

SINGING SLEUTH: THREE ROMANTIC MYSTERIES

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

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ABSTRACT

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The novella collection *Singing Sleuth: Three Romantic Mysteries* is a vital contribution to the creative arts because it fills an artistic gap. Within creative writing, a myriad of romantic stories and police procedurals exist. However, although genre-blending has become popular, it is rare that the romance and the detective story get blended in one plot, let alone three that center on the same protagonist. However, there are many readers who appreciate a bit of romance within a gritty mystery, or vice versa, that the collection does fill a need for.

What is even rarer is a story or collection that cements these two genres and also incorporates a spiritual thread. *Singing Sleuth* does this not only in its dialogue and characters, but in the restraint it uses. For example, unlike in secular romances, there is no sexual activity except between married couples, and even then, it is discreetly handled. Also, unlike secular mysteries or thrillers, the collection's violence is not gratuitous or graphic. Therefore, the collection serves a special purpose for a religious audience by giving them an entertaining read without the pitfalls of action they would rather not read about.

In order to write the novella collection, I conducted different types of creative research. Most of this research involved reading inspirational romance and mystery novels, as well as some novella anthologies already on the market that blend the two genres. I also took time to polish my craft in general, using books on plot, structure, and other elements to sharpen my writing. Finally, I was fortunate to be given the contact information for a retired Chicago police officer, who proved

a valuable resource because my heroine is a homicide detective. Personal experience also played a major role—having been in theater and choirs for many years, I was able to write the many performing arts scenes with authenticity.

As a result of my research, I was able to create a full and well-developed novella collection that seamlessly blended two opposing genres. I was also able to stretch my writing skills because until this project, I had never written a mystery and only attempted romance. The project required learning many new things, such as how law enforcement works, the complexities of romantic relationships, and how I could grow and mature as a writer.

I believe the implications raised by my project are myriad. First, the existence of such a collection confirms that the genre blend of romance and police procedural can exist. Because the elements of these genres will also draw in readers despite, or perhaps because of, a spiritual thread, the implication also exists that spirituality can be entertaining and creative. However, I think the most serious implication the collection raises is that creativity knows no borders. Others have asked if such a unique collection is publishable. I believe it is, and furthermore, I believe a story like mine will help the writing world to open itself up to even more unconventional projects.

INTRODUCTION:

When the time came for me to begin my thesis for the graduate English program at Western Carolina University, I was unsure of what to write about. I was aware, however, that a student should be passionate about his or her thesis topic. I am passionate about many topics, but the one that has taken up most of my time and energy over the years is creative writing. I love exploring characters, motivations, unique settings, and multifaceted conflicts. I also enjoy stretching myself within my writing. Therefore, my thesis became a creative one—a collection of three romantic suspense novellas with a spiritual thread which starred Maria Keller, a homicide detective with deep-seated, often repressed, theatrical interests.

The first novella, *To Protect, Serve, and Sing*, deals with Maria's need for a support system. When the story begins, Maria has just received a promotion to the homicide division of fictional Cherry Creek, North Carolina's police department. However, the position is not what she anticipated. The all-male division is not ready for the presence of a woman, so Maria is constantly ignored and even harassed. The only person who believes in Maria's ability is her partner, Brendan Schmidt, who does his best to help his protégé despite the sergeant's mandate that she is to be relegated to grunt work.

Maria's optimism, creativity, and humor serve her well in dealing with her hostile coworkers, but they are not enough. When Maria visits the local community theater, the Stage Door, in order to relieve stress, she doesn't expect to get the chance to prove herself. But when she discovers the corpse of the shrewish youth director in the ladies' room, this is precisely what happens. Maria goes undercover as an actress and sets her sights on catching the criminal who's poisoning members of the staff. But in the process, Maria falls hard for executive director Gil Montgomery.

Maria and Gil are highly unlikely as a romantic couple. Gil is everything Maria is not—organized, a perfectionist, introverted, and over-scheduled. Most importantly, he is a Christian, but Maria turned her back on God years ago. Yet, Gil is the first man Maria has ever met who

treated her with respect and kindness (readers discover she was raped in college, which caused her to drop out). His three children, whose mother died of leukemia three years ago, soon become precious to Maria. And when Maria learns that Gil's strict parents disapprove of her, she becomes more determined than ever to help the Montgomery family. She and Gil enter a platonic relationship for the sake of the case and the kids. Meanwhile, Maria rediscovers her latent love for performing and music. But as the case gets harder, her feelings for Gil stronger, and her need for spirituality deeper, Maria finally admits she can't do everything herself.

Maria gains support from her two adoptive cousins, Gil, and his children, as well as Schmidt and his wife Dorothea who become the equivalent of parents to her. Yet, even this support system is not enough for Maria to risk turning to God to fulfill her heart's need—one person who will always love and never abandon her. She considers becoming a believer on a few occasions, but adverse circumstances always arise to refresh the feeling that God could not want her. Maria hits her low point after a phone conversation with her adoptive dad, during which she learns he believes she tried to commit suicide in college. It is true she considered this after the rape, but the fall she suffered at the time was a freak accident.

Unbeknownst to Maria, the two Stage Door perpetrators have since become bent on taking her down, and they plan to use her badge as their weapon. A few days later, Maria is accused of the murders she's trying to solve. In a jail cell and facing life in prison or death, Maria works out her anger with God and places her faith in Him. This marks a drastic change in our protagonist. Before, her attitude reflected that she may have seen embracing God as a sign of weakness or inability to control her own life. Therefore, in turning to Him, Maria has acknowledged that she neither needs to control her circumstances or play the strong woman. Furthermore, she has learned to place faith in what she cannot see, rather than only in what she can. This faith is rewarded when, during interrogation, Maria exposes her enemies and walks away a free woman. Even better, she is able to agree to pursue a serious relationship with Gil.

The second novella, *Four-Part Fiasco*, finds Maria in her second year of homicide and maturing on all fronts. Most notably, she has gone back to college to finish her drama degree, balancing classes with work. She does not suspect that murder will follow her to a Christian

school, but when a professor is shot, Maria finds herself embroiled in a decades-old choir feud fueled by intolerant Christian faculty members.

Maria's spiritual and mental capacities are tested to their limits as she becomes overworked and one of her teachers displays unwarranted hostility toward her. She discovers the murderer's victims are all Christians with shady pasts, and that the root of his or her motives lies in what does or doesn't constitute true Christianity. Maria attempts to stop the infighting in order to get to the real danger, but finds this difficult because she is struggling with legalism in her own life. Maria's unconventional Christianity has led some people, especially Gil's parents, to believe she is a nonbeliever or at least a bad influence. Gil has even broken up with her, citing Mom and Dad's unfavorable opinions as a reason. When the death of her favorite professor compounds that wound, Maria is devastated. Worst of all Schmidt, who has been freezing her out due to his desire for a coveted promotion, refuses to understand her grief.

It is during these travails that Maria faces her second trust issue. For the first time, she realizes she does not, indeed cannot, trust herself or her decisions. Again, her painful past is somewhat responsible, but Maria discovers that her status as a cop plays a role, too. During the second novella, readers realize that in fact, "Maria" the idealistic theater maven and "Keller" the practical cop are basically functioning as two separate people inside one woman's psyche. Maria has practically drowned out her theater side, believing it is worthless. Yet, her passion for theater, and that part of her personality, refuse to die, and so she must deal with the fact that they still are a big part of herself.

Schmidt eventually comes around, promising to be a better partner and friend to Maria. He makes good on this promise, even coming to Maria's aid when the case endangers her friend, but is shot in the process. Maria saves his life, but is forced to kill the murderer before he can strike at both of them. Racked with guilt, Maria is forced to come to terms with the fact that she did what she had to. After being reassured Schmidt will be okay, Maria must also acknowledge that she cannot lean on him or anyone else to make decisions for her, be they work-related or personal. Once she realizes these things, Maria becomes better equipped to trust her own heart, which helps her accept Gil's marriage proposal at the end of the story.

The final novella, *Standing Ovation*, places Maria Keller in the path of her greatest challenge. As it opens, readers find her planning for her wedding, but also struggling with inner demons. The murder accusations from the first book, the insinuation that she killed the choir murderer on purpose, and memories of her rape and near-suicide are conspiring to torment the woman. She has frequent nightmares, her hands shake, she's unable to eat, and work has become nearly impossible. Her innate toughness makes Maria able to function, but her colleagues know she's losing control.

Maria's situation worsens when she finds out she's being stalked. A series of threats and morbid "gifts" point to the stalker's intent to kill. Maria's colleagues can't figure out who's after her or why, and when Maria hyperventilates at work due to a new threat, her supervisor declares he's had it. He forces Maria to take paid leave, and she flees to Texas, into the arms of Luke and Jasmine Brown, her adoptive parents. She's welcomed warmly, but Luke gives off signals that tell her their relationship is still tense.

Maria turns to a counselor for help, with some success. Meanwhile, she keeps in close touch with her Cherry Creek support system, but feels discouragement set in when each phone call fails to bear the news that she can come home. A few weeks into her stay, clues lead Luke and Houston's PD to discover Maria's stalker has been operating from Texas. When a clue points to Maria's past, she returns to her hometown of Angel's Crossing to examine some old memories.

Maria's mind has repressed a great deal of the events surrounding her last days with her parents, and only prayer seems to bring any memories back. When Maria is taken hostage, however, she discovers the truth. Her kidnappers are Willis Portman, her parents' former prop master and a violent ex-con, and his grandson. Worse, his grandson is Chandler Halliday, Maria's rapist.

Maria is informed she will be tortured before death and given four days to live. She attempts to use her time to dig up the truth of what happened to her parents. But after being severely beaten, denied food and water, and rendered hypothermic, she is barely able to function. It is here that readers see Maria's greatest resilience. Without her own tactics or support system, Maria only has God as a source of hope. For the first time, she must learn what it is to

give her whole self—not just her soul—into the hands of the divine. She does so, and though her trial does not miraculously end, Maria is able to survive. She experiences a prime example of divine intervention when an ally comes to her aid and helps fill in enough memory gaps for Maria to learn that Willis did kill her parents. Maria's subsequent rescue and healing are the ultimate example of this woman's ability to beat the odds. But as the story indicates, she could not have made it without her trust in God. Furthermore, it is Maria's trust that finally brings her full circle. Her ultimate decision to leave the force and return to the theater has been guided by her own heart and the support of those she loves. Yet, it is her acceptance of the Lord's destiny for her that finally allows Maria to be true to the woman she was created to be.

While creating *Singing Sleuth*, I faced several challenges. The biggest of these involved creating an ongoing plot arc that would support threads of suspense, romance, and spirituality. Each of these elements needed to have its own well-developed thread, and if one thread was dropped at any point, I knew the story would lose its essence. Therefore, my task throughout all three novellas was to make sure that suspense, romance, and spirituality all got equal time. This was particularly difficult to do with the suspense thread because I had never written a mystery before, nor did I know much about the law enforcement world. Research, including contact with a retired female officer, helped tremendously, as did the reading of novella collections whose format was similar to mine.

My second challenge involved Maria's character. As explained, Maria is a tough, put-together woman who lives in the moment and adores life. Yet, her insecurities needed to come to the forefront at various points. Sometimes, I had a difficult time writing about these insecurities well, which made Maria seem as if she was good at everything and made her a less likeable protagonist. Yet at other times, Maria's introspection sounded like a woman feeling sorry for herself. The challenge, then, became making her a relatable woman with unique struggles, without making her seem helpless against her inner demons. Humor was often the key there, as was crafting a few weaknesses for Maria that were not related to her past, such as, she's a bad cook and though agile, she doesn't have as much athletic prowess as she'd like.

Finally, in creating believable mysteries, I also faced the challenge of creating believable villains. This was a particularly thorny issue for me because I thought I had grown past the tendency to make antagonists caricatures. However, because I often had Maria face villains who could be archetypes—the dirty cop, the vengeful former love interest, the man who killed her parents and now wanted her blood—I had to find fresh ways to present them. With the help of my thesis director, I was able to get inside these characters' heads and create reasons for their negative behavior without making them too sympathetic. For example, the antagonist Maria deals with in the first novella, a crooked coworker, is a sort of “shadow twin” for her. That is, he is very much what Maria would have become had her adoptive family not taken her out of the foster care system and given her love and support. He is also a humanized result of what happens when someone takes the rules of a certain institution, such as law enforcement, so far that he becomes power-hungry and loses respect for others.

Critically, I believe *Singing Sleuth* has a secure, yet distinctive niche in the contemporary writing tradition. The novella collection has been described as a “genre blend” of romance and police procedural, with enough of the formulas of each genre to give it a base, but enough departures from stereotypes to make it appealing to a broader selection of readers. For example, Maria is by no means a typical police officer, and by no means is she a typical romance novel heroine whose main focus is winning the hero's affections. Instead, she and Gil come together as a team to deal with suspenseful and often dangerous events, discovering love for each other in the interim.

I believe *Singing Sleuth* also has critical value because of its success in dealing with inner turmoil and spirituality on a relatable level. As a longtime reader of inspirational fiction, I have seen several spiritual pitfalls that can and have caused me to get rid of a book. Among these are sugary conversion scenes, friends who exist only to witness to non-Christian characters, and Christians who act perfect, to the point that they fall apart if they forget to pray. These characters never face real conflict, and I believe none of them could actually stand up to it if challenged to do so. Maria and Gil, however, have and do face real-world issues such as deaths of loved ones, difficult jobs, and relational disagreements. They deal with these in realistic

ways; while faith does play a big role, neither one ever sugarcoats real feelings in the process. Furthermore, although Maria is a non-Christian at the beginning of her saga, she is never the focal point of a “witnessing scene” where someone explains salvation to her in a five-point presentation. Nor is she made to feel as though she will be shunned if she doesn’t choose to be saved. When she does convert, the experience is presented as a realistic one-on-one conversation with the Almighty, in which Maria works through her feelings of abandonment and rejection and requests healing only after becoming sure of God’s love.

I find it ironic that inspirational fiction was not a big part of my formative years’ reading material. In fact, I shied away from this fiction as a child because I thought it was unfair that some people thought a Christian girl should only read Christian books. However, I was fond of literature that featured strong female characters. This literature ranged from the American Girl series to books like Ann Rinaldi’s historical novels, Avi’s *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, Cynthia Voigt’s *Homecoming*, and Karen Cushman’s *Catherine, Called Birdy*. I became especially attached to these books because the ones I was required to read in school usually starred boys, and because as a handicapped girl, I never felt I could do as much as my peers could. The heroines of my books, who were capable of defeating villains, taking care of siblings, and cleverly escaping arranged marriages on their own, were the women who eventually led me down the literary road toward Maria Keller’s story.

This literary road became longer and more complex as I grew up. I began reading inspirational fiction, and while I discovered some of the flaws already discussed, I also found authors who did not sacrifice quality plots and characters for the sake of spirituality. Among these were Susan May Warren, Tamara Leigh, Rene Gutteridge, and Camy Tang. Each of these women, and many others, helped me learn to craft a spiritual message with a strong voice, a unique point of view, and humor, without neglecting suspense or romance. However, I also had secular influences—authors who created adult versions of the intrepid girls I learned to respect as an adolescent. While writing *Singing Sleuth*, I found myself particularly indebted to Zora Neale Hurston and Charlotte Bronte. Delia, the heroine of Hurston’s “Sweat,” reminded me of Maria in that both women faced evil in their lives, yet defeated it with their dignity intact. Bronte’s heroine

Jane Eyre, the titular character of her most famous novel, was also a help to me. Like Maria, Jane is an orphan, and so both women have experienced the hardship that comes with that role. Like Jane, Maria stands strong in the face of adversity, and like Jane, she finds ultimate happiness in the arms of a loving man. Yet unlike Jane, Maria does not depend on a man to complete her, nor does she surrender herself to traditional women's roles once she enters that relationship. Unlike Jane, Maria also refuses to allow unrealistic views of God to influence her relationship with Him—she tells God exactly how she feels and what she needs, depending on His grace to cover any human weakness she might expose.

Maria Keller is, in fact, the central element that ties all three novellas in the *Singing Sleuth* collection together. Her personality and strength make her a likeable character that readers will stick with through all three stories because they want to know if she will succeed, not only on individual cases, but also in the ultimate quest to discover who she is. Yet, Maria does not tie all three stories together by herself. The supporting cast—Gil, the Schmidts, and others—are all multifaceted characters who help make the novellas what they are. Additionally, the suspenseful, romantic, and spiritual threads all these characters represent come together to form a sweeping plot arc. The *Singing Sleuth* collection is much more than a police procedural, a romance, or even a spiritual quest. It is, in fact, all three of these, but it is also the story of a life. The overarching message is that without love, God, and a dash of adventure or risk, life is not entirely complete. Therefore, *Singing Sleuth* is ultimately the story of a woman finding pieces of herself within three aspects of a life she is determined to live well.

