

Romantic Notions

Falcon's Bend Series, Book 4

by Karen Wiesner and Chris Spindler

Swimming Kangaroo Books
Arlington, Texas

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Karen and Chris would like to thank dental technician Gerhard Kallman for explaining the process of modeling and casting rings.

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“The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.”

~Carl Jung

“If you love me only in my dreams, let me be asleep forever.”

~Unknown

Prologue

Seven years ago...

KIMBERLY'S ROOMMATE FINALLY left the campus dorm room. Some foreign student, he reminded himself. He'd timed his visit to coincide with her absence. When the dark girl descended the stairs, he slid out of his hiding place at the end of the hall.

Just the two of us now, darling. No more interference. I've rescued my eternal princess, and now I can finally accept the rewards of my hard work.

His shoes made no sound on the worn carpet. Seconds later, he lightly knocked on Kimberly's door. Anticipation built in his chest at the anticipation of the sight of her. Blond hair, soulful blue eyes, a blood-red mouth...a mouth that had made him tremble with violent need.

He frowned as the seconds ticked by, each a lifetime he'd waited through with impatience.

Soon you'll belong to me, darling. Don't make me wait even another second.

Just a little harder, he knocked again. He couldn't risk alerting any of Kimberly's neighbors. The tension seemed to jump inside his very veins. He clenched his hands, his needs growing with the prolonged wait. This moment had been appointed, destined, for all time to happen. That she might refuse to open her door had never occurred to him. Not when he'd arranged it, worked out every last detail. No, she wouldn't spoil it. She couldn't.

Soft, padding footsteps came close to the other side of the door, and then a voice called, "Who is it?"

The lilt of her voice captured him. Relieved, he smiled though she couldn't see him. "Kimberly...please, I'd like to talk to you."

Uncertainty crept into her tone. "Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of Van's. Please...can we talk?"

Darling, I'm the man you've waited for. The one who will love you and only you, to the exclusion of all else. You'll see. Throughout all time, we have been, we will be, soul-mates. Just the two of us, darling, I promise. No one will ever hurt you again.

No one else will ever have you.

The deadbolt slid back with a heavy thud, but, when she opened the door a crack, he saw in frustration that she kept the chain lock pulled. For a long minute, she stared at him uncertainly. He could see the redness of her eyes and swollen nose. She'd been crying. Over Van. Over the man who'd destroyed her, *betrayed* her time and time again. How could she...?

Bitch!

Forcefully, he tamped down on his anger.

"Kimberly, don't you recognize me?" Of course you do, my love. I'm your heart. Open the eyes of your heart, and you'll know I've always been there and always will be. An integral part of you. Just as you are a part of me. The biggest part.

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm not sure. But... I'm sorry. I'm really not in the mood for company."

"I know. I understand," he said too quickly, but tempered his eagerness with soft consolation.

How dare you pretend you don't know me? Oh, you'll pay for that.

"We're both grieving. Van was my friend, too. He often spoke of you."

"He...he did?"

He recognized the interest in her expression and took a half step toward her. "I'd like to talk to you, Kimberly. Van wanted me to come to you now. He wanted me to tell you what's important for you to know."

"What? What did he tell you?" Instead of intrigue, a hint of suspicion entered her stance.

"Please, could we talk inside, Kimberly? This is a difficult time for both of us."

Taking a shaky breath, she stared at him through the crack with agony in her eyes. She wanted to say no, he realized, but her lingering feelings for Van restrained her.

When he murmured "Please" again, his hands clenched into fists, she reached up and unfastened the chain. Standing back, she opened the door just a little wider. Just enough for him to enter.

She wore barely more than a long t-shirt. Legs, feet, arms...all bare. She'd scraped the sides of her waist-length hair back from her pale face, showing her grief with starkness.

"What did you say your name was?" she asked, arms crossed over her front as soon as she closed the door behind him.

"Jeffrey," he murmured, expecting her to recognize him instantly.

Once more, she disappointed him. Her gaze narrowed. "I think I remember seeing you with Van. You said you were friends?"

His teeth came together ruthlessly at her prolonged confusion. "The best of friends," he managed.

She shook her head, brushing wispy bangs back from her forehead. "Well, come in." With that, she started toward another room.

While her back was turned, he reached behind himself and slid the deadbolt into place as quietly as he could.

No, she won't open the door to anyone else dressed so scantily. From now on, only I will see her beauty.

The sound of the lock dropping home returned her attention to him. He rushed forward to follow her into the next room, saying, "Van and I shared a dorm room."

"We didn't go there often," she offered softly.

He watched her sit, tucking her legs under herself and reaching for the box of tissues. Wadded balls lay strewn around the padded window seat she occupied.

No more tears, darling. When you remember me, accept me, love me as I love you, as only I can love you...I'll see to it that you'll never be sad again.

"What did Van want to tell me?"

"You shouldn't grieve so, darling. Van wasn't worth it."

A tissue halfway to her nose, she jerked her head to look up at him standing over her. "What did you say?"

"I knew him well, Kimberly. We shared a dorm room. I know you would prefer to hear the truth now. It's not good for you to harbor illusions that simply aren't true. He was never faithful to you, my love. He hated your constant possessiveness. I know you caught him cheating on you. Why would you want to retain good memories of someone who treated you so disgracefully?"

Horror filled her expression. "He's...God, he's dead! How can you...? I forgave him for that. It was only once. I love...loved him. He loved me. I know he did. He was so sorry..." She wasn't saying the words he'd expected of her.

Jeffrey slid onto the window seat beside her. She shrank back from his nearness when he reached toward her. Annoyed, he nevertheless infused his tone with tenderness. "You'll never have to go through that again, darling. I love you as you deserve. You'll lack for nothing, I promise you. You're the only woman I could ever feel this way about. We'll be together throughout time and space from this moment on."

"What are you...?"

She jerked away once more, stumbling to her feet.

He shook his head at her. "We can't have you dressing like a tramp anymore, darling. I won't allow it. Don't you see? You belong to me now. Only I will see your beauty."

"I want you to leave!" she barked in terror. "I don't want you here anymore. I don't know who you are..."

Standing, he strode sinuously to follow her when she ran toward the front door. Grabbing her by the hair, he yanked her back to him, shoved her against the wall, and trapped her with his body. “Of course you know me, darling. Don’t hurt me again by pretending you don’t know of my love. We were meant to be together. I knew you felt the same way the night we met. It was meant to be. Nothing can change that now. Not even death.”

“I love Van. I don’t even know you. You’re crazy! Get out!”

“You’re distressed. I can see that, my love,” he murmured.

When he captured her wrists, she fought to be free. He tightened his hold, dragging her toward him. Seeing her open her mouth to scream, he smashed his hand over her lovely lips. Soon he would claim them as his own. Without resistance.

“He’s dead, darling. The authorities believe he killed himself because you broke up with him. But, between us, there will be no secrets. We share in love, always.” He lowered his mouth to her ear and whispered, “I did it for you, my love. I did it so we could be together, as we’re meant to be timelessly.”

Her eyes widened, her scream muffled when he drew his head back. He felt the slickness of her blood beneath his palm, and his arousal grew almost painful.

“Tonight, darling, is our wedding night. I have everything we need—”

Violently, she shook her head and he felt her coiling to attack him. His anger flared as he caught the leg coming up between his own. He slammed her back against the wall again, pinning her there with an unbreakable hold on both of her wrists.

“It doesn’t have to be this way, my love,” he ground out while she struggled, exciting him. “Just tell me you love me, too. Tell me you understand that what is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil. I will have you as I deserve for the sacrifices I’ve made to be with you.”

Her body went limp against his, her eyes staring at him in panic.

“You see, darling...” He stroked her satiny cheek, stained with the first blood of atonement for the sin of her love for another man. “You’ll always come back to me. I will have you, my love, or no one will ever have you again...”