TO PROTECT, SERVE, AND SING

CHAPTER 1:***“How do you solve a problem like Maria?”******-The Sound of Music***

Yeah, that’s me. Maria Keller, also known as the Cherry Creek, North Carolina Police Department’s problem child. I’m not insubordinate but, just like Maria von Trapp, who Mama named me after, I do always seem to be in trouble.

I’m late—again. I’m supposed to be back at the station in twenty minutes for a big meeting, but thanks to the suspect I’ve followed into the Sweet Indulgence Bakery, that’s not gonna happen. One of them, Sarge or the suspect, is going to kill me. I wonder who’ll be the lucky winner.

“I’m not telling you again,” the suspect says. He can’t be more than eighteen, with greasy hair stuffed under a baseball cap, tattoos from neck to ankles, a pierced eyebrow...oh, and did I mention the .32-caliber pistol he’s aimed at my chest? “Give me the gun or you’re dead.”

My heart ratchets up the beat, but I ignore it. I move closer and let my almost-black eyes flash venom. “I don’t think so, hotshot. Drop it and come with me.”

Grease Ball fires a shot directly behind my head. “Last warning.”

Of all the times for my partner to be home with the flu. I clamp my lips to avoid choking on the gun smoke and search for a strategy.

“Keller?” Sergeant Davenport’s voice over my radio breaks the tension. “What’s your 20? I need you back here, now.”

“Don’t answer,” Grease Ball says. “Give me that thing.”

I’m only twenty-eight, but I have been a cop long enough to know one thing. He will shoot. I think I’ve got the quicker trigger finger, but I’m not willing to see. Nor am I willing to risk calling in backup anyway. I focus on the bullet hole in the back wall. Provided he knows who I am, now would be a good time for God to send me some help.

I don't know if it's divine inspiration or what, but the next second, I'm unclipping the radio. "Oh. You want this? Help yourself, bucko." There's the pitch, and...yes! She connects with his nose!

The kid screams a heartless word, hands going to his bloody face, and drops his gun. I'm holding it a nanosecond later. I fire it once before a click tells me the chamber's empty.

"Okay, kid, you have the right to..."

But Grease Ball is already running out the back door. Well, two can play that game. Grease Ball fakes left and heads for the curb.

"Come back here, you..." There, I've got him—no, he's shot through the front door again. I slap it open and dart after him, but he's halfway to the back entrance. Okay, now it's personal.

"Enough games, kid. You're under..." The word "arrest" never gets said, because the soles of my soaked boots meet the concrete floor, and I'm skidding all over the place like a drunk Sasha Cohen. I end up falling forward into a bag of flour. The bag bursts, and I'm covered. The stinging in my knees and hands tells me I've kissed the concrete en route, but I ignore that and use the edge of a shelf to pull myself back up. Unfortunately, there's a sugar canister sitting on that shelf. Yeah, you guessed it. A shattered sugar canister, inches from my foot, and sugar grains stuck to my boots, socks, and pants.

"Give up, chick?" Grease Ball asks. He lobs an egg at me. My neck catches it.

"Oh, you are so getting three to five for this..." And the pursuit is back on. We burst back to the front room at the same time, but I pick up too much momentum and crash into a display table, which sends cookies, frosted brownies, a cherry pie, and a New York cheesecake flying. Most of the mess ends up on my uniform. Meanwhile, Grease Ball is halfway to the door, and I'm ready to scream. I'm not playing this wild goose chase game again, so I yank off my right boot and throw that at him. I'm aiming for his head and get his back, but that stops him long enough for me to hop over and slap on the handcuffs. I cut the Miranda Rights short. "You've got the right to remain silent. Use it."

He uses it. Good thing too, 'cause if he'd said one word, I'd have crammed a lemon bar down his throat right there. By the time I confiscate his great haul—five dollars and some change, including an Arizona quarter—my radio is crackling.

“Keller? Keller! If you can hear me, pick up, now!”

Uh-oh. Sarge. I examine my hand. It's covered in yolk, and there's a piece of shell stuck to my thumb. What are the others gonna say about this one?

“Keller, where in blue blazes are you?”

I do a quick juggling act, holding the radio with one hand and pulling my boot on with the other. “Sweet Indulgence, sir. I was on the way back...achoo...bumped into a...kachoo, kachoo...robbery in progress.”

“Hey, Keller, you don't sound so good. You got Lundstrom's flu?”

“Negative, sir. I forgot my slicker...ACHOO!”

“Oh. Do you have the suspect?”

“Affirmative.”

“Fine. Get back here, book him, and then get to the meeting.”

I stare at my soaked, bakery-goods-smearred uniform. “Trust me, sir. You do not want me to show up looking like I do right now.”

“Trust me, Keller. Unless you're half-naked, I don't want excuses. Meeting starts in five minutes. I suggest you put the pedal to the metal.”

My hands feel like a morgue in February, and it has nothing to do with the rain. Sarge doesn't accept less than 100% from anybody, but he has never, ever talked to me like this. What did I do to set him off?

Knowing you, it's probably more than one thing, a mental voice says. After all, who locked her keys in her cruiser last week, hmmm?

Shut up, I tell the voice. He wouldn't get bent out of shape about that.

No, but he's probably ding-dang-dong bent about your last “sick day.”

No. No way he found out. Nobody knows I call in “sick” on self-defense training days, not even my partner. Besides, I don’t do it for kicks. I have a great reason for playing hooky, one that still gets my heart going like a crazed metronome every time I think about it.

So get over it, says Voice.

I bite my lip. I tried. I can’t.

You could if you wanted to, but no, you’ve gotta be Miss Oddball. “How do you solve a problem like Maria...”

I flinch. Daddy used to sing that song to tease me. I laughed about it then, but now... No use digging it all up. We’re here. Perp in tow, I push through the station door.

“Hey, Keller, what happened to you? You eat too many salads and get desperate?”

“Really, if you wanted a doughnut fix, all you had to do was say so!”

“All right, that’s enough, get back to...” Sarge cuts himself off. “Keller, what...never mind. I’ll book the creep. You get into street clothes and report to the conference room on the double. I’ve got an issue on my mind and I intend to settle it with everyone present so there’ll be no questions.”

“Um...with all due respect, sir, isn’t there something in the law about a suspect knowing the charges against her before she’s formally indicted before a jury of her peers?”

Okay. I cannot believe I said that. One, Sarge might take it as smart-alecky. Two, I sound like a bad episode of *Law and Order*. And three, I’m squeaking like an out-of-tune violin. Sometimes I hate being a soprano.

“I told you to change clothes, not give me a lecture,” Sarge says. “So move!”

Yeah, it’s official. I’m toast. All thanks to a lousy cheesecake. The idea rattles me so much I can barely change, and I even put my shoes on the wrong feet. I sprint to the conference room without redoing my usual bun. Cops who are about to be fired don’t worry about the “no-hair-below-collar” rule.

“Keller, sit down,” Sarge says. “I intend to get this over with as quickly as possible.”

“Of course, sir.” I feel like an electric chair victim who’s been told it’ll only hurt a minute. Yeah, right.

“Okay. Keller, you’ve been with us for what, six years?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Right. And in those six years, all of us can safely say we’ve never met an officer like you. Now, you are not perfect, but your intelligence, compassion for civilians, and sheer guts have impressed us on more than one occasion. Most importantly, they have impressed me.”

“Yes...” This sounds like a praise session, but I’m still suspicious. If he wanted to say “good job, kid,” he could’ve done that at my desk. There’s got to be a “but” in here somewhere.

“But...”

Ah, there it is.

“But while that’s good news for you, it’s bad news for me,” Sarge says. “Keller...” He sets a box in front of me. “This should explain everything. Go on, open it.”

“Okay...”

“It’s not a bomb, sweetie,” dispatcher Nancy Harris laughs. “I should know. I made it.”

She’s right, but I’m so shocked when I do open it that it might as well be a bomb. In front of me sits a chocolate cake covered with M&Ms and bearing the words **CONGRATULATIONS, DETECTIVE.**

“W-what?” I can barely hear over the clapping, laughing, and cheering. “Sarge...”

“The look on your face!” He laughs some more and then schools his features. “It was a surprise. Your detective’s exam results came through. You aced it, so you’re an official member of Cherry Creek Homicide.”

“Oh...oh...I...uh...um...ahem...”

“Hey, it’s the dawn of the apocalypse,” Harold Wilcox laughs. “Keller’s speechless!”

“No, no, I...it’s...” I crack my knuckles. “I’m in total shock here. I mean sure, I’ve dropped hints, but I wasn’t sure y’all would take me seriously, and I thought, so what if they did? I’m not exactly the typical cop, ya know? What if...” The rest of the words stick, but my brain knows them. What if I can’t hack it? What if I’m just a big joke? What if I get an innocent person charged with murder? What if...

“What if you knock their badges off?” Sarge asks. “Yeah, definitely gonna happen.”

I should protest, but I can't talk. I can't hear. I can still see, though, and what I see is the reason I've been dropping hints about homicide. Faces of innocent civilians, and innocent suspects, who need me. Faces of guilty people who won't see justice if I don't do this. And two faces in particular.

"Yes," my voice says. "I'll do it."

My words kick the party into high gear, including a few toasts, several "Keller stories," and the general antics of men hyped up on way too much chocolate at 5:00 AM. Oh, not that I don't appreciate it all. I've rarely gotten this kind of treatment from anybody. But that's the thing. It makes me uncomfortable, and it also makes a mean voice yell in my ear, insisting that I shouldn't be letting my colleagues celebrate. What am I, an attention hog? Do I think it's all about me?

"Keller?" It's Carmen DeLuca, one of four more women on the squad. "What's up? You're awfully quiet, and you haven't even had any cake."

Leave it to a cop. "It's okay. I'm just tired. Long week, and now this...and..." I think it over. Carmen's not a bosom buddy, but we girls in blue have learned to stick together. "I feel kind of, you know, bad. It should've been anybody but me. I'm not all that."

"What was that?" Nancy's in on it now. "You earned this promotion, baby. Don't you let anybody say different. Now..." She cuts a slice of cake that would give a fitness coach apoplexy. "You eat that and give yourself permission to float around on cloud nine, got me?"

She does make me feel better, but not a hundred percent, and there's only one way to get there. I stand up. "Thanks, Nancy, but I think I'll wrap this up and go celebrate at home. And could I have a couple more slices for my cousins?"

"Of course."

Nancy gives me a plate covered with Saran wrap, and I head for the door. Sarge catches me on the way out. "Good luck, Keller. And hey, let me know how it goes, okay?"

"Yes, sir, I will. Thanks for making the last six years..." What, exactly? Bearable? No, that's wrong. As tough as it was to go from the stage to the proverbial mean streets, I love my job. I shake my head. I was never a wordsmith and I guess I'm not gonna start now. "I'm just trying to say, you've been a great boss."

“And you are one heck of a cop, lady.”

I hope I can live up to his words.

My cousin, housemate, and best friend, Monique Delaney, is waiting in the living room, working on some sketches for her interior design business. She takes one look and says,

“Well, I don’t think “drowned rat” covers it.”

“Not even close.” I kick off my shoes and leave them at the base of the coat tree. “Tonight was...well, I’ll tell you, but you won’t believe it. Where’s Meg?” I ask, as in our other cousin, Meg Fontaine.

“Where do you think?”

“Right.” Meg and I love each other, but on many matters, we’ve agreed to disagree. Such as, I don’t hobnob with the academic bigwigs at Cherry Creek Lutheran University, where Meg teaches French and aerobics. In return, she doesn’t wait up when I’ve got a late shift. But I’m gonna insist on an exception. We’ve been there for each other since I showed up as a gangly ten-year-old foster kid with flyaway raspberry blonde hair, a singing voice rusty with disuse, and bruised kneecaps. Our parents called us the M&M Girls because we all love the candy, and because of our names. No way am I going to step into a real detective’s shoes without the other two M&Ms at my side.

“Wake her up, would you?” I ask Monique. “I have to...to tell...KACHOO!”

Monique frowns. “Okay, I will, but you’re not telling us anything until you have a hot bath and put on something cozy.”

“Anybody tell you you’ve got a Florence Nightingale complex?”

“Yeah, but you love me for it. Go on. I’ll make tea. What do you want?”

“Chamomile, decaf. My nerves are jangled.”

Of course, I can’t say something like that and expect my cousins to just drop it. Sure enough, twenty minutes later, Meg meets me at the living room door.

“All right, so what’s so important you had to disrupt my beauty sleep?” Meg certainly looks “disrupted,” with her pink floral nightgown crumpled, her ebony hair half in and half out of her curlers, and her sleeping mask hanging around her neck.

“C’mon, Meg, be nice,” Monique says. She shoves tea and cake into my hands. “Okay, eat, drink, and spill your guts.”

“You do know what you just told me to do is impossible.”

“Yeah, but as you would say, I’m not playing that game,” Monique says. “So make like a canary and chirp.”

So that’s what I do. Once she has the story, Meg nearly chokes on her cake.

“Oh, Maria!” she exclaims. “This is wonderful news—you’re finally going to be a detective! You’ve worked so hard, and now...oh! I’m so proud, and so happy, and...and...” Uh-oh. She’s into French now. I love my Aunt Charlotte, Meg’s mom, dearly, but darn those five years she spent in Paris.

“Meg,” I say, “simmer down, honey. I have got serious questions here. Girls, what’ve I done?”

Monique squeezes my shoulder. “The right thing. Considering the way it happened, I know God’s got plans for you, starting now.”

“Amen,” Meg says.

“Girls,” I warn them. They know how I feel about God talk. Now, I don’t mind that they’re Christians, and I’m no atheist. I believe in God, angels, the devil, heaven, and hell. But as for the Jesus-died-for-you-and-wants-to-get-personal shtick? Not going there.

“Okay, but we’re not sorry for saying it,” Monique says.

I laugh. “Non-apology accepted. Y’all go on to bed. I’ll hang out here until my brain shuts off.”

“No,” Meg says. “As long as we’re up anyway, let’s celebrate.” She indicates my prized possession, the secondhand piano I’ve named Esmerelda, in the corner. “Will you sing something?”

“Sure. I’ll even let you choose.”

“Well, since we were talking about divine intervention, how about “Impossible” from *Cinderella*?”

“Yeah,” Monique says. “You rocked when you played the Fairy Godmother that time.”

I flinch inside, but rather than visit dark memories, I sit on the piano bench and start playing. After all, the impossible did happen tonight, and to me, no less.

Take that, Maria von Trapp!

CHAPTER 2:

“You’ve got no disguise, from somebody’s eyes”

-Footloose

“Keller, you’re late,” Sergeant Alexander Tunney barks the minute I get through the door of the detectives’ bureau. “Can you read this watch?”

I look down. His watch says 8:15, but...crumb, surely he wouldn’t...

“With all due respect, sir, I don’t think thirty seconds is worth...”

“Don’t give me any claptrap about respect, Keller. You are one of the most disrespectful excuses for a detective I have ever had the misfortune to work with. You think thirty seconds is nothing to get upset about? Do you know what can happen in thirty seconds? I’ll tell you. A murder! You know those little crimes Davenport led me to believe you were passionate about? Or maybe he was mistaken. Maybe you’re more passionate about getting your beauty sleep.”

Okay, easy, girl. Deep breath, in through the nose, out through the mouth. This is no biggie. It’s just like when your choir director used to get her Texas temper going when you were late for rehearsal. “Sir, that isn’t it at all. If those thirty seconds are important to you, they’re also important to me, and I will do my level best to respect that.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it, which, if what I’ve heard about you is correct, will be never. Now, quit trying to clean up your latest mess and get to work. There are files on your desk that I want to see on mine no later than ten AM, and that doesn’t mean ten and a second.”

I want to tell Tunney he can take his files and stick them in his ear, and I almost do it, too. But I don’t give in to emotions, and just because I’ve been the office gopher for the past three months is no reason to start now. Instead, I book it toward the lounge. Tunney may treat me like a slave, but I’m not acting like one. I’m having breakfast before I even touch a file. Now, let’s just hope somebody thought to bring in something besides doughnuts and sausage biscuits. A-ha...bagels, and as usual, the fat-free cream cheese is untouched. Now all I need is a cup of tea,

and I think it's a passion fruit kind of morning. So I cross the lounge, turn on the hot water, and immediately sneeze.

"What the...oh, crumb." I turn away from the deadly scent of coffee and find the lid for the can of Maxwell House. "What stupidjerk idiot moron left the darn thing open in the first place?" I shove the can to the back of a cabinet, slam the door, and straighten up just in time to hear a laugh.

"Well, well, if it isn't Jenny Come Lately. You know, I hear they're learning to tell time in first grade this week if you're interested." Pete Rawlings leans way too far into my space, takes a huge bite of his chocolate chunk muffin, and slurps his coffee. The scent is close enough to make me feel dizzy, which knocks me into Rawlings.

Rawlings glares at me. "Hey, Keller, quit contaminating my air."