Chapter One

Thursday, January 6, 2005...

WHY ARE THURSDAYS the longest days of my life? Amber Carfi wondered as she slid out of her vest in the locker room. She already knew the answer to that, of course. She had every Wednesday off, as did her partner and lover, Warren Jensen. Spending the day together had taken on a whole new meaning in the two weeks since their on-the-job-and-off buddy relationship had become more than she'd ever dreamed. Everything she'd ever wanted. They'd shared two blissful, perfect weeks together. Yesterday, the full day.

And I'm just waiting for the boom to fall and destroy it all. Destroy me beyond repair...

She took a deep breath. As patrol officers on the Falcon's Bend Police Department, she and Jensen struggled constantly to keep the new dimensions of their relationship a secret. The force was so tight-knit, everybody knew everybody else's business. Or at least tried to, if any indication of dirt to gossip about arose. So far, she and Jensen had done a pretty good job hiding their feelings. But the second she went off-shift...

Nothing else mattered except being together. Jensen filled her every waking and sleeping moment. She couldn't get enough of the sight of him, the sound of his voice, the feel of him next to her. Heck, she'd always been intoxicated by the *smell* of the guy. Leather, fresh air and all-man.

Amber stood in front of the long mirror attached to the wall near the showers. Her face was almost healed finally. Just a rapidly clearing up scab that ran in a jagged horizontal line across her jaw. A few weeks ago, she'd been working a case and ended up kidnapped with her father by a psycho and his girlfriend. She'd been beaten with a leather belt. The buckle had did some damage to the lower half of her face and upper chest. All things considered, she'd gotten lucky. No permanent damage had been done. She wouldn't have any scars. Soon she'd be left with the same old broken-a-half-dozen-times nose and ultra-feminine mouth—one of the few girly things about her. She'd spent a lifetime downplaying her

femininity. Too much fighting with boys as a kid, playing football in high school, becoming a cop on an all-male police force.

Never had a relationship in my life beyond the guys I hung out and watched football with. And Jensen was my favorite, my best bud.

The image of him sneaking into her first-floor bedroom window last night, their muffled laughter that quickly turned to frantic panting filled her mind. In the mirror, she watched her cheeks turn a dark shade of pink.

Yeesb, I'm pitiful. But I love it. I've never felt this way before. Can't get enough of him. He's so good!

She sighed, hearing her own longing in it. Reaching up, she slipped the rubber band out of her hair, letting the strawberry blond strands fall. When she'd gone to get her hair cut recently, she'd told the woman not to cut it to her usual shoulder-length. She'd wanted just a trim, wanted it to grow longer. She found it strange to look at the silky strands making a halo below her shoulders.

Once they were alone after their shifts concluded for the day, Jensen always took her hair out of the tight-wad ponytail she wore it in for work. She'd also been wearing a touch of make-up, something she'd never done before, and dressing a little better outside work instead of the old slob wear. Sometimes she barely recognized herself. She was no longer the burping, cussing, gum-smacking, mannerless, awkward *pig* who fit in so well with a bunch of guys boaring it up. Even the glow in her cheeks and the sparkle in her pale green eyes appeared unnatural. Did anyone else notice the changes in her? The idea embarrassed her to no end. But she wanted Jensen...*Warren, will I ever get used to calling him that?...to see the differences in her.*

She forced herself away from the mirror and went to her locker. Since she had come to work at the department two years ago, she'd gotten to knock around in the ladies' locker room by herself. But she'd used it only to store her duffel bag and to shower. Lately, she'd been bringing clothes to work to change into after her shift. In fact, today she'd slipped out of roll call without waiting around the way she usually did after shift reports were given. For once, she wanted to punch out on time.

All we'll have is the hour after work at his place. Then it's dinner with Dad and waiting endlessly and uncomfortably until we can be alone after Jensen pretends to leave for the night, only to sneak back in through my bedroom window.

They'd agreed not to tell or give any indication to their family and friends that things had changed between them. They hadn't even told her father, Zeke, and Jensen's best friend and former brother-in-law, Scott. Much as she would have liked to have more freedom, her father was still nursing a broken leg from the kidnapping. She couldn't leave him completely. He'd be laid up for the next month or so until his leg healed. She and Jensen would just have to make the best of things until then.

Torture.

She took off her uniform, put it on a hanger, and was slipping a sweater over her head when she heard a sound that made her duck around the line of lockers facing the door out to the department.

“Geez...!” she started when she saw Jensen quickly close and lock the door. “What’re you doing?”

She knew everyone still occupied the briefing room, but he’d taken a huge risk sneaking in here.

“If anyone saw you...” she started as he came toward her, his gaze moving over her bare legs to the sex-kitten underwear that’d been her secret pendant since she was a teenager.

“Nobody saw me. I made sure of it.”

“We could be fired if anyone did. Or worse, teased ruthlessly until we’ve got no choice but to quit or kill somebody.”

The Falcon’s Bend Police Department employed twelve full-time officers, six qualified reserves, along with the patrol sergeant and Chief, an administrative assistant and two investigators.

Jensen chuckled.

Even in his dark blue patrol uniform, he took her breath away. He was tall and muscular, his tan skin a contrast to his blondish-brown hair, spiked in front. She still couldn’t believe how much had altered between them. He’d been her best friend for five years. The guy who’d encouraged her to make a career as a police officer, who was constantly on her case for her lack of feminine appeal, the man who had saved her from the worst experience of her life a few weeks ago. Back then, she’d finally admitted to herself she was attracted to him. For years she had been, and apparently he’d felt the same about her, regardless of how unsexy her habits. But from the first time he kissed her on Christmas Eve, there’d been no turning back.

He slipped one arm around her. The other remained in the sling to prevent it from moving around and tearing the muscle again. Her kidnapping crazies had rigged a gun in his kitchen in an attempt to keep him from following. Only solid instincts had saved his life. The bullet caused a flesh-wound that’d done a lot less damage than he told her he’d feared when he saw all the blood. Unfortunately, it’d also done *more* damage than they hoped. His doctor said there was a chance he’d have trouble with the arm for years to come, or for life. But he was alive. For that, she said a prayer of gratitude each and every day.

His hand slid down to cradle her satin covered butt, and she looked up at him sassily. “Hey, who do you think you are?”

The intensity of his desire blew her away. God, when he looked at her like that...

“The man who’s been dyin’ to touch you like this for the last ten hours.”

Who needed sleep? She'd been getting up two hours early just to go to his house and crawl into bed with him. Who needed food? The fact that *she'd* barely been eating was truly saying something about her state of mind. They'd even forgone their usual nightly trips to Bend Fitness Club, not caring about football games and invitations to join friends.

Life was crazy, and she realized it with the sting of tears behind her eyes. She hugged him hard, careful about his arm, and murmured, "What am I gonna do with you, Jensen?"

I don't know how to function anymore. All I care about is being with you. We need a vacation. But even then...I'd come back and still wanna be alone with you every second of every day.

He sighed against her, his hand at the back of her head now, holding her tightly enough to make her cry in joy. She'd had so few relationships... Well, if one-night-stands could be considered relationships, she'd had her share. More than her share in her twenty-four years. Nothing like this. Then, all she'd wanted was what she'd gotten from those guys—a five minute pick-me-up to keep lust at bay for another month. She didn't think it was possible to get enough of Jensen. He held her the way no other man ever had. He looked at her and touched her and talked to her until the entire world felt perfectly balanced and safe. That didn't even get into the lovemaking...slow, uninhibited, mind-blowing *love* that satisfied her on more levels than she'd realized she possessed.

When he eased back and looked at her with his deep brown eyes, she felt like he was mesmerizing her. She would have done anything he asked of her, too.

"Let's go home, honey."

"Okay."