I blink to clear the water from my eyes. "Your name's not on this air."

"Hey, watch it, Keller. You forget I'm second in command here. Tunney's not around, you answer to me. Got it, Policewoman Barbie?"

"Oh, I didn't know they made Policewoman Barbie. What, did you order it for your collection?"

Rawlings plunks down the rest of the muffin and presses in, less than an inch from my nose. His flinty gray eyes narrow, giving a sinister cast to the rat-like features that make him more intimidating than your average fat cop. "Listen, Keller. You're a rookie, so I've been easy on you so far. But I'm warning you right now, don't cross me. Because if you do, you'll wish you never saw a badge."

I've almost got to feel sorry for the guy. He actually thinks I'm gonna cringe and run. I smile. "Rawlings, you're right. I am a rookie, so you don't know me. And one thing you don't know about me is I have seen plenty of people and things that scare me. You are not one of them. So you take your caloric nightmare, get out of my face, and let me do my job while you attempt to do yours."

"What job you have, that is," he says. He lumbers out.

“Jerk,” I tell the coffeepot, like it cares. “I should’ve just smashed the pot over his head. No, wait, I should’ve dumped it down his shirt. No, wait, that would require touching the rat and I’d rather die. Although if I did it while wearing latex gloves...”

Ah, who am I kidding? I say anything and I’m out of a job, a thought that nauseates me. I let my hand find the angel pin that belonged to Mama, and that I started wearing again once I didn’t have the restrictions uniformed cops live with. The cool silver comforts me the way Mama’s hand on my forehead used to when I was sick. I’d give anything if she were here now, or even if I could call her up and...

“Oh, get over it, Keller,” I tell myself. “Your parents are dead, and even if they were here, what would you expect them to do, tell Tunney and Rawlings and the others to quit picking on you? Right. Stop acting like a damsel in distress and get to work.”

A few minutes later, I’m at my desk, fixing up Tunney’s precious files. I turn on the radio to break the monotony.

“Good morning, Cherry Creek! Cynthia Cranston here, better known as your old friend CeCe, here at WTHR, your home of all those ‘50s and ‘60s classics, one-hit wonders, and show tunes. You’re listening to the Curtain Up Show, and I’ve got a hit here for every jerk teacher, coach, and boss in the city. No intro needed, people, you know it...”

“Do I ever,” I mutter as Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” starts pumping through the speakers (or as much as medium-low volume can pump, anyway). I don’t sing along, but I do hum, and even tap my pen on the desk in perfect rhythm.

“Hey, is this a private party or can I crash?”

I look up to find my new partner and only ally in the homicide business so far, Detective Brendan Schmidt. He’s a total sweetheart. Oh, not that I’m interested or anything. He’s ten years older than me and married with four kids. But he treats me like a person, and around here, that’s better than any office romance. “Like you can ask permission. I don’t have a door.”

“Right.” He leans against the cubicle wall and studies me. “Everything okay?”

“Oh, sure. I’ve got my bagel, my fruit passion tea, my show tunes, and the easiest tasks in the whole detectives’ bureau. Plus, Rawlings and I were having a ripping good time just now. What more could a gal need?”

Schmidt gives me an unreadable look. “Are you ready for the ten-fifteen meeting?”

“The ten...oh, crumb! What time...whew!” It’s only 9:57. I’ve got three minutes. “Excuse me.” I scoop up the files, but Schmidt stops me. “Whoa, where’s the homicide, detective?”

“If I don’t move it, the homicide’s going to be right here in this cubicle. Tunney will kill me if I don’t deliver these files on time. He already jumped on me for being late.”

“What? You were not...” Schmidt sighs. “I’m sorry, Keller. I wish I knew why he’s always on your case in particular.”

“What case? The Mysterious Case of Who Switched to Decaf?”

Schmidt howls with laughter. “Keller, you know something? You’re a real stitch. You just keep up that attitude, and go get some air. You’ve got to get Tunney out of your head or he’ll mess up your moment.”

It’s no big deal. I’m just expressing an opinion.”

“Well, for you, that’s big.”

“Right. Wish me luck?”

“I’ll do better. I’ll pray for you.”

And therein lies my partner’s only real flaw—the guy’s a stinkin’ saint. “Yeah,” I say. “God doesn’t like me, but thanks. It means a lot that you tried.”

Schmidt just grins, takes the files, and walks away.

For me, our weekly meetings usually move at the speed of a convertible through snow, but this one’s more like the Coca-Cola 600. Tunney’s already brought up the Rhodes murder, and the guys are deep in discussion.

“I don’t know why we’re wasting our time,” Sam Greenwood says. “We’ve got usable prints, but no murder weapon, and it couldn’t have been stashed like we thought. Adams and I tore that crime scene apart. Zilch.”

“But the prints matched the stepson’s, right?” asks Oliver Farris. “Well, there you go.”

“No. There was another set of prints on the windowsill, and the one print on the body didn’t match the stepson’s,” Eliot Doyle says.

“Don’t you clods get it?” Rawlings, of course. “Work with me here...the print was on Mrs. Rhodes’ mouth, and her mouth was bruised. We’re talking suffocation, which is why there’s no weapon! Honestly, you bunch of pansies...”

“Suffocation with what, Rawlings?” Greenwood shoots back. “They found the body in the kitchen. What was the perp gonna use, a spatula?”

Now or never. Clearing my throat doesn’t work, so I raise my hand. When that doesn’t work, I lean forward. This obstructs everybody else’s vision of the guys next to me. They have no choice but to see me.

“How did any of you get out of the academy?” Rawlings is still ranting. “A perp is usually so desperate he’ll move the body if he has to. It’s called a cover-up, ever heard of it?”

Farris looks at me, but immediately looks the other way. That second, I feel something hit my shoe. I duck and find a note from Schmidt.

-Wait for them to shut up and jump in. And put your hand down. You’re not in third grade.

As if on cue, the room gets quiet. Okay, I’m through with messing around. “Guys, wait a minute here. If you ask me, the reason Greenwood and Adams haven’t found a weapon is because there is no weapon. Not what you’d think of as a weapon, anyway. I mean, think about it. The only prints in that room are nowhere near the body. They’re on the windowsill, the sink, and a couple of pots and pans hanging over the stove. The only print on the body is on the mouth. And the only other sign of activity in that kitchen is the presence of a cookie sheet in the sink. Now, considering that Mrs. Rhodes was deathly allergic to nuts, and considering that one of the last things she ate, according to the report I read, was a slice of breakfast bread, I think it’s worth looking into whether or not that bread had nuts in it, and whether or not it was forced down her throat, courtesy of a homicidal guest at her bed and breakfast.”

I don’t take a real breath until the last word. Once I’m finished, Schmidt gives me a discreet thumbs-up. The others are giving me “are you crazy” looks, except for Rawlings, who

looks like he wants to eat me for lunch with fries and a Coke. Tunney's somewhere between that and shocked that I would dare speak. Too bad for him.

Farris rolls his eyes. "Women and their food theories."

This gets a group laugh and a slap on my knee from Doyle. "Ha, good one, Keller. What's next, a conspiracy theory about that murdered postal worker getting abducted by aliens?"

"Knowing Keller, it's probably Julie Andrews clones," Rawlings says.

"Oh, now, don't be too rough on her." If Farris' sympathy gets anymore sugary and synthetic, I'm gonna have a mouthful of cavities. "Maybe she knows something about the sociopath poisoning all our cologne!" Cue second group laugh, or rather, howl. What a bunch of boys.

Schmidt starts to speak, but I catch his eye and mouth, "please, please don't." He doesn't look happy about it, but he nods. Meanwhile, Tunney claps twice.

"All right, fall out and get back to work, detectives. Keller, don't forget to write down everybody's lunch orders. And do us all a favor. Learn some respect for the people in this business who know what they're doing. Dismissed."

Back in my cubicle, I flinch when I feel a large, tan hand on my shoulder. It belongs to Frederick Adams, otherwise known as Lurch for his 6'8" frame and 300-pound body. He hasn't said much to me, but I've always chalked it up to his stammer, which is why I'm shocked to see kindness in his eyes.

"Easy, M-Miss K-K-Keller," Adams says. "J-just w-wanted to s-say, I d-d-didn't think that w-was f-f-funny."

"You're darn straight it wasn't," Schmidt says, like he wants to say the real word. "I've got half a mind to file a discrimination complaint with Internal Affairs."

"Then tune in to the other half," I tell him. "Schmidt, I don't want you to..."

"I don't care. Nobody should have to bow and scrape to those...those pigs, and..."

"No, I mean it, Schmidt. I don't want...I can't...I can't handle the stress, okay? Well, I can, but I've not been here long, and I've wanted this job since I was in patrol. I do anything, and I'm out. Please don't blow it."

Schmidt gives me a compassionate smile. "Okay. I'll keep quiet for now. But just for now."

"In the meantime," Greenwood's voice speaks up from nearby, "Adams and I have a case to get back to and a new lead to check out."

"No," I say. "They're probably right, it's stupid..."

"Let us decide that," Greenwood says. "Believe me, if I ever thought you were stupid, I'd have said it before now."

"Thanks. Oh, by the way, what do you two want for lunch?"

"Tunney on Toast," Greenwood says.

"Will that be with or without cinnamon and jam?" I ask.

The three guys walk out laughing, and I go back to work. On the radio, CeCe is still manning the Curtain Up Show, and "Somebody's Eyes" from *Footloose* is on. I nod at the radio. "Exactly."

CHAPTER 3:

“It’s the hard knock life for us...”

-Annie

I wake up at 7:30 the next morning from a terrible dream in which Tunney drugged me and imprisoned me inside a clock. The phone’s ringing, so, grimacing at the bitter aftertaste of sleep in my mouth, I throw back the covers and start to get up, but Monique hears me.

“Go back to bed, Maria—I’ve got it! Hello? No, this is Delaney. Monique Delaney to you. May I...oh. Oh, really? I hope you have evidence to back that up, Detective. Well, that is not her problem. In fact, I don’t blame her...what? No, she cannot cover your shift as “payment” while you and your partner go to Asheville for the gun and knife expo. Who do you think you are, huh? Yeah...yeah, you better keep quiet, Mr. Big Stuff. Yeah, I’ll tell her...when I feel like it, which may not be until Friday...yes. Yes, I will have a nice day, but I can’t say the same for you. Goodbye and good riddance.”

“Exactement!” Meg calls from her bedroom. She mutters a few words in a mixture of “Frenghish”. I catch my name coupled with “best detective they’ll get” and “meatheads” before I hear light snoring that means Meg is back in dreamland, most likely eating chocolate truffles with Prince Charming.

I hurry into Monique’s room, still working on the tie of my cherry red bathrobe. “That wasn’t Tunney you told to go jump, was it?”

“No, it was one of his moron underlings. Oliver something, like I care what his name is.”

“Oh, you mean Farris. Don’t worry. He’s just mad because I told him I’d go out with him when a very bad place froze over. He’s a real Casanova. Schmidt and I saw him hitting on a meter maid one time.”

“That’s not why he called. Maria, please, please tell me you did not put a sign over the sink in the lounge that says, ‘your Mama don’t work here, so wash your own dishes,’ signed The Management.”

“Hey, I disguised my handwriting.”

“Oh, right. And you thought a bunch of detectives—key word there—wouldn’t figure out who it was?”

“That’s not the point. The point is that my name is Maria Keller, not Little Orphan Annie. If they can lift fingerprints off a paper clip, they can wash their own plates and coffee mugs.”

“True that, sister,” Monique says. She gestures that I should sit on the bed with her. “But I’m wondering something. Why don’t you quit? The Maria Keller I grew up with never let people push her around.”

“Yeah, but that Maria didn’t have so much at stake. Look, if this were just about being a detective, I’d quit in a heartbeat. But it’s more than that. This is personal now. It’s about self-respect. It’s about showing them they can’t run me off, and that I deserve a chance. And it’s about...” I can’t say it.

Monique hugs me. “I know. I know. If it’s any consolation, they’d be proud of you.”

“I hope so.” I break the embrace. “Now, enough with the mushy stuff. I’ve got two good hours before I’ve got to go in for my shift and I’m gonna make the most of ‘em.”

“Okay. You go get dressed, and wear what you want.”

That’s easier said than done. In theory, as a detective, I am indeed supposed to be able to wear what I want, as long as it’s not sweats or jeans and flip-flops. But with Tunney at the helm, “plainclothes” takes on a whole new meaning. His idea of appropriate dress is anything in black, gray, brown, or blue. Hey, if I wanted to be a Quaker, I’d hop a plane for Pennsylvania, okay? I grab my black twill skirt and white blouse. Note to self—find a way to dress this up. Blouse on, skirt zipped, hose on—oh, boy, do I hate pantyhose—and now for shoes.

And there sits my other problem. I’m not a shopaholic, except if you count sheet music and books, but I am a hard core shoe fiend. I own no less than thirty pairs, and most of them are, in some way, decorated. I own bejeweled ones, sequined ones, gold and silver ones, polka-dot

ones, beaded ones, and one pair of sandals with fake sunflowers across the top. Plus an array of cowboy boots, because otherwise, what kind of Texan native would I be? But, yeah, you guessed it, Tunney doesn't go for funky shoes. That leaves me with two—count 'em two—acceptable pairs. One is a half-size too small. And the other...

"Okay, that left shoe's gotta be around here somewhere. They don't just get up and walk away..." I get on my knees to lift the bed skirt and start singing a number from one of my favorite shows, *She Loves Me*. "Where's my other shoe/help me find my other shoe/don't just stand there like that, where's my shoe?" The song weaves its spell, and soon, I'm singing at the top of my lungs while turning the room upside down. "Help me find my shoe/I can't leave until I do..."

"Do I hear...singing in here?" The voice is Monique's, but it's deeper, threatening, and a tad familiar. She clomps into the room. "Well, okay then. Since you're in such a chipper mood this morning...get moving, I don't have all day! Redo those requisition forms—the commas are off-center! Reorganize my files...the order they're in is pathetic! And speaking of orders, go get me an iced hazelnut mocha!"

I play along. "But it's 7:45 in the morning."

"But it's 7:45 in the morning," Monique echoes. "What kind of excuse is that? The narcotics guys were up at six! Now, get to work...there's a stack of cases taller than the Chrysler building in here!" She steps closer and sweetens her tone. "What do we say, Keller?"

"I love you, Sergeant Tunney."

"I love you too, you knucklehead," Monique says in her normal voice. She plops down in the middle of the shoe search mess and tugs me down with her. "But Maria, don't you see? When you were singing, and just now, you were doing something fun. Your life needs to be fun again."

I hate it when Monique goes all Dr. Laura on me, but crumb, she's right. "I know, and I hate that it's not. But Tunney has rules, and I've got to play by them, or best-case scenario, I'll be labeled the station twit. Worst-case, I'll be out of a job."

Monique frowns. "From what you've said, you already are the station twit."

We look at each other and burst out laughing. I recover first. "Okay, you're right. Hang on." I find my red blazer in the closet and then reach for my red, bow-festooned heels.

Monique nods. "Close. Not quite there, though. Let me see..." Before I can blink, Monique jerks my hair from its bun. "I feel like the hairstylist on *What Not to Wear*," she says. "Let's get you a decent style going." She starts combing. "I always loved your hair."

"Hmmm," I say. I don't notice my hair much, but I guess it would be a novelty to Monique and Meg. They're both brunettes. Monique has cocoa-colored hair and Meg, rich, true black. You can definitely tell I'm adopted, but Meg and Monique have been more family to me than anyone in recent years. I'd literally be dead without them.

"There!" Monique sounds like she just finished a painting to rival the Mona Lisa. And I have to admit, my hair looks ten thousand times better. She's got it one-quarter up, three-quarters down. I'd almost forgotten what my hair really looked like.

"Monique, I...uh..."

"Never mind. This is payback for saving that rayon scarf I thought I'd ruined with pottery clay."

"Okay, okay, enough with the glamour session. I've got to get going."

"Good girl. And knock 'em dead at work today."

"Is that supposed to be a pun? Because if it is, it needs work."

"Well, it was supposed to be a pun, but don't worry if you actually decide to do it."

"Why, because you'll bail me out of jail?"

"No, a friend bails you out. A cousin helps you hide the bodies."

I didn't leave as soon as I wanted to because the minute Meg saw me, she threw a hissy fit. "Maria Magdalena Keller, what on earth have you done to yourself? You look anorexic! How much weight have you lost?"

Now, I know I don't look anorexic. Meg's just got a thing for melodrama. But she's right. "I dropped ten pounds." Well, okay, thirteen, but if you round it down...

Meg gave me a Look. "That's criminally thin, Miss Cop."

"Oh, yeah, and what are you gonna do, Miss Legs-up-to-Here? Arrest me?"

“No. Feed you.” Which she did—eggs and French toast with strawberries. I tried to tell her I’d grab a bagel on the way, but when Meg gets in Angel of Mercy mode, look out. But at least I finally got on the road.

Ever since I got my license, one of my favorite ways to de-stress has been to get in my car and just drive. I never have a plan for where to go, but somehow, I always end up where I’m supposed to be. Today is no exception. Twenty minutes from my house, I pull up in front of the Stage Door Community Theater, a four-story converted house on Sinclair Street. Memories rush out to meet me.

Mama and Daddy owned a community theater, the Thousand Stars in Houston, Texas. Daddy was an actor, and Mama handled the books and publicity and all that stuff. I was their only child, conceived after three years of trying and a miscarriage, my big brother. Mama was scared she’d lost me too, because I was two weeks late getting myself out of her. (Guess that explains my time issues). Well, the night of October twenty-seventh, Mama was sitting in on a rehearsal of *The Sound of Music* when her water broke. From that point, she barely had to push.

It stands to reason that theater is in my blood. I walked around the house humming and singing from the time I could talk, and started voice lessons when I was four. I could read music before I could read words and was learning piano before I learned to add and subtract. Mama homeschooled me, and although I was never a straight-A student (B’s, mostly, with the occasional A), we had a wonderful teacher-to-student relationship. That came in handy too, because she also taught my piano lessons, and she was tougher than Tunney some days. My voice lessons came from an on-staff coach.

So here I am, this creative kid who’s practically a musical prodigy, with two great parents, a theatrical family, and a growing love for books of all kinds, especially mysteries, on the side. Life’s good. And then I turn eight, and it all goes down the toilet.

I don’t know why I’m here now. Maybe it’s true, what they say about how you always come home. And this is as close to home as I’ll ever get. So I park the car and walk in.

“May I help you?” The woman sitting at the big oak desk in the foyer is a tall, violet-eyed blonde in a pale pink business suit and soft pink sandals with heels. Her nails are also a glittery pastel pink. Add her high, breathy voice, and she looks and sounds like a bubblegum ad.

“I...uh...I...” I have to say something, but what? No way am I gonna tell her my personal business, and “I just came in to look around” sounds stupid, whether it’s the truth or not.

“Are you lost?” she asks.

Ha. She has no idea. “No, I...” I’ve got to think on my feet. “I’m looking for a job. I’m a police detective, but I want to moonlight.” Perfect, and true, too. If I could moonlight here, I’d have something to think about besides my lousy, menial, anti-feminist desk job.

“Oh! Well, that’s nice,” she says. “I’m Sarah Goodson, the AD. Oh, I forgot, you might not know. That’s...”

“Assistant director,” I say. “I do know.”

“Right. Well, as I said, that is just super, but I’m not sure if we have anything open, and even if we did, we don’t take just any Penny the Policewoman off the street. I’d need to know if you have any actual theater experience.”

Breathe in, girl. Ignore the chick’s tone and just give her your credentials. “Over ten years in school and community theater productions, twenty-two years of voice lessons under different teachers, piano proficiency, and two years as an assistant youth choir director.” Beat that, Bubblegum.

Sarah doesn’t write down anything. “Okay. That’s impressive. But I must admit, I’m curious. What is someone with that much experience doing carrying a gun and wearing a badge?” she asks, as if she thinks I was lying.

“My degree fell through. I needed a change.”

“Oh, no. I’m sorry.” And, darn it, Sarah sounds as if she means it. Being around my colleagues sure has turned me into a shrew. “Thanks. I mean, it’s not a big deal, but thanks.”

“You’re so welcome. Now, I can’t do anything about getting you a job. Those requests have to go through our executive director, Gilbert Montgomery, and unfortunately, he’s not here right now. But I’d feel bad about sending you away empty-handed, as it were. I know you public

servants don't get much of a break. Could I interest you in coffee? A cookie? I just baked some chocolate chip ones."

Man, I must look worse than I thought. "No to the coffee," I say, "but yes to the cookie."

Sarah's back with the goods in short order, and soon, we're talking theater like we've known each other all our lives. Somehow, I end up telling her about my parents and the Thousand Stars.

"Is this theater like theirs?" she asks.

"In some ways. We had play posters in the foyer, too, and it smells exactly the same. Dried flowers, wood, greasepaint, and lemon Pledge." I get a feeling I'm saying too much, but ignore it.

"Ah," Sarah says. "Then why don't you take a look around? We've got elevators, so whenever you need to leave, just find one and press the button for the ground floor."

I should refuse and hightail it out of there. Something just doesn't feel right. But six years of theater deprivation does funny things to a woman, so I say,

"Okay, thanks," and start walking.

And what a walk it is. Every room in the Stage Door takes me further from the present and into a past that's painful, but I would give anything to have back. If I close my eyes for a minute, I can almost believe Daddy's going to come around the corner, swing me up in his arms, and say,

"Hi there, Pumpkin, how's it going? Mama's not working you too hard at school, is she?"

I'd giggle and say no, and then he'd say,

"Good. So, since it's Friday, can I count on my favorite junior director to sit in on my song rehearsals with the leads?"

Childish giggles interrupt my fantasy when I come to a door marked **SECOND STAGE**. I hear a series of harsh claps and then,

"All right, y'all shut up and plop your hind-ends in chairs, now! Last night's performance was horrible, and unless y'all want to look stupid again next week, you'll listen up and get all these mistakes fixed."

Okay. Now, I know show biz is a tough world and all, but these are kids. I feel myself edge into the stage area and sit in back, grateful the darkness hides my distinctive hair color. I'm then treated to a rehearsal of *The Wizard of Oz*. At least, I think it's a rehearsal. Every few minutes, the harpy in charge stops to yell at the kids, even calling one a "worthless, whiny twit." She finally stands up and snaps,

"If I have to spend one more minute with you unprofessional, snot-nosed brats, I'll need therapy. I'm getting some coffee. You kids sit silently until I get back."

Okay, let's be clear on one thing. My mama raised me to be a true Texas lady, and one thing she at least tried to drill into my head was, "now, Maria, don't you go poking your nose in business that ain't yours." Well, sorry, Mama, but you know I never learned, and that's truer now than ever. I follow Harpy out and say,

"Excuse me, ma'am, but I have been in theater for years, children's theater included, and I have never seen any director abuse kids like you just did. That behavior is uncalled for and I intend to report you."

"Well, aren't we Miss Crusader? Yeah, you do that, lady. You do that and get laughed right off the premises." Harpy sashays off.

"Yeah, well same to you, Miss Hannigan!" I yell. But as with Rawlings, I might as well be yelling at air. I duck into a vacant music room and put my chin in my hand. How did my life get this way? All I ever wanted was to help people. Fix things I knew were wrong. Prove I wasn't the human mistake everybody always said I was. But...

"What are you doing in here?" a male voice barks in my ear.

I jump up and feel my shoe connect with his foot. He grunts, and I whirl around, knocking into him. "Oh! Oh, sir, I am so... I didn't mean to...you scared the daylights out of me, and..."

"It appears I was well within my rights to do so," he says. "However, I am not in the mood to deal with you, so if you leave my property now, I will not call the police."

Now, I haven't really looked at a guy, much less dated one, in six years. But I have to admit, this one's smokin' hot. Six-two, give or take, clean-shaven, hair the color of upper piano keys, and incredible, almond-shaped, jade eyes. I really could get lost in them, just like they say

in books. Except those eyes are glaring at me because Smokin' Hot thinks I'm a trespasser. Time to act like the detective I am and set him straight.

"Sir, I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong idea, and I'm really sorry about your foot, but there's no need to be alarmed. I am the police." I reach into my pocket for my badge. "Detective Maria Keller, Cherry Creek PD."

Smokin' Hot's glare intensifies. "That's a Books-a-Million discount card."

I look down and see he's right. "Uh, sorry, I must've left my badge in my car, I..."

"Save it, lady." And the next thing I know, he's grabbing my wrist and dragging me out of the room.

Fear shoots me so full of adrenaline I nearly vomit right there. The last thing I see is my left shoe. The last thing I hear is the shoe connecting with Smokin' Hot's kneecap.

He doubles over in pain and I make a beeline for the door, but he catches up near the end of the hall. "I don't know who you are, lady, but I've seen some bad acts before, and yours is one of the worst. So let's just end this play right now, shall we?" He's got his hand around my arm again, but I'm so mortified and scared I can't do anything about it, so I barely notice when he pushes me into his office.

"Sit here while I make a phone call." He plunks me into a chair as if giving a child a time-out and picks up the phone. He dials a number, then an extension. I'm sitting close enough to hear who picks up. "Cherry Creek Homicide, this is Schmidt."

This guy knows Schmidt?

Oh, crumb. The way this day's going, I'll be lucky to get a job as the theater's janitor.

CHAPTER 4:

“We have an opening for a princess...”

-Once Upon a Mattress

Calm down, Keller. Calm down, girl, I coach myself. Schmidt will get here, he'll recognize you, and he'll explain to this so-attractive-it-shouldn't-be-legal moron that you are in fact a detective. Then you can get to work, and... I look at Smokin' Hot's clock. Crumb. I'm supposed to be at work in thirty minutes, and knowing my luck, there is no way.

“I hope you're proud of yourself,” I tell Smokin' Hot. “Thanks to you, my supervisor is probably going to have me making coffee for the rest of my natural life.”

He straightens his tie and gives me an arrogant look. “That's not my fault. I'm not the one who broke in here.”

Breaking in? He wishes! I glare at him. “Shut up or I'll kick you to Timbuktu, you arrogant, high-handed jerk!”

He backs off, but not for long. “What is your problem? Are you strung out on drugs? On welfare and can't feed your illegitimate kids? What?”

I would laugh, but people have made insinuations like that about me all my life. She can't get somewhere on time? She must not care. She doesn't line her files up alphabetically? She's a slob. She's an orphan? Her parents must've beaten her, or else they couldn't feed her. Either way she's trailer trash. She's got raspberry hair and a big personality? She must be a druggie who has piercings, tattoos, and babies by five daddies. She's a girl? Well, she definitely can't be a decent cop. I would laugh, but a gal can only take so much, and...

The office door opens.

“Gil, hey, buddy!” Schmidt's in the room, and he's...whoa. My partner is knocking knuckles with this...this...man? The traitor!

“So what seems to be the problem?” Schmidt asks. Smokin’ Hot jerks his thumb toward me.

“My problem is a tiny, dark-eyed woman who packs a serious punch.” He turns away from me and I assume he’s hiking up his pant leg. “That came from that...cherry-colored bullet she calls a shoe.”

He steps back, and Schmidt and I finally look at each other. “Keller?” he asks, like he’s never seen me before.

Smokin’ Hot’s handsome mouth drops open. “Keller? You mean...Brendan, is she really a police detective?”

“Yes. She took Feldman’s place. Who did you think she was?”

“A petty thief and druggie who sleeps around,” I say.

Schmidt turns to his friend. “And just how did you come up with that theory?”

Smokin’ Hot looks as indignant as I feel. “I found her in a music room. I’d never seen her before in my life. She told me she was a cop, but showed me a bookstore discount card instead of legitimate ID and claimed her badge was in her car. Now, was I supposed to believe that? She doesn’t even look like the type to be carrying a badge.”

“So that makes her a criminal?”

Smokin’ Hot clears his throat. “Uh, no, but...but she kicked me,” he says in the tone a first-grader uses when tattling to the teacher. “She kicked me and ran off.”

Schmidt gives him a Look. “So let me get this straight. My partner took one look, kicked you, and ran?”

“Well...no, not exactly. I may have...startled her. I demanded to know what she was doing there, and she...well, she acted scared, but I assumed it was guilt. So I grabbed her arm and tried to get her out of there...”

“You did what?” Schmidt asks. “No, on second thought, don’t repeat it. Keller, what happened?”

So, leaving out the details about my dismal work situation, my maverick emotions, and the fact that I think this idiot is attractive, I answer Schmidt’s question. Once I’m done, his face

clears and he smiles, but Smokin' Hot looks unconvinced. "You're telling me that my AD just let you traipse around in here without a visitor's badge?"

"Visitor's badge?" I echo like the brilliant woman I am.

"Yes. Visitors to the theater must be wearing identification. I can't believe she didn't tell you."

I can. I knew there was a reason I should've listened to my intuition. What a fool I'd been to be sucked in by chocolate chips and a sweet smile. "I believe it," I say. "I get the idea Sarah doesn't like me much."

"Now, don't go jumping to conclusions." Smokin' Hot's patronizing tone makes me want to smack him. "You probably said something to offend her, and..."

"I...you...well, maybe you don't know her as well as you think you do. In fact, I don't think you know your staff at all. For example, whoever you've got working with kids right now is a witch."

"Miss Keller..."

"Detective Keller to you."

"Miss Keller," he repeats, "you need to leave, now."

I jump up. "Hey, you can't tell me what to do. And let me tell you something else, Mr.—
Mr.—"

"Montgomery. Gilbert J. Montgomery, owner and executive director."

I feel the color slide right off my face. "I...you...you're the...and I...oh, crumb! Crumb, crumb, crumb!" I want to say something much stronger, but fortunately—or unfortunately, however you look at it—spending so much time with Christians means I can't cuss without major guilt. Instead, I'm rooted to the floor, twisting my hands and cracking my knuckles. I think I'll be sick.

Schmidt moves closer. "Keller? Hey, Keller, come on, pull yourself together," he says for my ears only. His voice is neutral, even kind, but I still kick myself for getting emotional. I nod and turn to Montgomery. "Where's your closest ladies' room?"

"Down the hall and to the right."

“Thanks. Excuse me.”

I’m hoping the ladies’ room will be empty, but when I come in, I see a pair of shoes under the handicapped stall. Well, no problem. I can think on my feet, sing any show tune cold, shoot a gun, and track down criminals. A broiling face and brewing headache should be a snap. It takes only a few minutes to wash up and knock back a Tylenol. Then I decide while I’m there, I might as well use the facility for its intended purpose, because I don’t want to come in to work, go straight to the john, and have certain cops who shall remain nameless make women-in-bathrooms jokes.

The woman from before is still in her stall, but I figure she wants her privacy. Unfortunately, when I finish and start to pull up my hose, they catch and get a run in them. I indulge in that curse word, immediately apologize in case God was listening, and make a mental note to pop a lemon LifeSaver later.

The hose are irreparable, so they end up in the trash can. Thank goodness I shaved my legs. I wash my hands, but then notice the other woman is still in her stall. I move closer, but I don’t hear or smell anything weird. Still, this is starting to concern me.

I knock on the door. “Hey, are you okay?”

No answer. Okay, that means she may have passed out or had a seizure or something. I summon up my first aid training, gather my skirt up around my legs, and crawl toward her. “Listen, if you can hear me, my name’s Maria. I’m going to help you. You’ll be okay.”

There’s still no response, but I’m not worried. That is, until I see who the victim is. Once I do, my heart knocks against my voice box, and I hear myself choke. The woman is in her late thirties, brunette, blue eyes, snakeskin stilettos. In other words, she’s the shrewish youth director. But if she needs help...

Wait. There’s something wrong with her eyes. They’re staring blankly, as if...

“Oh, no. Ooooh, no, lady, do not do this to me. Not today of all days.” I need a breath. I need a pulse. I check, but get neither. I remember something Schmidt told me early on—a person’s not dead until they’re warm and dead. I double-check.

That’s all I need. I’m out of that room and back in Montgomery’s office in less than thirty seconds. “Schmidt! I...I...you should...we need...”

“Slow down, Keller. What is it?”

“Schmidt, there’s a body in the ladies’ room.”

I have heard some crazy things in my life, but I can’t believe what just came out of my own mouth.

The place is swarming with cops, both homicide division and the uniformed folks. Most of us are working our tails off, but Tunney is barking out orders, and Rawlings is huddled up talking to...whoa. Sarah Goodson? What could he want with her? It occurs to me to go over there and defend her, because after all, Rawlings is a woman-hating pig, but I decide not to. It’s natural for Rawlings to question her because she’s the AD. Sarah looks like she’s holding her own, and besides, I’ve got my own problems to deal with—namely, a racing heart, cold hands, and an overpowering urge to crack my knuckles.

“Don’t you do it,” I mouth at myself. “Don’t do it, girl. Keep it together. Just breathe. Come on, you can do it. Breathe.”

No, I can’t do it. I’m officially freaking here. I edge closer to Nicole and feel my head shake. Unbelievable. She was here thirty-six minutes ago, moving, breathing, talking...well, okay, yelling, but...and now, she’s...where? Heaven? Hell? Some kind of floaty, empty soul-sleep thing? Or is the only thing left of her this shell, soon to become a rotting mass of...whoa! So not going there! I breathe in and take a look at her—the pale blue suit that matches her eyes, the snakeskin heels...shoe fanatic though I am, I would never wear those. But maybe she was a shoe fiend, too. Why didn’t I think of that before I chewed her out? Oh, well, that’s easy. She was ripping poor little kids to shreds, and I had to stop it. Nobody hurts kids on my watch, ever. Still...