His gaze fixed on her lips, but she knew even one kiss would keep them here. With his arm... No way. She shook her head, and he conceded but his attention shifted to the globe key she wore on a long gold chain around her neck. The heavy, old fashioned skeleton key wasn't like any other in existence with its supple curves. When she was a little girl, she and her father had designed a globe puzzle together, and this key was just one of several steps to opening it. The globe puzzle had been confiscated by the FBI, but she'd gotten the cherished key back a few weeks ago and had taken to wearing it all the time. The first time Jensen saw her naked on Christmas, he'd commented on it, asked how she got it back—did their superiors retrieve it from the FBI agent they'd been working with? Amber had murmured, "Hmm," not able to confirm or deny the fact for fear of the truth coming out. A truth she hoped he'd never learn.

In any case, his expression whenever he saw the key told her that he wasn't satisfied with her initial non-answer for how she'd gotten it. She

knew if she just took it off, he'd forget it. Maybe she'd forget her own stupid mistake. But the key represented the only happy time in her childhood, a time that'd been stolen from her. She wanted to hold onto the good even if it meant discomfort all the way around.

Tucking the key into her shirt, she proceeded to pull on jeans, aware that Jensen watched her. Then she threw everything else in her bag. He went out the back way first, and she followed a minute later.

Falcon's Bend was a small town in Wisconsin, on the Falcon River, with just under 8000 Green Bay Packer football-loving folks—Amber and Jensen had, until recently, been fanatics themselves. The town had more taverns than churches, but filled both on the appropriate days. Teenagers talked of escape from a one-horse town like Falcon's Bend, but transportation in or out was limited if you didn't have wheels. No train, no commercial flights, one bus stop, and one taxi service that only took calls from around town and some of the nearby areas. For Amber, Falcon's Bend was the only home she'd ever known. The only one she cared to know.

By the time she drove them to the farmhouse his grandfather had left him a few miles outside of Falcon's Bend, they were laughing about the fact that neither of them remembered more than surface details about anything they'd done that day while on patrol. She remembered their morning alone together vividly, but lately her job had become a job—the impediment to her 24-hour-Jensen fix. His three Golden Retrievers came running, and they gave cursory attention to them before rushing inside.

She helped Jensen take off his jacket, not an easy task with his arm, and shucked off her own along with her boots. Without further delay, he reached for her. The touch of his lips against hers broke her restraint. She unbuttoned his shirt, carefully removed it as fast as possible because he wasn't patient. Kissing her again, he led her backward toward the living room where his sofa bed had become his permanent bedroom. He never bothered to put it away anymore. Neither of them could wait long enough to fold out the bed each time they wanted to use it.

Her hands busily worked open his trousers, shoving them down. Once he sat on the edge of the bed, she discarded the rest of his clothes, stripped her sweater over her head, her jeans off, and climbed on top of him. Magic hands cradled her breasts in a satin bra, thumbs and forefingers gently working the diamond-hard nipples.

"I love your breasts," he whispered raggedly against her cheek.

"I think I do, too." She'd barely noticed them before. Before Jensen had made them beautiful and necessary and so incredibly responsive. Before Jensen, the world had been a place devoid of pleasure. Empty with the agony of being...*yeah, the agony of being in love.*

Their coupling was frantic, hindered only by his arm in the sling. She'd learned how to give and get pleasure without hurting him. She

slipped to his side, propped up on one elbow to look at him, and their fingers played without the same previous level of urgency over well-explored flesh.

“Move in with me,” he murmured harshly when their breathing slowed.

“Okay.”

He chuckled as he looked at her heavy-lidded eyes and drawled, “Okay?”

“Just as soon as Dad is healed.”

“That’s a month or more. I want you here. I wanna wake up with you every morning and go to bed with you every night.”

“You do wake up with me and go to bed with me. Sooner or later anyway.” Leaning down, she slid her tongue over his nipple, and he groaned as she played with him but wouldn’t be distracted so easily.

“Here. Where you’re always in reach.”

Here, where his dead wife still lived. Jen’s stuff remained in her closet upstairs, all over the bedroom she and Warren lived and loved in. He’d closed off the entire second floor after she died as if enshrining the past.

Amber looked down at him. “I can’t leave my dad alone, baby. He can barely go to the bathroom by himself right now.”

“We can go there every day. Call him. Check on him. Make sure he’s all right.” The fingers of his good hand reached up and traced the line of her neck, her shoulder, the suddenly tingling peaks of her breasts.

“I thought we decided not to tell anyone about us.”

Her reminder gave him obvious pause. Did he regret that decision? Things were so new between them, she acknowledged that it wasn’t the right time to make their relationship public. They weren’t ready to make a commitment to one another. But, geez Louise, she was so far around the bend with this guy...

If we tell everybody and then something goes wrong... When it goes wrong Nothing ever lasts for me.

He sighed, drawing all five fingers of his left hand over the sharp jut of her hipbone. It was an awkward caress for him, lying on his back to protect his right arm from injury, reaching over to touch her where she lay beside him on his left.

She shifted her head an inch closer to his. “Do you remember the first time we made love?”

“Christmas eve. Morning. In that chair. You were wearin’ that kitten-soft white sweater and you pulled it over your head... I stopped breathin’.”

“Mhm, and do you remember how I kneeled in front of you?”

“Never forget it, honey. Got a feelin’ I’ll remember it ’til the day I die.”

The words “I love you” came to her throat, fiercely demanding, the way they had that first time and every few minutes since. If she couldn’t say them, she’d show him.

Life had taught her that a person could never prepare for the big stuff, like love and loss. Those things always came straight out of nowhere. Only once they appeared could you deal with them.

She didn’t have a clue what she was doing with this big stuff she felt, but she vowed, if nothing else, to cherish what they shared until the day she died, too.

* * *

WARREN FOLLOWED AMBER into the older duplex. She lived in a nice, geriatric neighborhood of Falcon’s Bend. The living room was the first room immediately upon entering the apartment. Her father Zeke sat in the chair nearest the front door that he’d come to favor in the few weeks since he’d been let out on parole. He’d been sentenced to thirty years for robbing a bank but made parole at the end of last year. Amber knew the fact that she was a cop and had vouched for him at his hearing made a difference to the board—the difference that’d gained him parole after fifteen years of rejecting his application.

Her two-year old Golden Retriever rushed to greet her, and she bent to give him some love. “Need a milk bone, Sammie old boy,” she muttered, rubbing his ears until he all but became gel on the floor at her feet.

“There you are,” Zeke said, his gaze leaving the football game on the TV screen to take them in. He’d obviously just gotten off work at the local hardware store, where his best friend Micky was his boss. He still had his coat on. Just getting in the door with his broken leg took most of his strength usually, so he waited awhile to tackle the next endeavor.

The nature of his expression as he looked at the two of them left Amber feeling completely exposed. He knew something, though she hoped he’d respect their unwillingness to talk about it.

“Micky’s picking me up, and we’re going to Brews ’N Blues for dinner,” he continued. “You’re both welcome to join us.”

“Will you be okay?” she asked automatically, her hand still moving in a caress on her dog’s silky head.

She glanced at Jensen and knew their excitement at the prospect of being alone together was mutual.

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me. I’m sure you could use a break from your old man.”

Amber couldn’t help noticing that he’d gone from inviting them to uninviting them. The look she’d given Jensen had no doubt been the cause. She mumbled something about having a good time.

A car horn came from outside. "That's Micky," Zeke said, reaching for his crutches. He managed pretty well on his own, but Jensen moved with her dog deeper into the small living room to give him space. At the front door, Amber helped her father into his winter hat, meeting his denim-blue eyes for an awkward second as he said, "Enjoy yourselves."

She closed the door after him, then strode to the picture window overlooking the street to make sure he made it down the steps and sidewalk to the driveway where Micky was parked. His friend had emerged to help him into the passenger's seat.