Still nothing, girl, I tell myself. You just focus on your crime scene photos. So I do.

“Hey, Keller.” Schmidt joins me, armed with his own Nikon. “How’s it going?”

“It’s going. Man, are you ever gonna have a case to sink your teeth into. I’m jealous.”

Schmidt gives me a Look. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What do you mean? You heard Tunney.” I imitate Tunney’s voice. ‘Listen, Schmidt. Keller is an observer. She holds your evidence bags. She throws things away. Period.’”

“Unh-uh. Don’t go there. I need a partner, not a grunt work girl.”

“Ha. Tell that to the good sergeant.”

“I will. I fully intend to tell him that I am sick of running a one-man show when I have a capable detective right next to me, and who cares if said detective has long hair and a soprano voice. And I know what you’re gonna say.” Now it’s his turn to do an imitation. ‘I do not need anyone to stick up for me, especially a man, and especially you. You are not sticking your neck out on my account—your married, four-kids-to-put-through-college neck, I might add.’ I know that argument, Keller, and I’m done listening. It may only be a technicality, but I’m the senior partner here. Therefore, you answer first to me. I am ordering you, let me help you.”

I wish I could argue, but Schmidt is coming to know me better than I know myself, which means he knows that by this point, I’m too physically and emotionally tired of the whole mess at work to protest. “Okay, okay. I surrender. Help away. But,” I jab my finger at him, “if you get fired and your kids miss out on Harvard, I will have your head on a platter with chocolate ganache sauce.”

Schmidt cracks up. “Well, Hannibal Lector you are not,” he manages. “I’ll take over with the pictures for now. You grab Gil. We need to interview him, figure out what we’re working with.”

“You got it.” I pass my camera to Greenwood and head out. Most of the rest of the homicide squad is milling around in the hall, talking amongst themselves, but I don’t see Tunney or Rawlings. I feel myself relax, but only for a minute. I still have to face Gilbert Montgomery, who for all I know still thinks I was gonna rob him blind. Well, nothing for it but to woman up and get it over with.

“Excuse me, Mr. Montgomery? If you’ll come with me, my partner and I need to ask you a few questions.”

He turns on me. “Miss Keller, with all due respect, you are the last person I want to talk to right now.”

“And with all due respect, I don’t care.” Okay, that didn’t sound so good. I’ll try again.

“Look, I’m sorry. I can well imagine how stressed, upset, and worried you must be, and I’m sure our earlier meeting didn’t help. But I promise, if you will just cooperate and give me the

information I need, I will do whatever it takes to solve this case for you.” I start to leave, but hear footsteps behind me. The next thing I know, Tunney has my arm.

“You better have a good explanation for this, Keller,” he says.

“I’m working.” And two and two is four. Now that we’ve established the basics, what else do you want to know? Honestly, that formal complaint is looking better all the time.

“Don’t you give me lip, woman. I specifically told Schmidt that you are strictly an observer. You wanna do something, make yourself useful, go down the street, and buy a couple dozen doughnuts.”

The others, including Gilbert Montgomery, have dropped what they’re doing and are staring. Tunney is smirking, like he thinks an audience will intimidate me. Well, if that’s what he thinks, he doesn’t know Maria Keller. I have never been so grateful for my heels. “Sir, I am needed here now, and I respectfully ask that you allow me to do what has been asked of me.”

“Keller, get out of here. I am warning you, one more word and you will lose your job.”

“You can’t do that.” Can he? I know he can. My voice is starting to shake with the knowledge.

“Watch me. I don’t need you. More to the point, the force doesn’t need you. You think just because Davenport likes you, you’re irreplaceable? Wrong. You’re as replaceable as a roll of toilet paper.”

“I never said that, and I don’t want you throwing Sergeant Davenport in my face. I earned that promotion, and if you don’t like it, you can just...”

“Jump in the lake.”

Whoa. That’s not my voice. That’s...Gilbert Montgomery’s voice, and he’s marching over here like a knight storming the castle. He smiles at my supervisor, but I see something lethal underneath. “Sergeant Tunney? Gilbert Montgomery. I direct this theater, and I’m the one who’s requesting the force’s help. In case what that means isn’t clear, let me explain. You work for me, not the other way around. And because you work for me, I have the right to request, if I choose, which detectives work this case, because it concerns me and my business. And at my request, Maria Keller is on this case, as a detective, not a servant. And if you have a problem with that, I’m

sure your superiors wouldn't mind transferring you to a division that adheres to your standards, ridiculous though they may be."

Tunney backs off. "I'm not sure you understand, sir. Keller's a rookie. More to the point, she's a softhearted, empty-headed rookie. Surely you know what a lethal combination that is, especially in this job."

"A-ha," Gilbert says. "And if her name were Martin Keller, would you feel the same way?"

"Hey, listen, pal, don't you go accusing me and telling me how to run my force. I've forgotten more about law enforcement than you'll ever know."

"I'm sure you're right. And so I'm sure you understand that part of being a good officer is giving everyone under you a fair chance, your trust, and your respect. It seems to me those are things you've forgotten what it feels like to have to earn."

"Amen." That voice belongs to Davenport, who's been hovering around on the outskirts with the patrol squad, like the leader of a flock of blue jays. "Tunney, how about you and I step outside and have a little talk about your rookie detective? Schmidt, you and Keller get back to what you were doing, now."

If it were anyone but Tunney, I'd swear he was about to cry. He sputters like a stuck faucet for a minute, mutters something about how women are nothing but trouble, and leaves. Meanwhile, Schmidt's eyes are thrilled, but his voice stays serious. "I'll meet you in Gil's office in a few, okay?"

I nod and head toward Gilbert, who's off by himself in a corner. When I get closer, I see his face is pale and strained, and it appears he's muttering at the air.

"I'm not going to argue because I have enough to worry about, considering this murder. And by the way, I beg you to let it be solved quickly. But all-knowing or not, you're wrong. She and I are as alike as chocolate and celery, which never tasted good, if you get my drift."

"Who're you talking to?"

He jumps like I yelled in his ear. "Miss Keller, didn't your supervisors at the academy teach you not to sneak up on people?"

“No. They actually taught me to do it, because it’s part of my job. But you’re not answering my question.”

“I’m praying, if you must know, and from what I understood, you should be working. I don’t want to find out I spent the last five minutes standing up for a slacker.”

Great. Gilbert’s a Christian, and judging from what I’ve seen, he’s not a nice one. Worse than that, the way he just called me a slacker stings like a blast of pepper spray. But I shouldn’t feel that way, because he’s right, and I’m wrong.

“I came over to thank you,” I say, “but you’re right. There’s no excuse for slacking off. Let’s get this interview done.”

He gives me a strange look, almost as if he...what, exactly? Pities me? He better hope not, because man or not, if he said he did, I’d knock him on his butt. Doesn’t get me at all? Yeah, I’m used to that one, and since being one of a kind is cool, I can roll with it. Wants to apologize? Right, a man apologizing to me. That’ll be the day.

“All right,” he says. “If you’ll follow me.”

So I do, at a safe distance, of course. Under my breath, I find the courage to sing,

“We have an opening for a gumshoe/for a genuine, certified gumshoe...”

CHAPTER 5:

“Anything you can do, I can do better...”

-Annie, Get Your Gun

Thanks to Gilbert Montgomery’s staff roster, Schmidt and I have a name for our victim. Nicole Ainsley. Personally, I like Miss Hannigan better. But if there’s one thing you don’t do as a detective, it’s let your personal judgment cloud your work. So I don’t. Instead, I consult my notebook—bright red, with my favorite black, musical-note-patterned pen in the spiral ring. Like Alfred Doolittle of *My Fair Lady* said, a little bit o’ luck never hurt.

“Mr. Montgomery, how long have you owned the Stage Door?”

“Ten years.”

Down goes the info. “And in that time—” Self-doubt sneaks up on me. Tunney’s words still burn, but worse is what Gilbert Montgomery’s rescue, because that’s basically what it was, has done to my heart. I don’t know how to feel or what to do about it, and that scares me. But it doesn’t matter. I’m a detective now, and my head rules my actions. Six years ago, I vowed it always would.

Schmidt lays a barely-there hand on my knee. “You okay?” he mouths.

I smile and move away. “Fine,” I mouth back. “Nerves.” Liar, liar, pants on fire.

He nods and gives me a supportive smile, and I continue. “Mr. Montgomery, in that time, have you ever felt threatened? Been badly received? Made any enemies?”

“Nothing unusual, no. We’ve gotten the occasional scathing review, but that’s normal.”

“Yes. Now, let’s talk about Nicole. While I was um, touring your theater, I observed her browbeating the kids. Is that how she’d normally handle them?”

“Apparently so,” Gilbert said. “I received a complaint from a mother about it this morning.”

“Ah? What’s her name?”

“Lorna Hamilton. But she was gone for several hours before the murder. Plus, I don’t think she’s capable. She stakes too much on being a ‘nice person.’”

I tap my pen against my cheek. “Everyone is capable, Mr. Montgomery, but I’d be willing to bet you’re right. I studied up on homicide for years before I ever got promoted, and in my experience at least, people with families, especially young kids, don’t kill others unless they’re desperate or just don’t give a flip what happens to their kids. Murder equals jail time, which equals virtual loss of family, and most parents, if they’ve got any sense, don’t want that.”

“Indeed.” Gilbert looks surprised. “You’re quite the criminologist, Miss Keller.”

“If that’s a compliment, I’ll take it. So, tell me more about Nicole. Everything you say can only help.”

“If you ask me, she never should’ve been hired. I’d lost three youth directors before that—one to maternity leave, one to an elopement, and one to a family emergency. I was desperate to find someone. Nicole had two educational degrees. It escaped me, or at least I didn’t think to consider, that she had no experience with children. Her background was preparing her to teach young adults and college students.”

“Hmmm.” Down it goes. “What about Nicole’s relationships with the rest of the staff? Who were her friends? Her enemies?”

“In answer to the former, no one. In answer to the latter, you could say the entire staff. I’m not sure there’s anyone she didn’t ignore, insult, or give the runaround in her time here,” Gilbert says. He clears his throat. “I was stupid to hire the woman.”

“Blaming yourself won’t help,” I tell him. It’s true, or at least it’s supposed to be. People have told me that often enough. The catch is, behind it, there’s always been that hidden statement—the one that says, ‘but I don’t want you to forget you screwed up.’ I bite my lip. Yeah, that’s me, all right. Maria the Mistake. But then, this is not about me. I take down Gilbert’s info and keep quizzing him. Schmidt jumps in every few questions or so, and after a few minutes, I feel like I’m hitting my groove. But then Gilbert shakes his head and asks,

“Brendan, I really need to step back for a minute. Is it okay if I take a quick walk?”

Schmidt puts his hand on Gilbert’s shoulder. “Sure thing, buddy. Take five. Keller and I will stay here and wait for you.”

“Okay. You two avail yourself of the candy dish if you want.”

Avail ourselves? What is this guy, an escapee from a Shakespeare troupe? But coming from him, the words sound natural, and nice. Delicious, in fact.

“Keller? Earth calling Keller, anybody home?”

“What? Oh! Ah, what did you just say, Schmidt?”

“I said, want some?” He’s picked up the candy dish and has “availed himself” of a packet of Red Hots.

“Oh. Okay, yeah.” I take out a miniature Hershey bar. “At twenty-five calories, I don’t think this counts as dessert.”

“Sure doesn’t. I have got to teach you how to eat right, and I don’t mean eating your veggies. But seriously...” Schmidt grins. “You’re doing great.”

“Huh. Tell that to your buddy Gilbert. He keeps looking at me like he wants me to screw up.”

“Hey.” Schmidt’s eyes turn serious. “Keller...Keller, look at me. Go easy on Gil, okay? There are things about him you don’t know.”

“Oh, what? His parents were alcoholics and he didn’t get the part of the head elf in the school play, so now he has license to be a jerk?”

Now Schmidt’s the one glaring. “Maria Keller, that is not funny.”

Oh, crumb. Me and my big fat mouth. I crack my knuckles. “I know that. I’m sorry. It’s just...”

“I know. Men are not your favorite species right now.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s...” How do I explain about the many foster kids I knew who used things like that as excuses for bad behavior? How much it hurt that they got cut breaks, and I didn’t? I decide to discipline myself, finish off the Hershey bar, and reach for a lemon drop. The taste makes me cough.

“Why eat it if you don’t like it?” Schmidt asks.

I shrug. “Habit. Mama used to use lemon juice on me instead of soap when I back-talked her or, as she put it, had too much mouth. So, uh...why is it that I should be nice, just in case I’m tempted to tell him where to put his attitude again?”

Schmidt laughs. "Well, if I know human nature, you'll probably give in at least once, but okay. He's a widower, Keller. Lost his wife two years ago. She left him with three kids, all under age ten. Gil loves them, but can't spend as much time with them as he wants because of running this place. I know how he can be sometimes, but he really is a good guy. Just try to remember that."

I sigh. "Okay. As a favor to you." It's all I can say, because I'm too busy giving myself forty mental lashes to talk. No wonder the man's insufferable. His grief for his wife doesn't seem fresh, but even old grief has a sharp bite. Plus, he's got hurting kids, and it sounds as if at least one is little enough to barely remember his or her mama. Plus, he's got a theater of yapping, harping, whining people...and then here he has to deal with me, showing up out of nowhere, stomping on his foot like the moron I am. He thinks he's stupid? Well, he hasn't met the poster child yet.

Gilbert's back a few seconds later, and I let Schmidt wrap up the interview. At the end, Gilbert stands, looking tired and defeated. "Anything I can do to help you close the theater down?" he asks.

"Nothing," Schmidt says. "I talked to Tunney earlier. Apparently, during his little talk with Davenport, he found out Keller has a strong theater background. Davenport thinks Keller and I should work this from the inside, and despite his personal feelings about her, Tunney agrees. He thinks she's the perfect undercover cop."

"Undercover?" Oh, what am I, a parrot?

"Yeah," Schmidt says. "I'll be visible, which means I'll kinda float in and out, conducting interviews and, if need be, interrogations. But you're going undercover. Tunney thinks if we get somebody on the inside, we've got a better chance of solving the case."

"Makes sense."

"Okay, so you throw on some makeup, you trade the business suits for something more, uh, theater-ish, and boom, you're a civilian. What's your middle name?"

"Don't you dare laugh. It's Magdalena."

"Okay. Maggie, um...what's your mom's maiden name?"

“Channing.”

“Nope, too close.”

“Brown? It’s my adoptive parents’ name.”

“Perfect. So tomorrow, up-and-coming actress Maggie Brown comes in for an audition. Congratulations, partner. You more than earned it.”

“Wait.” Gilbert stands up. “Brendan, what...you want her to act for me? Why couldn’t she just be...I don’t know, a janitor or something?”

“Because the janitor can’t get in good with your cast and thus, discover who knocked Nicole off.” I don’t know why I don’t just scream at him. Honestly! Attractive or not, grieving or not, kids or not, this is the most arrogant, selfish, elitist guy I’ve ever seen. Janitor, indeed.

“And,” Schmidt says, “because someone around here is liable to catch on to her acting experience, so if she’s not using her talent, she’ll lose credibility.”

“But...but...” Gilbert turns to me. “Can you even sing?”

“I guess you’ll just have to find out, won’t you?”

“I guess I will. And Miss Keller?”

“Yes?”

“Four o’ clock sharp. I consider being late highly disrespectful.”

The next day, since I don’t have heels to announce my presence ahead of time, I rely on my voice. “I’m here! I’m here...I’m sorry I’m late, it’s just...”

“I don’t want to hear it, Miss Keller.” Gilbert Montgomery’s baritone voice rumbles through the auditorium just before he steps out of the shadows like the Phantom of the Opera. “What did I tell you yesterday?”

Who does he think I am, an errant four-year-old? “I know what you said yesterday, Mr. Montgomery, but I honestly could not help it. I was...”

“I did not ask you where you were. I asked, what did I tell you?”

Man, is his attitude ever getting old. Time to cop up and lay down the law. I hold his eyes. “Mr. Montgomery, if I’m going to work undercover for you, and thus get a murderer out of your

theater, we might as well define our relationship right now. As long as I ostensibly work for you, I will respect you and follow your rules. But you are not going to talk down to me, and you are not going to treat me like a naughty little girl. Is that clear?”

He glares at me, and for a minute it looks like he'll laugh or throw me out. But then a new look comes into his eyes. Is that...guilt? He glances at the ceiling and back to me. “Fine. Why were you late, after I specifically told you I would not tolerate it?”

Oh, God, if you really care about me, please don't make me sound like a whiny female. “Because my supervisor insisted I stay and retype a report he was dissatisfied with. I don't understand why the man got so bent out of shape over the date not being written to his specifications, which, by the way, he didn't inform me of, but it's the police force, what are you gonna do?” I laugh, but then remember that the guy I'm talking to apparently has no sense of humor. “Check with Schmidt if you want. He's...”