Predictably, Jensen came up in back of her. "This is our lucky day," he murmured into her hair. "Let's go to my house. I'll make dinner." His good hand slipped beneath her waistband. She sighed contently. "Can't refuse that. Let me check on Mrs. Frederick first."

Her neighbor in the duplex was an elderly woman who got out only infrequently. Amber had been checking on her at least once a day, running errands when she needed it, since she moved in.

"I'll take Sam for a walk," Jensen agreed, she knew, just to speed things up.

"He can come with us to your house. He's got a thing for Goldie." Goldie was one of Warren's three Golden Retrievers, and the only female.

"Don't blame her. Rusty and King are too old to see to her needs. Kinda like you and me."

Amber laughed. "We're only ten years apart. And you've got my needs well in hand, baby."

She could hear his grin when he asked, "Do I?"

She turned in his arms. "Don't pretend you haven't noticed."

They shared a long kiss that made her say, "I'll hurry." She went out ahead of him and Sam and let herself into Mrs. Frederick's apartment. The older woman was hard of hearing. As she entered, Amber called out, "It's me, Mrs. Frederick. Amber."

At seventy-one, the woman should have been in a nursing home or living with a relative long ago, but her stubborn refusal had kept her where she felt most comfortable. She accepted help from very few, and Amber counted herself honored to be among those trusted.

She found her neighbor in the kitchen, her wheelchair next to the cupboard where her old-fashioned phone hung. In an instant, Amber saw the usual smiling woman was in tears.

"What is it?" she demanded in concern, kneeling before her chair.

"Oh Amber, it's my granddaughter."

Erin Daughtry, Amber remembered. Mrs. Frederick talked about her daughter, Heather, and granddaughter often.

"A friend of mine just heard on the police scanner. Poor Erin has been *murdered*. I just can't believe it!" Fresh sobs erupted.

After a moment in which Amber tried to console her while finding out more information, the older lady said brokenly, "It has to be one of those terrible men Erin always gets hooked up with. She's been with the same one steady for the past year, which isn't usual, but my Heather tells me he's no good. Erin just can't seem to find a nice man like your Warren."

Amber had met Erin the few times she'd visited her grandmother with her mother, as well at the bar where Erin worked the times she and Jensen had gone there after a shift. Erin was the type of woman who dressed a little sleazy and could be aptly described as an oxymoron: street-smart understanding of the way things were, yet she didn't have any brains when it came to men. She let them walk all over her, loved them far too desperately, and took them back even when they didn't deserve forgiveness. After being treated like crap by one too many of them, she'd become experienced but not nearly hard enough to prevent it from happening over and over again.

"So Heather found her?"

Mrs. Frederick nodded. "She called the police from Erin's apartment."

"Look, I'll see what I can find out. I'll do whatever I can."

The older woman patted her cheek gratefully. "What would I do without you, honey?"

Chapter Two

SO, YOU TWO,” Melody’s father—the distinguished Vittorio DeMazzino—turned his exuberant attention on them. When she threaded her arm through his, Danny Vincent knew his wife of two years felt ‘the speech’ coming, too. His dread of every single family get-together was about to fall upon them.

“When are the two of you going to bless us with a grandchild?”

Mel’s arm tightened around his, and her touch gave Danny the strength not to say or do anything he would have liked to. He’d been expecting it all evening. Since her father would be heading back to New Orleans tomorrow after a prolonged holiday visit, his mother invited him over with the rest of the Vincent family in the area. More than once, Melody’s father had talked about moving to Falcon’s Bend—to be closer to his daughter and currently nonexistent grandchildren.

The pressure had been building from all sides since Christmas. Two years ago they’d foolishly let the world know they were trying to have a baby. In all the time since, nothing had happened on that front. But no one had forgotten their excitement.

With a room full of screaming, squabbling kids, what else are they gonna think about?

Girls and boys ran around and made enough noise to drown out a jet. His sister Ruth’s new baby cried for something no one seemed able to provide. It was a scene out of a nightmare. Why had he and Mel given their families hope so early in their marriage? The instinctive need had given way to a more realistic view of loving their life together...as it was. His career as a detective in the Falcon’s Bend Police Department satisfied him completely. Melody had gotten a coveted job at the prestigious Herman Art Gallery in Eau Claire, a good hour away. She was also finishing up her degree in art at the college. The owner of the gallery, Michael Herman, valued her, and presented no obstacles to fitting her work hours around her class schedule.

Danny supposed part of his newfound indecision stemmed from immersing himself in pregnancy and childbirth books strewn around their

home. For the first time, he realized that women could die during childbearing. Previously, he'd found the concept unthinkable—if he thought about it all. Now he knew that, even in this day and age, so many things could go wrong.

Danny had spent too many years looking for his better half. He was nowhere near ready to lose the good woman he'd found. Unfortunately, he hadn't found an easy way to talk about it with Melody. She seemed fine about everything, having or not having kids, enjoying their marriage and her life in general. Wordlessly, they'd put having children on a backburner, for which he'd been profoundly grateful. Except during family get-togethers.

"We've got plenty of time," Danny said between his teeth, looking at his beautiful wife. "Don't we, honey?"

Her smile was soft and sweet, lighting up a face that never failed to take his breath away. This woman belonged to him, to have and to hold. Lately, he got stuck on 'until death do us part.' Even in death, he didn't want to be parted from her.

The phone rang, and at least his mother's hopeful hovering behind Vittorio's chair ended. Wiping her hands on her apron, she rushed to the kitchen to answer the phone.

Mel's father wasn't done with them. "You've been married for an acceptable number of years now. If there's a medical problem preventing natural pregnancy, perhaps you could consider adoption."

No doubt, it was a suggestion he saw great merit in, considering that Melody had been adopted. But neither he nor Mel wanted to consider that option just yet.

Danny tensed, fury making him wonder what made family believe they could pose over-the-line-of-privacy questions without tact or even embarrassment. He'd never discussed baby overproduction or lack thereof with his five older sisters. He respected their ability to make their own decisions too much to ever do that.

No, he and Melody would have a baby of their own, unless it wasn't an option. But only when they were good and ready.

His wife's hand tightened again on his arm, saving him from an outburst he knew he'd regret. She leaned forward on the loveseat to the chair her father sat in. She touched his hand. "Daddy, when the time is right, it'll happen. Danny and I are enjoying being newlyweds now."

Vittorio's well-lined face relaxed slightly, and he conceded with a nod. Yet he couldn't seem to help adding, "Just so you remember, darling, I'm not getting any younger."

Sure, why not have a baby just because our parents are getting older? Fabulous idea. Why else would anyone ever have kids?

"Danny, your sister is calling from Chicago," his mother told him.

"I'll take it in the den," he said, needing to get away for a few minutes. Dropping a kiss on Melody's pert nose, he murmured that he'd be back. Worry lingered in her eyes as he rose to standing. She knew he was a hot-head and reacted with his gut before his head. Talking to his sister would cool him off.

"Tell Shayna hi from me," she murmured.

At twenty-eight, he was still considered the baby of the family. Shayna was the youngest of his sisters, and the only one not married producing babies at an alarming rate. She'd always been his favorite sister, possibly because they were closest in age.

Or because she's never asked me when me and Mel are gonna get down to brass tacks and start churning out kids—like it's the simplest thing in the world to do.

Danny walked through the house he'd grown up in. After all this time, it continued to retain a home-like feeling for him. In his father's den, he closed the door behind him and went to the phone on the little table next to the leather chair his father used to read in every night before going to bed. But he'd always had time to wrestle, give a noogie and a hug good night. His father had made Danny *want* to be a father.

Now why did I remember that?

"Hey, you slacker," he greeted his sister when he picked up. "What're you still doing there when you have familial obligations here?"

Shayna hadn't been able to come home for the holidays. She worked for a big advertising firm in Chicago where she and her partner were the top team. Overtime at holidays was expected. But the last time Danny talked to her, she'd hinted she and her partner might have expanded their relationship but she didn't want to talk about it for fear of jinxing it. "You're supposed to be keeping the heat off me."

Her laugh sounded just a touch evil. "I'm keeping the heat off *myself* by staying here," she insisted. "Why? What's going on there?"

Danny sighed. "Ah, Mel's old man's going off on us about having a baby again."

"It happens. He wants a grandkid to spoil rotten. It's not a bad thing, Dan."

"No. I suppose it's not a bad thing. Just presumptuous and rude."

Shayna chuckled. "You and Mel did seem hot to get her eggs fertilized when you got married. What changed?"

"I don't know. Life and having kids just doesn't seem as easy or safe as I used to think it was."

"Not all pregnancies go bad, little bro. Some women even have easy pregnancies, births and recoveries."

"But nobody knows how it'll turn out beforehand."

"No. I'd say something like that takes faith."

She was right. And he didn't have any in this area. He'd rather live indefinitely without an heir than risk losing the woman he loved more

than life itself. That meant he and Melody needed to stop tempting fate the way they had been most nights. But he wasn't sure how to suggest to her that she needed to go on birth control. It'd be hard enough to feel her out on whether she was okay with waiting.

Planning to extract them from the family reunion in short order once he returned to the living room, Danny instead faced another few hours of trying to get his wife alone. In the car, he at last pulled her close to him. She smiled, not surprised at him reaching for her the second they shared privacy. It'd been their way since they fell in love. He kissed her until she went completely limp in his arms. She moaned softly when he drew back.

Brushing blond curls back from her pink-tinged face, he looked down at her.

"What was that for?" she asked.

"I love you. The only thing I need in this life is you."

Her full mouth turned up in a joyful smile.

"I was thinking..."

The soft look in her beguiling sapphire eyes almost made him forget the suggestion he'd come up with in the long hours since he talked to his sister.

"What were you thinking?" she murmured.

"Maybe you should go on birth control for awhile, honey. Somebody told me or I read somewhere that some women are more likely to get pregnant when they go off it again."

Her eyebrows merged in confusion. "I don't understand, Danny. Is something wrong? Is there something you want to talk about?"

He averted his gaze, stroking her silky hair. Was it possible to be honest without telling the truth? "I don't know. I've...we've been trying so long now, and, hell, sometimes I just wanna make love to my wife without thinking about consequences. Like we used to. Without a plan. Without an agenda."

"I have no agenda. Each time we make love, I feel closer to you. That's the truth. It seems impossible, but it happens that way every single time."

It happened to him, too.

No, better not to talk about his fears. If she had her heart set on a baby, he couldn't hurt her with his cold feet.

When he bent to kiss her again, his cell phone buzzed in his jacket pocket. Annoyed, he worked it out, muttering an apology. He flipped the phone open and put it to his ear. Melody sat back, used to him getting calls at all hours of the day or night, regardless of what was happening between them.

"Detective Vincent," Dispatch greeted him, "we've had an 11-46. Officer Carfi knows the victim. She and Officer Jensen are headed to the

scene.”

Danny absorbed the details of the murder while his thoughts strayed only slightly.

Amber and Warren. Together all the time and in every sense of the word. Good thing I'm the only one who saw Jensen go into the women's locker room today.

“You have to go?” Melody guessed when he closed his phone.

He nodded. “I’ll drop you off at home first.”

“I’ll wait up for you.”

The promise would keep him warm for the hours they’d be apart.

Chapter Three

THE BUILDING ERIN Daughtry lived in, Riverside Apartments, was right next door to a church. A prayer or Weight Watcher's meeting had apparently concluded, and the street outside was busy with cars pulling out.

When Amber and Jensen got out of his truck, they found Jeff Chopp, FBPD's patrol sergeant waiting outside the building, huddled in his jacket against the frigid cold. Chopp was a massive guy over six-three with red-blond hair, square, tinted glasses that hid his eyes and a bushy moustache. It'd been said that he'd been on the force for so long, no one knew whether the department had come first or Chopp.

"Pete and Danny coming?" Jensen asked of the two detectives, Pete Shasta and Danny Vincent, in the department.

"On their way. DCI and coroner are ETA five minutes."

Amber nodded. Chopp didn't stop them when they went into the building and up to Erin's apartment. Don Rosch and Roger Bradley, partners and full-time patrol officers, had secured the scene. Rosch said, "Girl's in the bedroom, naked as the day she was born."

Amber punched Rosch. The guy was a pig through and through, but she and Jensen hung around with him a lot, watching football mainly—before anyway. Nearly bald Rosch had more hair above his lip than under the cap he wore as often as he could get away with. Rosch was a smart-ass loud-mouth—the one who generally screamed like a little girl when someone surprised him.

Bradley was nothing like his "raucous" partner. He was quiet and shy, and Amber had noticed that he spent a lot of time being embarrassed. Wouldn't be easy to be around Rosch and not get embarrassed often.

"Dead girls get you hot, you sick bastard?" Jensen said in disgust, and Rosch turned bright red, muttering denial.

The apartment was pretty typical for the buildings around the area. From the front door, there was a space that led to an open kitchen on the right, another room to the left—probably the bedroom. Straight ahead was an archway that led to the living room.

Someone had been cleaning. Nose wrinkling, Amber could smell strong bleach, especially near the bedroom. Did the killer stop long enough to clean up his mess?

From the bedroom doorway, not touching anything, Amber saw Erin Daughtry. Twenty-five years old, blond, buxom but slim—beautiful in a too-obvious way. She was naked on top of her bed, arranged straight as an arrow from head to toe. Even from the distance, the blood-red hole in the heart, just above and to the right of the single red rose held in both hands between her bare breasts, was almost over-dramatic.

Murder. Shit. There was unfortunately no doubt about this one.

“Sleeping Beauty,” Jensen murmured sympathetically.

Amber nodded, cringing slightly at the analogy. A fairy tale princess was exactly what Erin looked like, other than the naked part. Purposefully arranged in a pose of innocence and purity. No blood to be seen on the pristine bedspread or anywhere on the body. Even the large silver ring with an elaborately engraved rose on a vine on her finger seemed deliberate. Had she worn it before? Or had the murderer given it to her to complete his perfect picture?

Amber shivered at the thought that the ring might have been placed on Erin to symbolize some sick marriage.

“What is that?” Amber asked Rosch, who was standing too close behind her. She could smell the sweat he wore like cologne. She gave him a push, and he backed off a couple, necessary inches. She pointed to what looked like a note card propped next to the body.

“Says somethin’ like ‘What ya do in love ain’t good or bad.’”

For a second, Amber stood staring at him in confusion. Then the connection clicked in her brain.

“What?” Rosch demanded, suddenly sensitive. He took another step back as if he’d realized his deodorant had given out long ago.

Even Jensen looked at her uncertainly.

Amber shook her head. In Falcon’s Bend, football—actually, sports in general—was the end all, be all. Few read anymore, even the stuff that maybe wasn’t worth reading. “It’s Nietzsche, you dope. “What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil.” It’s from *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Aphorism 153*.”

Rosch sneered, making his already ugly face twist to almost grotesque proportions under his too thick mustache. “How do you know, Carfi? You read that crap or believe in it?”

She groaned out loud, shaking her head at his pathetic defense. “No. It was required reading in my lit class in college, Snoopy. Nietzsche’s a godless woman-hater—in my opinion anyway. The killer has to be a man with this one. Only a man would find anything Nietzsche had to say profound.”

Rosch’s radio crackled, and he walked away to take the call.