“Upstairs on surveillance duty,” Gilbert says. “Which reminds me, has anything turned up?”

“Not yet. Whoever this guy or gal is, they know how to hide the evidence. From what we know, Nicole Ainsley's body was moved into the ladies' room. Now, she's about a hundred forty pounds. That's roughly twenty pounds heavier than me, which means in all likelihood, one of two things are true. One, we have a strong single perp, probably male, or we have a perp, plus an accomplice who agreed to move her. There are no prints on the body, which means our perp used gloves. The last time anybody saw Nicole, from what we can gather, was yesterday at 12:45 PM, at the same time as—“

“A crowded rehearsal,” Gil finished. “Which gave the...uh, perp, was it?”

“Yeah, short for perpetrator, ample opportunity to slip in, poison Nicole, slip out, ditch the evidence, come back, and stash her.”

“Poison her? How do you know that's what happened?”

“Simple. No gunshot wound, no indications of stabbing or strangulation—in general, no violence. No murder weapon, either. And as I said, no prints on the corpse. Plus, Schmidt and I have found an overturned cup of tea, plus the remains of a spilled lunch, in Nicole's office. We

didn't see anything suspicious, but the crime lab can uncover that, and an autopsy will tell us exactly what was in her system."

He actually smiles at me. "Wow, you're good at this."

Wow, he has a gorgeous smile. And wow, does he know what those five little words just did for me? "Thank you. That means...I can't tell you how much it means. I hate to see anyone steal life from an innocent human being, so I'm going to put my heart and soul in this thing. And well, I've got to admit, I'm excited. I've never done this before. Until yesterday, I was the office flunky."

"I guessed that. Get coffee, type reports, file papers, make copies, answer the phone—did that about cover it?"

"You got it. Plus pick up lunch, take out the trash, and replenish the pastry supply. I drew the line at scrubbing coffee mugs and picking up Tunney's dry cleaning."

"He tried to make you do that?"

"Well, no, that was his pet, Rawlings, but he did suggest getting Tunney's, too."

"You could sue him. There's a name for what Tunney's doing—discrimination. Veiled sexual harassment. Borderline employee abuse."

"Wait a minute," I cut in. "Now, I'm obviously not your favorite person. Why do you give a flip what happens to me?"

"Because you're a fellow human being, and though I don't like you, my beliefs require me to love you. Plus, I've got enough conflict in my theater without Tunney throwing his weight around."

"Oh." Why does it hurt so much that his motives for being nice to me are basically selfish? I shake my head. Snap out of it, Keller. That's not why you're here. I turn to him. "That may be," I say. "But if I'm gonna prove myself to the boys, I've got to get in here and solve a murder. Do I still have an interview, or do we reschedule because I was late?"

He gives me a slightly faded version of that delicious smile. "You do, but this isn't my usual interview. For the purpose of this case, you're in, and from what I've heard about your

previous experience, you would be anyway. All I want is to hear you sing. Then, I'd like to hear if you're interested in any specific roles, which will help me determine where to put you."

"Okay, but is it fair for me to ask what the play is before I sing? If I have a title, I might know what to sing, instead of picking something at random."

"That's perfectly kosher. I'm opening auditions for *She Loves Me*. Do you know it?"

"By heart. I was in it in high school. I played Amalia. Oh, not that I expect that part, because I don't, it's just, you asked, and..." Okay, Keller. Shutting up would be a great idea about now.

Gilbert nods. "I understand. So, you played Amalia. That tells me you're a soprano, so we'll stay in that range to warm you up. Take the stage, please." Once I do, he sits at the nearby piano and gives me an F sharp. "On an "ah," please. Sustain the sound until I release you."

Can do. Deep breath, and... "Ahhhhhhh..." Ah, indeed. Dead center. That glass of orange juice this morning really did the trick. My head tilts up and I tell my throat to open some more. My vocal chords are thrilled. It's been awhile since they've gotten to show their stuff in a place like this. I don't tell them to add vibrato, but they do it on their own.

"Release." Gilbert sounds a little shell-shocked. Uh-oh. Maybe I sounded horrible. Oh, I knew I should've gone with the cranberry juice. Darn that pulp! But before I can finish giving myself the punching bag treatment, he's playing a chord, and I'm back to warm-ups. A few minutes later, he asks for a real song, and having handed over sheet music, I'm soon deep into "Far From the Home I Love" from *Fiddler on the Roof*. In it, middle daughter Hodel tries to convince traditional Tevye that her going to Siberia to marry her true love, the revolutionary Perchik, is the best thing for her, even though she'll be homesick and miss her folks.

Within a few notes, I forget everything. I can't remember who Tunney is, or what a murder is, or why I have to impress this jade-eyed stranger sitting in front of me. The only person in front of me is Tevye, and I'm Hodel. I love him, but crumb, I adore Perchik. He's everything to me. "Oh, what a melancholy choice this is/wanting home, wanting him/closing my heart to every hope..."

The scene breaks down. I'm still singing, but I'm not outdoors in the dead of a Russian winter. I'm onstage at the local theater, and my piano backup has disappeared. I laugh. "Hey, Montgomery, where'd you go?"

He clears his throat. "Sorry. That's okay, though. I've heard enough. Your voice is great, but..." He frowns. "I have problems with your volume. You're inhibited in places. What's more, it makes the twang in your voice pop up. I won't have you losing your breath onstage, and I won't have my audience thinking they've inadvertently walked into a Reba McEntire concert. You will begin meeting with a vocal coach tomorrow at four PM sharp for an hour of intense work before your first rehearsal."

Of course, some of this, I was expecting. My vocal coaches were always complaining that I was "inhibited" and needed to "let go, not just pretend to". But Gilbert's tone, and especially that snarky little Reba McEntire comment, are too much for me. I'll have him know I love Reba! I give him the look suspects get when they dare try telling me that no, Miss Officer, I ain't been smokin' no crack. "Agreed, provided that your vocal coach is more supportive than you."

The moron laughs. "Oh, come on, Miss Keller. You've been in the theater world, and you've been a cop for awhile, haven't you? Surely you don't expect people to jockey for position so they can tell you how wonderful and perfect you are."

"Why, I oughta..." Hold up, girl. It won't help if he thinks you're a diva. I give him a brittle smile.

"You misunderstood me, Mr. Montgomery. I appreciate constructive criticism. My mom, several choir directors, and two highly qualified voice teachers who taught me after my mother died, gave it to me for many years. And they pushed me as hard as they could."

"As for my experience in the force, I have had supervisors who screamed in my face, insulted me, my family, and the great state of Texas—that whole "don't mess with Texas" thing is a myth, according to them, by the way—and sergeants who drained every scrap of physical energy I had. You try being on your feet from six AM to six PM, five days a week—sometimes seven, and sometimes on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Independence Day. You try facing down criminals who would like nothing more than to see you in a morgue with a tag on your toe. You try

cleaning drunks' vomit out of your cruiser—the smell sticks around for days. You try wading through enough red tape to fill a swimming pool, and having a civilian spit at you because you arrested his guilty three ways to Sunday nephew. You try that, Gilbert J. Montgomery, and then you tell me you know a thing about my life. You try that, and then you see how it feels when someone you've known a total of thirty-six hours laces what would otherwise be considered constructive criticism with mocking remarks about her accent and condescension thicker than cinnamon on French toast. You try that, and then just see what you'd do for a compliment or even a lousy smile, for crying in a bucket.”

If we were in a musical, this would be the part where Gilbert would do a double take, realize he sounded like a jerk, sweep me off my feet, and declare that even though he treated me like dirt before, I am in reality the most amazing woman he's ever met. But all he says is,

“Be careful, Gumshoe. You'll strain your voice.”

“I...” What's the use? I sigh. “Look, let's not torture each other anymore than we have to. Just give me a script. I'll be here at four, and that's a promise, if I have to jaywalk to get here. Who do you want me to play, anyway?”

“Right, I forgot. Um...if it's okay with you, I'd like you to reprise your role as Amalia. It's a better fit for your vocal range, and it also gives me a way to introduce you as an up-and-coming rookie. Most of the cast and staff will probably treat you like a little sister, which will make it easier for you to get info from them.”

Gilbert Montgomery just gave me the lead in his production. Does he realize what he's done? Does he know how much I've missed acting in any role at all? Does he know the number of nights I sat up because my shift schedule threw off my inner clock, drinking tea and reliving rehearsals, opening nights, cast parties, and inside jokes? Does he know how often I've played the “what if” game with myself, wondering if maybe I should...well, a lot of things?

I want to tell him the answers. I want to spill out all that information like tea out of an overturned kettle and tell Gilbert he's an angel from Heaven. But what I say is,

“Sure. Yeah. I mean, yeah, getting info. Perfect.” Lame, Keller. Lame.

“Miss Keller!” Gilbert claps his hands in front of my face, and I jump back. “What?”

“Answer me.”

Well, so much for Mr. Angel. “What did you ask me?”

He gives me a Look. “I asked you to take this script.” He hands it over.

“Thanks,” I make myself say. “Now, I’ve got to get out of here.” And far away from you.

“You’re welcome. See you later, Gumshoe. And make sure you spend some quality time with your lines. A cast is only as strong as its weakest actor.”

CHAPTER 6:

“You are precisely my cup of tea...”

-The King and I

“Gumshoe, indeed. Why is it that man can’t go five lousy minutes without mocking or patronizing me?”

The hallway’s empty, so I don’t get an answer. Just as well, because I know what it’d be. *Maybe he can’t, but you deserve it.* And I know I do. What was it I said, anyway? Something about criticism, choir directors, dead mothers, and of all the stupid things, vomit and spit. Wouldn’t that just make a man turn into a blob of Jell-O and beg for a date?

“Whoa!” I exclaim. “Girl, since when are you interested in dating anybody, especially that...that...man?” And what a man he is. Time-obsessed, critical, self-righteous, demanding, a schedule freak...the man wears a suit and tie in the middle of the week and carries a pocket hanky, for mercy’s sake!

Oh, but what a man he is. Those incredible jade eyes that normally held such contempt for me, but could be so warm and gentle when he tried. That luscious dark hair I thought only belonged to princes in storybooks. The smile that, crumb, I’d do anything to see more often. The way he’d made me feel protected when Tunney jumped on me. The way he understands how much theater means to me. The way he makes me feel worthwhile, and...

“Keller, stop that right now!” I whisper so no one hears my real name, but with all the fervor of Sergeant Langley, the only cop at the academy I was afraid of, until I showed her I wasn’t afraid to use a gun like so many of the other girls were. I infuse more of her Brooklyn accent into my voice. “You have no business thinking about Gilbert Montgomery, or any man, in any context unless that context is business-related. Have you forgotten how much trouble you got into last time?”

I feel my body vibrate. No, I most certainly have not. My memory’s still got the whole horrible scene locked in the archives. Chandler throwing my car keys out the window. Myself, in

sock feet because I abandoned my shoes, on the asphalt reaching for said keys. Shoving a fist in my mouth so I wouldn't cry and hightailing it back to my dorm at breakneck speed until I had a stitch so bad I couldn't move. And after that...

"Scuse me, miss? You okay?"

I realize too late I've been leaning against the wall with my eyes closed, moaning.

"Oh...I'm fine."

"Hate to be the one to spot a liar, but no, you ain't," the man says. He steps up and shakes my hand without invitation, but doesn't seem to notice when I break the contact. "Max Vandenberg—Miracle Max around here. Now, what's happened to make a sweet thing like you upset? If it was one of them snooty actors, I'll kill 'em."

Suddenly, my embarrassing situation is lucrative. My intuition is screaming "suspect," so I have to bite my lip to rein it in. "Oh? I mean, oh, no, it wasn't. Miracle Max? That's your real name?"

"Well, Max is, but the Miracle part's just what they call me. I'm the head maintenance guy here. I can fix anything. Well, anything 'cept broken hearts, but I'll at least try. So, what's wrong, honey?"

Now, if Mr. Miracle were about thirty years younger, I'd be running for the border right now. But considering his salt-and-pepper hair, slight stoop, and thick glasses, I figure I'm safe. I decide to tell a smidgen of truth. "It was my boyfriend. We broke up a long time ago, but being here...I love the theater, but being around all these happy endings is hard sometimes. He—our relationship ended badly." Whew, if that isn't the understatement of the millennium.

"Dumped you, did he? Well, now, I don't understand that at all. You seem like such a nice gal. But let me tell you, honey, most men will try to be good to a lady, but some of us are just rats. You take some of the kooks in this place."

Oh, man, this is pure gold! "Like who? I mean, who should I watch out for?"

"Well, the chorus guys, for one," Max said. "Mr. Gil gets a lot of 'em from the big cattle call auditions 'fore he starts a new play, so you never know who's gonna come in here. And then you gotta be careful around Tyler West. But George Richmond—now, he's the one you better

watch out for if you ask me. He's kinda gettin' up there in years, but he's still a crackerjack actor. Playin' Maraczek in the big show. Problem is, he's always goin' around sayin' how Mr. Gil makes this place a fourth-rate outfit and we'd be better off if he got his tail outta here. So you ask me, I wouldn't put it past George to have knocked off Miss Nicole so's the town'd think Mr. Gil can't handle things 'round here."

I feel like a child being handed her first Christmas present, but keep it in check. "Does Mr. Richmond, um..." Careful, girl. Don't let your cop voice slip. "Is he...violent?" I gulp, look down, and crack my knuckles. Only half of it's an act.

"Well, miss, I don't want to worry you, but yeah, I've seen him kick up a ruckus before. Last play he acted in—it was Shakespeare, *Hamlet*—he got all bent outta shape 'cause Mr. Gil had him playin' the ghost, but he wanted to be that guy...P-somethin', kinda rhymes with baloney."

"Polonius?" Thank goodness the only English course I got a B in was Shakespeare.

"Yeah, that's it. Anyhoo, that was what set it off, but then Mr. Richmond got mad 'bout a bunch of other stuff, which I don't know what all it was, but it don't matter now. He took one of the swords from the prop shop, slashed his costume with it."

"You don't say." My fingers itch for my notebook. "Well, thanks, Max. I'll steer clear. And I hope this mess gets cleared up soon. I love theater with all my heart, and I don't want to see anything happen to this one."

"That's good of you to say, Miss..."

"Maggie. Just call me Maggie," I force out. I despise my middle name. When we were kids, Meg's older brother Claude loved to tell me how Mary Magdalene was a demon-possessed woman in the Bible. Just one reason in two million that I refuse to go to church.

"Nice name," Max says. "Well, I gotta run, but it was nice to meet you. You be good now, hear? Watch your step 'round those guys I told you 'bout, and if anybody gives you trouble and you can't find Mr. Gil, you come get me. And as for the other, you forget him, honey. It'll be your turn to marry the prince someday. That boy was just a big ol' frog."

“Thanks, Max,” I tell him, even though I know his words are a well-meant lie. I’ve tried to deny it, but it’s true. Chandler Halliday was the only guy who’d ever look at me, a show-tune-singing, tea-drinking, time-challenged, female cop, twice. And even if I weren’t all those things, no other guy would look. Not if they knew.

“Keller?” The soft, but insistent sound of my real name brings me back to the cop world. Schmidt’s gesturing at me from across the hall. “What’s going on? I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“I got sidetracked, but it’s legit. You will never believe the information I got out of the maintenance guy.”

“Miracle Max?” Schmidt whistles through his teeth. “Good work. I couldn’t get him to open up if I used a crowbar and I’ve known the guy for years. What’d you do?”

“Uh, never mind that. What about you? Got anything?”

“Negative. I’ve been questioning everybody in the place, and they all swear they had nothing to do with it. Everybody but Sarah Goodson, that is. I asked her a couple of questions and she acted like she was about to come unglued.”

“And that doesn’t tell you anything?”

“Look, Keller, I understand what you’re saying, but you have got to stop letting bad experiences cloud your judgment. Sarah is a sweet, caring woman. Furthermore, she’s the last person on my suspect list. So I want you to question her, but I don’t want you jumping all over her case just because you don’t like her. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir.” I’m shrinking inside. I haven’t felt like this since the academy. No, that’s wrong. Back there, I could get insulted and pushed around all day and walk away unscathed because I knew it wasn’t personal. No, the last time I felt like this was when I woke up in the hospital, and Luke...

“Miss Keller.” Gilbert Montgomery strides toward me, carrying a piece of paper. “You dashed out without signing your show contract. And consider this a warning. I will not tolerate this kind of irresponsibility again, detective or not. The next time it happens, I’ll...”

“What? Lock me in a torture chamber and put me on the rack? Or maybe you prefer the dark-dungeon, bread-and-water treatment? Either way, if it means I don’t have to hear your condescending, nagging, snarky voice, I am more than game. And did I mention that you never showed me that contract in the first place?”

Gilbert grips my hand. “Maria, look at me. You’re right and I’m sorry. I...”