Amber knew a scene like this, with such a significant modus operandi—dead girl arranged with a romantic rose and a wedding ring on her finger, Nietzsche quote at the scene—would be something to look into. All similar crimes would suggest a pattern, possibly even the same killer. Unfortunately, finding anything wouldn't be an easy task. All the government agencies were coming off two major holidays back to back. This time of year was a bad time to be investigating a murder, for more reasons than one.

“You notice there's no sign of forced entry?” Jensen said, and Amber nodded.

Either Erin knew the killer or she had opened the door without finding out who was behind it. “Maybe the door was open and the killer just waltzed in.”

“Maybe,” Jensen conceded.

“Victim's mother said she usually locks her door, but she's not fanatical about it,” Bradley told them.

Rosch returned to them and offered importantly, “She might've just forgot.”

“Heather told you guys that?” Amber asked.

Rosch's moment of glory dissolved while he fumbled with his notebook to find out the name of Erin's mother. “Yeah. Heather Daughtry.”

“She's in the living room,” Bradley told them while his partner looked sheepish. “She's the one who found her daughter and called it in. She's been right where she is since we asked her not to touch or rearrange anything.”

“I know her. I'll talk to her,” Amber said, and Jensen followed her.

Amber noted several things in the living room when she entered the surprisingly spacious area. First, she saw a bottle of expensive champagne and two flute glasses on the coffee table. The bottle hadn't been opened, and the glasses stood empty. DCI would dust for prints on all of it, but Amber doubted they'd find any except possibly Erin's. What had she and her guest planned to celebrate? Or maybe the murderer had an agenda with this stuff?

Quickly, Amber inventoried in her mind the expensive items in the room—large screen television, VCR, deluxe, top of the line stereo and a huge selection of music cassettes neatly placed in a glass-fronted cabinet. A profusion of dainty porcelain butterflies covered nearly every surface in the room.

The apartment building itself didn't suggest luxury from the outside, though it certainly couldn't be described as the worst in town either. The apartment was nice without being extravagant—well-kept. The temperature was a shade too cold, indicating that Erin wasn't pouring money into heating bills. Clearly, Erin Daughtry put her money into

entertainment, not necessities, and Amber had a good feeling she wasn't rolling in it either. Erin worked as a waitress out at Brews 'N Blues—she had for many years. Or maybe she had a rich boyfriend who liked to keep her in costly 'trinkets.'

Erin's mother, Mrs. Frederick's daughter Heather, stood near the window, her face in one hand. Amber had often thought Heather and Erin looked more like sisters than mother and daughter. Heather had the same long, blond hair, same buxom slimness. Wore just a little too much make-up.

Jensen stayed behind while Amber went over to her. "Ms. Daughtry, I live in the duplex next to your mother, Mrs. Frederick."

The woman nodded, making a stab at a smile. "I remember you. You're a police officer. My mother thinks the world of you."

Amber gave a muted return smile. "I'm Amber Carfi. I met your daughter when she visited your mother. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

Heather gasped, shaking her head. "I can't believe it. I don't think I'll ever forget...seeing my baby girl like that." Her voice sounded hoarse, as if she'd been screaming.

Amber put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed slightly. "Do you have any idea who would have done this, Ms. Daughtry?"

"Call me Heather, honey. I..." She started to shake her head again, but stalled. "I feel so lost. How could this have happened? Thea called me just after four o'clock—"

"Thea?"

"Thea Bryan, Erin's best friend most of her life. They work together at Brews 'N Blues. Thea called me and said Erin called into work sick today. Between the two of us, we tend to be protective of Erin and we're always checking up on her. As soon as I got off work, I came over with some chicken soup I picked up from The Rainbow Café. I called ahead so it'd be ready. It's in the kitchen. I dropped it off there before I went to find her—"

"Where do you work?" Amber asked quickly.

"Special Occasions on Elm and 3rd. Jayne Klements is my boss."

"Why were you and Thea so protective of Erin?"

"Oh, Erin...my Erin always had a knack for choosing exactly the wrong men. Then she suffered but was too in love to end it."

Her impressions about Erin, based on her neighbor's conversations about her granddaughter, had been correct. "Did you try calling your daughter after Thea said she called in sick?"

"Often. It just rang and rang. Her answering machine didn't pick up. It's probably broke again."

Amber glanced around the room, then asked, "Where is the answering machine?"

"Her bedroom."

Amber excused herself and went to take a look. Disappointed, she conceded that, though the machine didn't even look plugged in, she couldn't touch anything until forensics went over every inch of the apartment. She would call attention to the machine as soon as Pete and Danny arrived.

When she returned to the living room, she asked Heather, "Does Erin have a cell phone, or just the landline?"

"Just a landline, same as me."

"Did it worry you when Erin didn't pick up the phone?"

Heather took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "Actually, no. She's done this before. Called in sick but she was really with a boyfriend. Or when she was upset about something that happened with him and couldn't face work."

"Did she plan to go anywhere today other than work? Shopping? Visit somebody?"

"See her boyfriend, but she said they didn't really make specific plans."

"So she might have had a visitor or visitors today? I mean, other than you? What time did you get here anyway?"

"Maybe she had visitors. I'm not sure." An ugly look crossed Heather's face. "Her boyfriend's in the hospital, but don't be fooled. He's never been innocent a day in his life. If anyone would do this to my precious baby-girl, it'd be him." The older woman shook her head as if trying to dispel the violent emotions erupting inside her. "Anyway, I got here around five o'clock or so. I knocked a couple times, and when she didn't answer, I used my key. I...found her—"

Amber took a deep breath, glancing back at Jensen standing a discreet few feet away behind the sofa taking notes.

Rosch called from the living room to say their detectives had arrived.

"Excuse me, Heather. I'll be right back."

The woman nodded and looked once more outside at the dull landscape behind the building of snow covering everything as far as the eye could see.

Chapter Four

WHEN DANNY PULLED up to the apartment building where Dispatch placed the crime, he saw his partner of eight years and life-long best friend, Pete Shasta, just getting out of his own car. Pete ran a hand through his thick, orange-red hair.

“Survive the festivities?” Pete asked, and Danny mock-glared at him for his complete lack of sympathy. Pete chuckled, his frost blue eyes crinkling.

“What were you doing?” Danny asked. “Or would Lisa not want you to say?”

Pete and Lisa had been married about five years. Lisa wasn't able to have children, and for that reason, having them was a non-issue between them. Pete wouldn't bemoan what his beloved wife couldn't give him—all he wanted was what she *could* give him. And she'd given him all he could ever want. Most of all, she'd given Pete back his faith in love in spades. After the number his first wife had done on his head and heart, Danny had worried that his best-friend-all-his-life might never recover. Lisa had done what no other woman could have. Everybody loved her. The two of them were made for each other.

“Remember that romantic hideaway in the woods you were telling me about up north?”

Danny grinned, lifting an eyebrow. He'd planned to whisk Mel away for the holidays this year, avoiding 'the speech' altogether. He'd found the luxury resort on the internet. Unfortunately, between their jobs and familial obligations, the plan never really took off. “Yeah?”

“I'm taking Lisa up there for her birthday.”

On Valentine's Day, no less. Danny knew Pete had timed his vacation with it. No one who worked on the police force would stay in the area when days off were granted. One way or another, they'd be called back in and there would go all hope of a vacation.

“Seven days and nights in the arms of an angel. No murder to get in the way.”

“Don't be so sure,” Danny warned.

Chopp led them upstairs, catching them up on the fact that DCI and the county coroner would arrive soon. Amber Carfi and Jensen were interviewing the victim's mother, since, apparently, she'd known both.

Officers Rosch and Bradley stood guard at the apartment door.

Inside the apartment, the strong stench of bleach greeted Danny's nostrils and made him cringe. He knew where it came from when they saw the bloodless dead woman lying on the bed, shot through the heart.

"Someone went to a lot of trouble," Pete muttered Danny's very thoughts.