His touch gives me a sharp adrenaline shot, and I jerk away. “Back off, Stage Nazi.”

His eyes are cold again. “Miss Keller, is that what you call anyone who dares correct you?” he asked. “Because if it is, I can see why you can’t get along with Tunney.”

“And if that’s the way you talk to your cast, I can see why they’ve always called you a slave driver, Gil,” Schmidt cuts in. “Leave her alone. She does not need this from you.”

“Brendan, um...” Gilbert clears his throat. Why is that habit becoming endearing instead of annoying? And why is it so easy for me to use his first name in my head? “I...” He straightens his tie—paisley, a perfect contrast to the charcoal suit. “I’ll call you later, okay?” Bam, he’s outta there.

Schmidt frowns when he sees me rubbing the back of my hand. “What is it?”

“Nothing.”

He doesn’t look like he buys it, but changes the subject. “Look, I didn’t mean to bite your head off. It’s just, I don’t want certain cops to have their opinions about you confirmed, and sometimes, that makes me treat you like a kid, which you are the furthest thing from. I’ll try not to do that anymore.”

“It’s not your fault, but thanks. So you want the scoop on Max?”

Schmidt laughs. “Honestly, you remind me of a Timex watch. How’d you get so resilient?”

“You got an hour?”

“Sure. I want you to come to dinner, and you’re not finagling your way out of it this time.”

“Schmidt, you know how I feel about that. You have a family, and I cannot...”

“Yes, you can. My wife’s been planning for this all week, and trust me, her orange chicken would bring Tunney to his knees.”

“Ooh, that’s too tempting to resist. Okay, I’ll follow you over there.”

Two hours later, I'm asking myself why I didn't do this months ago. The Schmidt house is the one you'd find if you looked up "hospitality" in the dictionary. His four kids, ages eleven to three, are wonderful, but it's his wife who rocks my world. I knew it from the minute she asked,

"Maria, Brendan tells me you flit around the station like a hummingbird because you like feeling useful. Would you help me set the table?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"No, it's Dorothea. Not "Mrs. Schmidt," not "ma'am," and not "my partner's wife who I can't talk to because she might think I'm hornin' in." Dorothea angled her head toward the kitchen. "Now, let's go—those dishes aren't going to walk in and make themselves at home, and I need to get to know you."

I don't know how I managed to get through setting the table without dropping silverware or breaking a dish. Setting the table was always my job at home before Mama and Daddy died, and doing it with Dorothea was so much like having Mama back, it was scary.

They don't look a thing alike. Dorothea, I noticed, had blue eyes and brown-black hair, but Mama and I could've been twins. Mama had a Texas drawl ten times thicker than my slight twang, which thanks to years in theater, I barely have anymore. Dorothea had something that reminded me of the famous Ocracoke brogue. Mama always called me "cricket," because of my singing voice, not "dear." But both Mama and Dorothea, I have learned in the past two hours, have a gift for sizing up what a guest needs and making sure she gets it. And I'm not just talking about food, although Dorothea makes Julia Child look like a Whopper flopper. I'm talking about what happens after dinner, when Dorothea says,

"Brendan, sweetheart, why don't you take the kids to the living room and play Uno for awhile? I think your partner could do with some good old-fashioned woman talk."

"Read my mind, love." They kiss, and Dorothea and I are left alone in the kitchen.

"Maria, I don't know if I can say it enough. I'm thrilled to have you here."

"Excuse me?" I feel like Dorothea just spoke Japanese. "You don't even know me."

She laughs. “Well, I feel like I do. Brendan’s told me a lot about you. Such as, you can’t drink coffee, but you love tea. I have some chocolate mint in the cabinet. Would you like some?”

So maybe she does know me. “Yes, please, but...he told you about...the allergy?”

“Oh, dear. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. It’s just that your husband is the only one who really knows I’m allergic to the stuff, and I...well, if the others found out...”

Dorothea hands over a steaming mug. “I understand. But now, let’s get down to brass tacks. What else should I know?”

“I, uh, I’m a singer.” I know I sound stupid, but what else can you say to a woman who practically sees into your soul?

“Yes, and an actress, too, I hear. I love theater, but I never had the talent for it. Could you tell me about it?”

I hesitate. I fell for this once, with Sarah. And really, I’ve fallen for it with others, too. I once stayed with a foster family where the mom was an actress. I thought she understood me, but she ended up trying to get me into beauty pageants, putting me on strict diets, and pushing me to the forefront of a circle of drama club “mean girls.”

“Bad question?” Dorothea’s voice makes me sick with guilt.

“Oh, no,” I say. “Not at all. But...” And the next thing I know, I’m opening up about Sarah Goodson, the murder case, and how much I want to succeed. And soon, I’m telling Dorothea all about my theater experiences. It doesn’t take long before we’ve bonded, and unlike with Sarah, I know deep down it’s real.

Dorothea gives me that probing look again and smiles. “You see now why I was so happy when you came? I can tell how special you are, Maria. God must have a wonderful plan for you.”

Okay, Schmidt’s a dead man. Of all the things for him not to mention. “Uh, Dorothea, I’m not...”

“I know you’re not. That doesn’t mean I can’t say it.”

“Yeah, but it’ll make you wish you never met me when I tell you I don’t believe that. Once they hear who I really am—or rather, who I am not—Christians don’t want anything to do with me.

The only exception is my adoptive family, and even they...the only ones I have left now are my cousins. They're my best friends, but they're Christians, too."

"And so you believe one day, they'll abandon you," Dorothea says, but without condemnation.

"Yeah. And before you tell me that's not true, you should know some things. My mom and dad died when I was eight. I loved them more than anyone, but they were Christians. I've never been able to quit asking myself if maybe I wasn't a good enough daughter so God decided to take them to Heaven where I couldn't wreck their lives. I went through ten foster homes in two years. Two of those were Christian families, and they dumped me faster than any other family. Oh, they'd blab about how taking me was their Christian duty, but they never...noticed me. Never picked me up from school, never asked about my day, never paid attention when my music teachers said I was gifted...nothing. But I don't want to dump this on you."

"You aren't. From what I can tell, you've flown solo for much too long, my dear. So I'm making an offer now that I expect you to take me up on. We're all here if you need us. But if you ever specifically need someone to talk to, or even loan you a shoulder, I'm right here. You can trust me."

"I..." I have to drink some tea to get my tongue unstuck from the roof of my mouth.

"Thank you, Dorothea. But..." Am I really going to do this? "I was wondering..."

"Yes?"

"Since you said that, could you help me figure something out?"

"Of course. What do you need?"

"I feel a little silly saying this, but it's a woman thing. See..." I proceed to explain the Gilbert Montgomery situation.

"And I just don't know what's gotten into me," I finish up. "Because at first I thought, hey, get over it, his only good quality is that he happens to be cute. But then, when he stood up for me, it was like he actually cared. Like he thought I was worth more than Tunney said. And it made me feel...well, this is gonna sound cliché and dumb and totally female, but it made me feel different inside. Like I was flying and stuck to the floor at the same time. And at the interview,

he—well, he made me so mad I couldn't think straight, but even so, there was something...I hated to leave. I wanted to stay, if only to spar with him. For a minute, I wanted to ask what he meant about my volume, and I wanted him to show me how to fix it, because I knew critical though he was, he'd treat me like a professional singer. And all I want to know is, what's going on?"

"I don't want to frighten you," Dorothea says, "but I think you're seriously attracted to Gil."

"Attracted to...no! No, that's impossible. That's insane. I...I'm nothing like him. I'm not even a Christian!"

"So you've said. But that has never stopped God. So here's my advice. Go back to the theater and do what you're there to do. I know you won't throw yourself at Gil, but don't shun him, either. Even when you two argue, let it run its course. God will do the rest."

That's what I'm afraid of.

CHAPTER 7:

“Some things nearly so, others nearly not...”

-The King and I

The next day, I speak into the microphone Greenwood, our tech wizard, embedded in my angel pin. “Case number 13329-776. Codename, Songbird. Now entering the nest on the trail of a bloodthirsty hawk—or two.”

“I don’t know,” Schmidt says. “You’re having way too much fun. Of course, it’s about time.” He looks me up and down. “Man, you must really miss dressing like a civilian.”

I study my outfit—straight-leg jeans, a multicolored peasant blouse, a little more blush and lipstick than usual, and a pair of white tennis shoes with rhinestones. “Well, I figured if I’m gonna be rubbing shoulders with my old crowd, I might as well look the part. Plus, I’m kinda partial to this blouse.”

“Yeah, but that wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain director, would it?” Schmidt elbows me in the ribs.

I pull away. “You wish.”

“Sorry. But out of pure curiosity, what’s your deal with being touched?”

“That’s not something you need to know right now.”

“Okay. I’ll shut up. But if you ever want to talk...”

“I don’t, but if I do, I promise to tell you. Now, come on, let’s do this deal.”

“Go get ‘em, partner. I’ll be praying for you.”

“I could use it.”

I head in then, but almost turn back. Schmidt has made it clear that I can come to church with his family anytime I want and that we can talk one-on-one if I ever have questions about Jesus. Today, I almost ask if we can talk faith later over an appetizer and Cokes. But a quick stab, like the burn from a taser, holds me back. Questions about Jesus? Yeah, I got a million of ‘em. Why did he abandon me when I was a kid? Why, when I begged for his help, didn’t he

listen? Why did he take Mama and Daddy? If he was mad at me, why didn't I die? Could Jesus—would Jesus—get rid of the fears that I only acknowledge when I can't sleep? The fear that I don't matter, the fear that I am a mistake, the fear that if I go to sleep, I might not wake up?

But I can't ask Schmidt any of that. His life is perfect. His wife is an angel, his kids adore their daddy, Tunney never steps on him, and even Rawlings gives him a wide berth. No, I tell myself. Don't you dare say anything, because the minute he realizes what a piece of trash you are, he'll dump you. You better get your head on straight, forget the spiritual, and focus on the physical stuff you can fix, starting with this case. I turn and march myself down to the costume room. Once there, I do a quick self-check before going inside. Badge—in the secret pocket of my blazer sleeve. Gun—concealed in a shoulder holster. Wallet—left-hand pocket, next to my silenced pager. Post-it—in my purse somewhere, but where? Let's see, we've got a notebook and pen, a Books-a-Million card, a Payless Shoes discount card, a tube of red lipstick, a peppermint...ah! There it is. I knock on the costume room door.

"Come in!"

"Hi, I'm looking for..." Can I read my own writing? "Karen Winters?"

A blonde in her early forties stands up from behind a sewing machine. "You've found her. How can I help you?"

"Maggie Brown—I'm here for costume fittings."

"Oh. Let me get my schedule...yes, here you are, right up top. You're our Amalia."

Hearing my character's name feels foreign, but it still makes me smile. Once auditions are over, actors address each other by character name only within the confines of the theater.

"That's right."

"Wonderful. You won't need costumes right away, but I need to get your measurements and figure out your colors. Just step over here...good, now arms out. So, where did you act before?"

"Texas. I moved up here after my cousins asked me to be their housemate."

"Well, you picked a great theater family to join. We do tons of musicals, but Shakespeare's big here too, and a lot of non-singing plays if that's more your cup of tea. The

people are all wonderful, too. At least they used to be.” She lowers her measuring tape and her voice. “Don’t take this as an insult, but my advice to you is to think long and hard about working here. There was a murder here yesterday, did you know that?”

I throw my hand over my mouth, eyes wide. “No! Who was it?”

“Our pathetic excuse for a youth director. Not that she didn’t have it coming, because she never gave most of us the time of day, but I certainly wouldn’t touch her. You want my opinion, a man did it. Which is why I say to you again, you better think about running. Killers go after pretty young things, and honey, you are gorgeous. Got a boyfriend?”

“Not now.” Which is more than I’m willing to say, but I’m being careful in case she runs into Miracle Max. Theater people gossip like you wouldn’t believe. I smile at Karen over my shoulder. “Besides, I’m a lot tougher than I look.”

“For your sake, I pray so, honey. There were cops all over the place yesterday, but they didn’t turn up a thing. This scum’s smart. He’ll be back.”

“Any idea who he might be after next?”

“Who knows with criminals? But if you ask me, which you didn’t but I think you should know...I’ve got a good idea who did the dirty deed.”

“Do tell.”

She circles her measuring tape around my waist and chest, and I focus on the info I’m about to get so I won’t think about the tingling, burning sensations I’m feeling. Meanwhile, Karen’s still nodding her head and casting conspiratorial looks at the door.

“George Richmond,” she finally says. “He’s got it in for this place, and everybody knows it.”

“Hmmm. So I’ve heard.”

“Yeah. He’s worse news than the economy, baby. In fact, I saw him skulking around Nicole’s office for three whole days before the murder.”

“Well, are you sure he wasn’t just...I don’t know. Maybe he didn’t like her anymore than the rest of you, but he had to talk to her, and...you know.” Rule number one: if the customer

thinks you're a pretty young thing, play it like you are one and act a little airheaded. Rule number two: don't sound too eager to get the bottom line.

"Oh, no. You ask me, he was up to no good. Kept slipping in there when she wasn't around, and sometimes when she was. I heard them talking plenty of times. Couldn't catch words most of the time, but once, I clearly heard, 'you need to get out of here.'"

"You think he was threatening her?"

"I know it. Because just before the murder, I saw him sneaking down the hall, carrying a bag of food from Chang's Café. And don't try telling me she just had a bad reaction to the MSG."

Ding-ding-ding, we have a match! The spilled food Schmidt and I found was sweet and sour pork, lo mien, beef chow fun, and several other salty, fattening Asian dishes. But that doesn't mean good old George is our perp. Personally, I hope he isn't. I love a challenge, and if he's the perp, it'll make the case too easy. But either way, I can't wait to talk to this guy.

"Okay, you're done," Karen says. "I'll start working on your first dress. Any particular color you would like or that I should stay away from?"

"No neutrals, please," I say. "I was always getting stuck wearing them in my last job."

"And I'm always stuck looking for stray actresses," a familiar voice says. "Your vocal coach is waiting in the practice room on the second floor, Miss...Brown."

I can tell he almost said "Keller," and I send him an eye message—*who messed up this time?* Gilbert just clears his throat.

"Be right there," I tell him before risking a prayer. *Please, God, let my voice be okay. Outside of solving mysteries, singing's the only thing I'm halfway decent at.*

"You'll do great," Karen says. "Word on the street is you've got some serious pipes."

"Pipes that need some oiling," Gilbert says. "Miss Brown, please use this opportunity to improve your punctuality record."

"What record? I was born two weeks late. Mama tried everything from castor oil to jumping rope, and then, the way she said it, I got in so big a hurry, I was born on the theater floor."

"Which explains your penchant for rushing everywhere," Gilbert says, but he's smiling. I wonder if he's sick. I pick up my purse and realize too late it's unzipped halfway. A plastic click tells me I dropped something. Gilbert is holding my bookstore card.

"I believe this is yours. You must love to read, as much as you carry it."

"Thanks. No, not exactly. I mean, I'm not the scholarly bookworm type. If I hadn't worked as hard as I did in school, I would've gotten all C's, and I never finished college. But yeah, I read a lot. Those classics authors are cool, for a bunch of dead guys and gals. Hawthorne, Poe, Mary Shelley..."

"So basically anything grim and slightly macabre," Gilbert says.

"Yeah, but a lot of other stuff, too. I only read the macabre stuff if I want to scare myself," I say. We laugh, but then Gilbert frowns.

"Miss Brown, I will excuse your lateness one more time and walk you to the practice room. But I don't intend to keep turning a blind eye, so stop spending your money on Sue Grafton mysteries and spend it on a watch."

I wait until we're in the hall and turn on him. "Okay, Montgomery, what the heck is your deal?"

"Miss Keller, I recognize the euphemism you're using. In my mind, it's as good as the real word. Nonbeliever though you may be, I insist you clean up your language."

"And believer though you may be, I insist you quit being a self-righteous jerk. Although maybe I'm being unfair, because I just don't get you. I mean, one minute, we're having a friendly conversation, or you're sticking up for me or otherwise being nice. And the next minute, it's like, 'bad detective! No doughnut!'"

"What?"

"It's a cop joke. You know, cops, doughnuts? Doesn't apply to me, though. I hate the blasted things."

Gilbert starts to answer, but the practice room door opens first. "Miss Brown? Finally! Montgomery, where have you been keeping her?" a male voice asks. "Hi, I'm Tyler West."

"Hi." I offer him my hand, which his own swallows.

“Hey there. Nice to see a new face. So, let’s go in here and let’s see if your voice is as gorgeous as the rest of you.”

My inner alarm goes off, and my throat closes up. “Uh, thanks,” I manage. Easy, girl, no need to panic. He thinks you’re pretty. Big deal. But it is one. All I can think about is Chandler and what he suckered me into with his sweet nothings, appreciation, and seeming unconditional love. My heart’s in crazed metronome mode and it’s all I can do not to run.