"The mother found her," Chopp said behind them in a hushed voice. "Seems her daughter called in sick at work, and the mother wanted to make sure she was okay once she got off work herself."

"You said Amber interviewed her?"

"Yeah."

"Let's see what she knows."

Danny followed his partner back through the apartment. They ran into Amber and Jensen coming out of the living room. They went into the kitchen. A Styrofoam container—receipt taped on the lid—sat on the counter. "That's the chicken soup Heather picked up from The Rainbow Café before she came over."

Danny glanced at the receipt to see the date and time imprinted on it, verifying what Amber told them, no doubt passed along by the victim's mother.

In the next few minutes, Amber told them the basics of what she'd discovered, Jensen occasionally offering some of the notes he'd recorded.

Chopp's hand-held radio crackled, and he pivoted out of the room, pulling it from his dangerously drooping belt on the way.

"You know the victim?" Danny asked.

Amber nodded. "Erin Daughtry. She's the granddaughter of the woman I share a duplex with—Mrs. Frederick. I've met her and her mother Heather before, when they visit. I don't know either of them well, but my neighbor talks about them a lot."

"What kind of a person is Erin?" Pete asked.

"According to my neighbor, she's basically settled into her waitress job at Brews 'N Blues without any big dreams for more—though by the looks of the expensive electronics in the living room, I'd have to say she either spends most of her salary on entertainment or she's got a rich boyfriend who spoils her. Mrs. Frederick talks a lot about how her granddaughter's life seems to revolve around the guys she gets involved with. She falls for the wrong kinds, does all the wrong things. Seems she's been with the same guy steady for the past year, which is quite a record for her."

"And what about the mother? What's her story?"

“She’s divorced, had a bad time of it with her ex, I’ve heard, so it’s no surprise she keeps a hawk eye on her daughter’s relationships. Heather says Erin’s best friend—Thea Bryan—called her at work today to say Erin was sick. Heather got here around five o’clock. She blames Erin’s boyfriend for this—seems to think he’s the killer, though he’s currently in the hospital. That’s all I was able to get right now.”

Pete nodded. Danny had taken down all the pertinent facts, some of them copied directly from Jensen’s notes, while Amber talked.

“Does the mother seem to trust you?” Pete asked.

“Yeah. She remembered me and didn’t hesitate to answer all my questions.”

“Okay. Good. Well, why don’t you accompany us again while we finish the interview you started,” Pete suggested.

“Doable, sir,” Amber said, falling back into her former habit of treating them with military-strictness. As if realizing she’d backtracked, she added, “Not a problem.”

Danny saw Amber and Jensen exchange a very private look before she accompanied them to the living room.

Chapter Five

“YOUR DAUGHTER IS a waitress at Brews ’N Blues—is that right, Ms. Daughtry?”

Heather nodded, glancing from Pete questioning her, to Amber. She went to stand next to her once more with a steadying hand on her arm. She’d introduced her superiors, and Heather had nodded at his request to talk with her.

“Do you know when Erin was supposed to go to work today?”

Heather didn’t hesitate when she said, “Four p.m.”

“But her friend—” Pete gazed over at his partner’s notes. “—Thea Bryan, who also waitresses there, said she called in sick?”

For some strange reason, Heather looked at Amber. The blatant request for reassurance in her expression surprised Amber. When she nodded toward her to indicate that everything was fine, Heather turned back to Pete and said, “I believe so.”

They’d have to verify that with the owner of the tavern.

“How long has your daughter worked there?”

The older woman’s eyes opened slightly as she tried to remember. “Years,” she offered an obvious guess. “I can’t remember exactly how many, but a long time. Terry just dotes on her. All his waitresses are like daughters to him. He takes care of them real good.”

“What about this place?” Pete glanced around the apartment. “How long has she lived here? Are you aware if she knows anyone else in the building?”

Heather focused on a loose thread in the sleeve of her jacket for an instant. “She’s been here for a long time. I can’t remember exactly. Five years, maybe. I don’t know much about her neighbors. I know her two best friends, but neither of them live in this building.”

“Tell me more about your daughter’s best friends.”

“Thea and Erin have been best friends all their lives. The two of them are also fairly close with Lucia Rubato, though I haven’t seen Lucia for a couple weeks.”

Amber glanced over at her superiors upon hearing the familiar name. “I know Rubato. She works as a waitress at The Rainbow Café.”

Amber had met the woman through her teenage daughter, Maria. Before Christmas, some boys from Maria's class had lured her from school to a nearby park to rape her. Amber had stepped in just in the nick of time. It'd prompted her decision to teach self-defense at the high school for an hour every Wednesday morning.

"Amber was telling us that you mentioned Erin's boyfriend," Pete continued. "What do you know about him? How long has she been with him?"

"A year." Heather shook her head in disgust, this time tempering it slightly, no doubt because she was talking to a detective. "Mike Benson. I never liked him. Never. He's dishonest, a cheat and a thief. All those affairs he had with married women... Well, he never treated Erin right. She found out he cheated on her just recently, *again*, though I have no doubt in the world that this was *far* from the first time. But, my stupid loveable girl, she forgave him the way she can't seem to help herself with creeps like him. I would have thought my own experience with her father would teach her to be a little more discerning, but she's totally in love with the loser."

"Do you know his address?"

Heather sniffed. "He's the super at the Golden Sunset Apartments over on Roosevelt."

Pete glanced at his partner. Danny wrote it down in the notebook he'd been transcribing in since the beginning of the interview.

"Can you give us contact information for any of your daughter's previous boyfriends?"

"I can give you their names, but she hasn't seen any of them for quite awhile. It's all been about Mike Benson for so long."

"So none of her previous relationships ended badly?"

"All did actually, but they ended decisively. What more can a woman do than beg, cry and threaten before she has to let a man go?"

"Threaten?"

"You know...that thing women do," Heather said quickly, seeming to realize that the word would jump out at the detectives investigating her daughter's murder. "Girls threaten to kill themselves... A lot of nonsense that's just a broken heart talking. Erin never tried to hurt herself. Never. Depression seemed her only outlet. It wasn't easy for us to reach her then. The fact was, though, she moved on to other men fairly quickly after these break-ups, and I'm sure the men did the same."

"What were your daughter's plans today? Did she tell you?"

"No. As I told Amber, Mike Benson is in the hospital. I'm sure she planned to see him if he wasn't released before she had to go to work."

Pete waved toward the champagne and glasses on the table. "Does this scene suggest to you that her boyfriend was released and came over?"

Heather let out a watery bark of laughter. “I honestly can’t explain what those are about. Erin doesn’t usually buy expensive alcohol—champagne, almost never. She liked her toys—” She glanced at the TV and stereo Amber had no doubt her superiors had noted on entry into the room. “—but she was really very frugal with money. Those are her glasses though. I bought them after I divorced my husband to celebrate.”

So the killer had brought the top of the line bottle of champagne, Amber surmised. To celebrate what?

“What about her boyfriend? Would he have brought the champagne?”

“Mike Benson, buy expensive champagne?” Heather hooted in clear amusement. “Mike Benson would have happily drunk any alcohol, even something loaded with skunk piss. It’s what put him in the hospital. There’s absolutely no way he bought that. He’s more of a beer drinker anyway. And my daughter habitually gave him what he wanted—she wouldn’t have bought anything but Mike’s favorite beer.”

The champagne was important, Amber decided, and so was whatever the killer came here to celebrate before killing Erin. She knew the detectives would follow up on it, but the chances of finding out who bought it would be slim if it’d been paid for with cash.

Pete got that expression on his face that was all about tactfully bringing up a volatile subject. “Ms. Daughtry, I’m not sure how much you saw in your daughter’s bedroom—”

“Everything,” Heather said under her breath, shuddering slightly. Amber hugged her with one arm.

“Then you saw the ring she’s wearing?”

Heather shook her head in horror while she spoke, “It doesn’t belong to her.”

“You’re sure? It wasn’t given to her by her current or a previous boyfriend?”

“It’s true that Mike Benson wears a lot of jewelry like that—the steel, skulls, chains. Most of her boyfriends have dressed like that. It’s not the kind of jewelry my Erin liked. She was into gems and sparkly things. If Mike Benson gave her that ring, he gave it to her today. I’ve never seen it before. Erin would have shown that to me for sure.”

“Do you know if he ever gave her jewelry?”

“He never has. Like I said, me and Erin shared everything. She’s always excited to show me anything her boyfriends buy her.”

So the murderer had to have given Erin the ring, Amber thought. Before or after he killed her.

“You said you’re divorced?” Pete asked in that completely non-judgmental way of his. “Where is your husband?”

“Far away, thank God. He left us long ago and good riddance. He and his current bimbo live somewhere out in Texas, I’ve heard.”

“What was Erin’s relationship with her father?”

“She never forgave him for abandoning us. Once the divorce went through, we never saw him again.”

“Your daughter made that decision on her own?”

“Yes. I made sure she knew she was free to have a relationship with him—I promised her I wouldn’t let it bother me. But she insisted she never wanted to see him again.”

Finding out Heather’s ex-husband’s whereabouts wouldn’t be too hard. Amber had the feeling he’d be easily eliminated from their list of potential suspects.

“Ms. Daughtry, we need to verify your whereabouts today. Understand that this is routine, to make sure all the i’s are dotted and the t’s are crossed. You said you were at work until about five p.m. We need to know your place of employment and your supervisor.”

Heather nodded in understanding and gave the information. Again, Danny wrote it down.

Amber remembered that the receipt on the take-out soup had put the time down at 4:47 p.m. The Rainbow Café couldn’t have been more than five to ten minutes from Erin’s apartment.

Pete asked Heather to reiterate her movements that day, and Heather repeated just what she told Amber earlier. She’d been at work all day. From there, she went straight to The Rainbow Café, picked up the soup she pre-ordered, and came directly to her daughter’s apartment.

“So Thea called you at work around four o’clock?” Pete confirmed. “Did she call you on the business line, or did she call your cell phone?”

“Work. I don’t have a cell phone.”

“Can you tell me what your first thought was when you let yourself into the apartment, put the take-out in the kitchen, then saw your daughter, Ms. Daughtry? What did *you* think had happened?”

Heather pressed her hands over her eyes as if she could block out the images that Amber had no doubt would be seared into her brain for the rest of her life. “I don’t know. I was horrified. I...I thought of Mike Benson. Since they got back together a few months ago, things haven’t been good. Not at all.”

“Got back together? When did they break up?”

“They broke up in early November, I’d say. He cheated on her again, and Erin found out about it. Some skank he picked up at Brews, if you can believe that. He isn’t the type of guy you can push around. And Erin wasn’t satisfied even after she forgave him and took him back. I know she made a lot of demands on him. She wanted him to marry her, like that would somehow make up for his vile cheating. Like that would somehow make him faithful from that moment on. But he wasn’t kowtowing to her demands one iota. ‘Take me or leave me as I am, babe. Your choice.’ He says that to her all the time.”

Amber watched Heather replay the memory in her mind. Stark devastation made her pale. “When I saw her lying there like that... It just seemed so horribly *fitting*. He refused to marry her, and, even when she tried to bluff him by claiming she was pregnant, he was sick of hearing it. She wanted to be a bride. And he made her one. Once and for all.”

Amber swallowed the lump suddenly blockading her throat. Until they’d talked to the guy, there was no way of knowing how bent on revenge he was for Erin’s relentless harping, and how far he’d go to end it.

“*Was* your daughter pregnant?” Pete asked softly.

Heather shook her head. “No. She couldn’t have been. She asked me to pick her up some tampons a few weeks ago when I went to the store.”

Chopp came into the room and murmured something to Danny, who nodded, then turned to Pete, saying simply, “Coroner.”

“Give us a few more minutes.”

Chopp nodded and said he’d handle it.

Pete turned back to Heather. “Do you know if your daughter had any enemies, besides possibly Mike Benson, Ms. Daughtry? Any relationships in particular that ended badly? Anything that would lead to this?”

“I can’t imagine—”

A strange sort of expression stole over Heather’s face, one that implied that she’d just remembered something that belied what she’d been about to say.

“Last year...actually, it was about six months ago. Erin and Mike Benson had been dating for awhile. She was ecstatically happy, but she knew he wasn’t always faithful. Anyway...Erin became convinced someone was trying to kill her.”

Pete frowned at the unusual development. “And what made her think that?”

Heather shook her head. “Oh, she said she was being followed. She *felt* like she was anyway. Stalked—that’s the word she used. And those accidents...two of them, both within a week of each other. Someone tampered with the brakes in her car. The first time, she was lucky—she realized they weren’t working right away and jumped out before it could pick up speed. It coasted and hit another car. Minor damage even then. She didn’t bother filing a report with the police before she took the car in and had the brakes fixed. She said she assumed they just gave out. Her car is really beyond what anyone should be driving. Maybe it was. But as soon as she got the car back, supposedly fixed, the brakes went out again. This time, she got banged up some, and I convinced her she had to report it. But the police never found out who did it, or if her car just needed to be

replaced. The officer implied as much when she gave her statement. It was that same officer who was the first here. Big moustache.”

“Rosch,” Amber said softly.

“Erin was scared to death, but nothing happened after that. It all just went away.”

Pete nodded, inclining his head toward his partner and whispering something. Danny left the room.

Thanking Heather, Pete told her they would be in touch as soon as possible. If she had any questions or concerns, she could call them. He handed her a business card.

When he left the room, Amber squeezed Heather’s arm. The woman looked up at her. “Do you need a ride home, Heather? One of our officers can drive you if you don’t think you’re up to it yourself.”

Heather shook her head. “I’ll be fine,” she insisted. “I need to see my mother. She’ll be a wreck.”

“I’m sure she’d appreciate that.”

Amber went to join the group of officers gathered in the wide entry hall outside the kitchen and living room.

“...into a case you investigated about six months ago. Erin Daughtry’s brakes might’ve been tampered with twice, reported only once—no solution.”

Rosch nodded, scribbling as fast as he could.

“You and Bradley finish the rounds in the building for witnesses while Chopp supervises the evidence search in the area, then find out what you can about that cold case.”

Rosch made a motion to his partner, then they departed.

“Chopp, send another team to round up Mike Benson,” Pete ordered. “He’s the super at Golden Sunset Apartments on Roosevelt. Bring him to the PD for interrogation if he’s out of the hospital.”

“Jensen and I can do it,” Amber volunteered immediately, knowing Jensen would groan only in her hearing but comply regardless.

Pete shook his head, saying to the patrol sergeant, “Send Malik and Whatley.” He glanced at Amber. “We might still need you here.”

“Okay. What about Jensen?”

“Right now, we’ve got everything pretty much in hand. Go ahead and go home, Warren. We’ll call you back in if we need you.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Amber said, seeing the look on her partner’s face. He didn’t want to leave. More like he didn’t want to go home alone, considering their earlier plans.

“Someone will give me a ride home when they’re done with me, then I’ll come out,” she said softly when they were outside the apartment, in the hall.

“I can wait here.”

She shook her head. “It probably won’t be long. Didn’t you say something about making me dinner?”

The reminder of their severely busted plans didn’t seem to make him happy, and she didn’t blame him. She was disappointed, too. Yet she couldn’t deny that she wanted to be here, too.

“I’ll have dinner ready when you get to the house.”

His hand enclosed hers near the wall, and she squeezed back, moving close to him to whisper, “I’ll make it up to you” before she returned to the apartment.

end of excerpt

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