“Miss Brown?” Tyler opens the door. “Are you coming?”

Yeah, I am, but no way am I going in there alone with you. I play the rookie card. “Sure,” I say. “But I wondered, would you mind if Mr. Montgomery sat in? I’d rather know up front if my voice is up to his standards.” Because I would. Against my better judgment, I care what he thinks. I want him to approve of me. Why that matters, I don’t know—okay, I refuse to admit—but there it is. Plus, I want the protection.

“I would love that,” Gilbert agrees. “After all, someone’s got to make sure you do your best.” He flashes me a cocky smile.

“Okay,” I warn Tyler once we’re all situated. “I have to warn you, my voice is rusty. I mean, I keep it in great condition, but I haven’t done much singing since I joined...uh, the ranks of the non-theater world.”

Well, in that case, I’ll oil it for you,” Tyler says. “The boss said something about your ability to hold long notes, so we’ll start there. Take as deep a breath as you can and let it out on a hiss, as if you were a deflating balloon. Stop only if you run out of air.”

“Twenty-eight seconds,” Tyler announces when my air is gone. “Very good, but I’d like to see you at sixty.”

“Excuse me?” The longest I’ve ever held a note is thirty-two seconds, and that’s a big stretch. My breath sustainability has wavered over the years, and even though four seconds off my record might not seem like a big deal, I’m not going to stand for it. “Okay, so how do I fix that?” I ask Tyler.

“You practice. You know the health saying, burn more calories than you consume?”

“It’s what keeps me in single-digit jeans.”

“Impressive. Yeah, I didn’t peg you as a big girl, which is good. I like ‘em skinny.”

“And that has what to do with my voice?” I’m starting to feel sick. Meanwhile, Gilbert clears his throat, but it sounds like a growl.

Tyler notices and gets back to business. “The calories thing is also true for your voice. I noticed that you tend to breathe in and out slowly, but what you need to do is breathe in quickly and then breathe out slowly. That sounds counterproductive, but it’ll give you more air to burn. Here, put your hand on your ribcage, and I’ll put mine...”

“You will keep your hands to yourself, Minnesota Skinny.”

“Oh-ho, a diva.” Tyler grins at Gilbert. “Better teach this one some discipline, boss.” And he pinches me somewhere his fingers have no business going.

I know what to do. Turn around, smack the guy silly, and run like heck. But Tyler’s words and actions catapult me back to a dreadfully similar situation, and all I can do is scream.

Gilbert’s head whips toward me. His eyes take in my face, Tyler’s hand, and the spacing between us, or lack thereof. “What the blue blazes do you think you’re doing?” he shouts. “No, you know what, don’t answer that. You just got yourself fired, pretty boy. Get out.”

“Hey, man, I was just having a little fun.”

“Do not make me repeat myself. You’re lucky I’m firing you, not smacking you. Go on, move it!”

Whoa. Is this knight in shining armor the same guy I’ve been butting heads with since the minute we met?

“Maria? Maria, are you all right?”

No. I am not. Tyler’s behavior has scared me senseless, on top of which Gilbert is now acting like Prince Charming, and I think...

“Gilbert? I mean, Mr.—uh...I...uh...I think I’m gonna...”

CHAPTER 8:***“People will say we’re in love...”******-Oklahoma***

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. It was stupid, I’m so sorry...” Why can’t I say anything else? Because of Chandler, that’s why. Chandler, and Tyler, and the other dirty, rotten pigs who call themselves men on this planet. Well, not all men are pigs. In fact, the one with me now is...a fresh wave of nausea crests, and my stomach burns as I lean over the trash can he’s holding.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Yes, you said that.” Gilbert laughs. “Don’t worry, Maria. You had cause. Besides, I have three kids under age ten. I’m used to this.”

“Oh, that’s right, you do.” Yeah, Maria, go with that. Get him away from the fact that you just urped two meals and three cups of tea into his wastebasket. “How old are they?”

“Clayton’s seven. Then Sophie and Desiree—we call her Desi—they’re my twins. They’re four. Here, let me show you.” He pulls out a wallet-sized photo. The little boy, a gap-toothed, freckle-faced kid, has blue eyes and his dad’s black hair. The two little girls, carbon copies of each other, are nothing short of dolls, with flyaway curly brown hair and wide-set grayish-green eyes. They’re all positioned in front of a Christmas tree. The woman behind them has Clayton’s eyes and the girls’ hair.

“Your wife?” I ask.

“Yes, that’s Anne. I took that the Christmas before...”

“Yeah. How did she die?” I ask before I can stop myself. I bite my lip. “Me and my big mouth.”

“No, it’s okay,” Gilbert says. “It was leukemia. Anne was always frail, so when she got a fever that year, we figured we’d just have to let it run its course. But she got worse and worse and...well, by the time they figured it out...there were literally six months between the diagnosis and the day I buried her.”

“Oh, Gilbert...I mean, Mr. Montgomery...that’s awful.” I shrug. “Punks with knives and guns I can deal with any day. But something that just creeps up on you—inside you—like that...ooh!”

“I know. But those punks don’t look too easy to deal with, either. Maria, I’m sorry about Tyler. He was always a ladies’ man, but when I hired him, he swore up and down he’d converted, and...”

“Hey, news flash. Christians lie.”

He does a double take, and I expect him to condemn me to hell, but he looks confused. “What does that mean?”

Okay, pal, you asked for it. “It means there are plenty of true, good Christians in this world. The Schmidts are, and I think you are. But others lie. They hurt people. They shove their standards down people’s throats and hate anyone who dares disagree with them.”

Gilbert nods, but just as I know he will, he has an answer. “Maria, God’s people are flawed, and yes, some of them are hateful despite their claims to faith. But God is perfect, and He loves you.”

“I don’t think he does,” I say. “More to the point, I don’t think he could. Not if what I saw from his children was any indication.”

“Didn’t you hear anything I just said?”

“Yes, I did, and it’s the typical answer of a sheltered Christian who grew up in a great home, with wonderful parents, and had sweet, nurturing Sunday school teachers and pastors to show them the way. You didn’t see what I did, bud. You didn’t spend two endless years of your childhood with a different family every six weeks, two of which were quote, unquote, Christian. You weren’t ignored and seen as a burden. You weren’t called a devil-child because your parents were actors. You didn’t have to copy passages out of the Bible about wrath and punishment for the smallest offense. And you...” I crack my knuckles. “You never knew what it felt like to know that God saw how much you hurt, and yet ignored you.”

“Maria...”

“No. No, please, don’t try to convert me. My cousins have done that already. When, and if, I become a Christian, I’ve got to do it on my own.”

Gilbert clears his throat. “That wasn’t what I was going to say. I was going to apologize to you. I didn’t know about your experiences, and it was foolish of me to feed you platitudes.”

“Excuse me? I...Gilbert...I mean, Mr. Montgomery...”

“Call me Gilbert if we aren’t working. In fact, call me Gil.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. I didn’t expect that from you, that’s all.”

I know. Maria, I...I’ve been a real jerk. I’ve tried to blame it on a lot of things...stress, worry, missing my wife—but it hasn’t worked. I’ve treated you like a twit, and as a gentleman and a believer, I should know better. I should have treated you like the capable person you are from the minute you walked through my door.”

“I wish you had. But it’s refreshing to hear a Christian admit to making a mistake. Most of them don’t.”

He gives me that killer smile. “I’d like to prove you wrong. That is, I’d like a truce. Can we do that?”

I bite my lip. “I’d like that. This whole rivalry thing is stupid, and it’s not helping either of us. I’m starting to forget how it started in the first place, if you want to know the truth.”

Gil laughs. “Okay, then, truce it is. Although you’re fun to spar with.”

“So are you. But...” I give him my hand. “Here’s to a clean slate.”

“I’ll shake on that.” He does, but lets go fast. “So I take it you’re okay with handshakes?”

“Yeah, but anything beyond that is hard.” He has no idea how hard. I feel myself shudder. “It’s chilly in here.”

He holds my eyes and nods. “A cup of tea might help.” I must’ve given him a Look, because he smiles. “Brendan told me, for your safety. But I promise he hasn’t told anyone else and neither will I.”

“Thanks, Gil. Yeah, I’ll take that tea.”

Gil disappears into the room next door and returns with two teabags. “I didn’t know what you liked, so I thought I’d let you choose.”

"Well, I like everything but lemon," I tell him. "Vanilla almond sounds good." I take the cup of hot water Gil offers and let the bag steep. One deep drink later, I'm starting to forget about Tyler. "I feel better already."

"Good. I take it you didn't want cream or sugar?"

"No, never. I take my tea the way I take chocolate. Straight, strong, and as full and rich as it gets."

"Just like life?"

"You could say that, yeah. But then, if you don't live that way, you might as well be sitting pretty in a nursing home, smart-mouthing the judges on Court TV."

Gil's shoulders shake with laughter. "I see you more as the type who would race her wheelchair down the hall and spike the prune juice with grape soda."

"Yeah, that about nails it."

"Is that why you became a cop?" he asks.

It's my turn to laugh. "What, because I thought I'd look hot in the uniform? Wanted glory? No way." I suck tea through my teeth, letting the heat ward off bad memories. "No, that was more...a practical thing, I guess. More secure than theater. That's what my adoptive dad said, anyway."

"Adoptive?"

Oops. Wrong move. Might as well tell him, though. Otherwise, he might get the idea, like some people did, that my parents are alive and just didn't want to take care of me. "Yeah. My parents have been gone twenty years. They died in what the cops said was a car accident." No need to tell Gil what I think really happened. Not yet. I take another drink. "Anyway, I didn't have family, so I spent two years in foster care. Luke and Jasmine Brown adopted me when I was ten. Luke's a cop. A captain, actually."

"Oh. I'm very sorry. About your real parents, I mean."

"Yeah, so am I. I miss them every single minute of every single day." Oh, crumb, why'd I go and say that? I sound like a wimpy, whining female. Time to get the conversation back on track.

“Foster care is kinda the reason I became a cop,” I say, like I don’t care what I’m talking about. “See, the families I stayed with were mostly decent, but I did hear a lot of comments about how I’d never amount to anything because I wasted my life playacting. I just wanted people to like me and think I was worth something. Stupid, huh?”

Gil sighs. “Maria, I wish you’d stop calling yourself that. You aren’t stupid, and neither are your desires. Everyone wants that. Everyone needs that.”

“Yeah, but you have to earn it, which I’m working on,” I say. “Although I did look pretty good in dress blues.”

Whatever Gil’s going to say gets cut off when a terrific crash reverberates through the hall.

We stare at each other. “You don’t think...” Gil asks.

“No, I don’t. Don’t get paranoid. That’s what every perp wants. Just come with me.” With every word, I can feel myself changing from Maria, the free-spirited actress, to Keller, the confident, all-business cop. My smile is gone, and in its place is a pursed mouth and clenched jaw. I’ve straightened as if there’s a broom stuffed down my back. Even my heels sound different—instead of clicking on the tile floor, they’re clacking. I’ve got my gun out of its holster in record time. The sound of it cocking reassures me—*I’m here. You’re safe. Let’s do this.*

“Maria?” Gil asks. “One question. If there’s nothing to worry about, why are you cocking your gun?”

“Hey, not being paranoid is no excuse for being stupid. That, and...” I laugh. “If it turns out the perp made that noise, I’m taking him down. Nobody interrupts my tea and gets away with it.”

Gil and I find the noise in the middle of the third floor lounge, where a table lies on its side, legs splintered, contents scattered all over the floor. Those contents are an order of buffalo wings and ketchup-drenched fries. Good grief, does everyone in this theater plan to retire to an obesity clinic? The sight of this heart-attack-for-a-buck makes me crave fruit salad.

“Keller, there you are. Get over here.” Schmidt waves from a few feet away. “Gil, what are you...”

“Just came to see about the noise, but I’ll let you two work.” Gil gives me one of his killer smiles. “See you later, Gumshoe. Please be careful.”

“Gil, trust me. I know what I’m doing. But you might want to pray.”

“Gumshoe?” Schmidt asks.

“Don’t look at me like that. It’s nothing.”

“Okay. So since when is he ‘Gil?’ Last time I checked, you couldn’t stand the guy. And may I add that that was a little over seventy-two hours ago?”

“Since he asked me to call him that. Now let’s get to work. Sheesh, who’s the rookie around here? Who’d our perp hit this time?”

“Vocal coach.” Schmidt steps back, and I almost puke again. “Oh, crumb,” I mutter. “Schmidt, we’ve got major trouble here.”

I make myself kneel and study our latest victim, none other than Tyler West. “This guy was supposed to give me a lesson before rehearsal, but...” I can’t make myself say it. What if Schmidt takes what happened as evidence that I’m not a real cop, just a woman who can’t stay out of trouble? I don’t think he would, but I haven’t known him long, and...

“But what?” Schmidt gives me a piercing look. “Keller, did you slip and tell him who you are?”

“No! No, never!” I know I’m practically yelling, but it stings that Schmidt would even think of thinking I’d blow my cover.

“Shhh. Shhh, calm down. I’m sorry, but you know I have to ask. I know you wouldn’t. Not on purpose. But what happened?”

“West hit on me. At first, it was just sleazy comments, but then he pinched me. You know where. Gil fired him on the spot.”

“Oh, man. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” I’m not, and Schmidt looks like he knows it, but to his credit, he nods.

“Okay, then. Take a good look at our victim here. What’ve we got?”

I recognize his question as a kind of pop quiz and lean in. West's hand is against his throat, like he's ingested something horrible, even fatal. His shirt is covered with some kind of brown substance, saliva, and trace elements of...ah!

"Sugar," I announce. I move to the trash basket. "And I'd bet my piano it came from in here." I slip on my gloves when I see what I'm looking for. "Schmidt, hand me some tongs, would ya?"

"You got it."

"Okay, come to Mama...there you have it. Large sweet tea, courtesy of Wendy's."

"Good work," Schmidt says. He pops the cup into an evidence bag. "Poor guy. Never thought the calories really would get to him."

"You said it." I bite my lip, trying to force away the thought that West got what was coming to him. I may not be a Christian, but I can hear Luke's voice scolding me to watch what I say. It's never a good idea to wish bad things on anybody. In fact, I once had a Sunday school teacher who claimed doing that would send me straight to hell. I don't remember where she got the idea—some Bible verse out of Matthew, I think. She told me that during a Texas "super summer" day in July when it was literally a hundred ten degrees out. To this day, I count the days until fall, starting June twenty-first. I sigh. Still two months to go.

"Keller? Where are you?"

"What? Oh. Sorry."

"That's okay. But really, woman, what is it with you and daydreaming?"

"I'm not daydreaming. It's...being in homicide makes you think, I guess. I mean, about mortality and all."

Schmidt nods. "That it does, but think about mortality later. There's a clue flashing right before your eyes. Look. West may not have gotten to you, but it looks like he got a good smooch from another lady in his private harem." Schmidt points to a red stain on Tyler's cheek.

"Yeah...hey, wait." Is it my imagination, or does that stain smell? "Schmidt, hold it. That's not lipstick. It's nail polish. The smear's too big to be a leave-behind. It's like the perp wanted us to see it. It's gotta be a signature."

“Like a serial killer? But then why didn’t Nicole have one?”

“I don’t know. Unless the perp is trying to confuse us. Remember how we said there could be a perp and an accomplice? Somebody to hide the bodies? Well, the male could be doing that, but it could be a female doing the dirty work. Or it’s a male leaving nail polish to make us think he’s a woman. Or the perp is now playing a game because he or she knows we’re here, so he or she killed again just to...”

“Keller!”

“What? Is it that crazy of a theory?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. Look! He’s still breathing!”

“Holy...” A look from Schmidt stops me just in time. “I mean, uh, that’s something, all right.”

A series of coughs startles us both. “Ugh. You got...that...right.”

Schmidt pulls himself together first. “Tyler? I’m Detective Schmidt with Cherry Creek PD. Can you talk to me, buddy?”

Tyler looks at me. “What’s she...doing...here?”

“I’m his partner,” I bark at him. Victim or not, this is still the scum who made a pass at me. “And he’s the merciful one in this duo, so start talking to him, Romeo.”

“Please do,” Schmidt says. “First off, was there anyone here when you came in?”

“Ms. Goodson came in...said she was—looking for...some tea for...front office...” Tyler clutches his throat again. A smothering, depressed feeling settles over the room seconds before the death rattle.

“At least we got something,” Schmidt says.

“Yeah, but what do we do with it?”

He runs a hand through his hair. “I hate to say it, but we go find Sarah.”

“Wait a minute,” I say. “There’s something else. I was talking to Karen Winters, and...” I sum up the George Richmond situation.

“Oh, I see. Looks like we’re gonna have to split up. You handle Sarah, I’ll handle George.”

"No, you got stuck with Sarah last time."

"But I don't want to leave you alone with a strange man."

"Look, I know what you're saying, but George is older. I don't think he'll try anything."

"Okay, there's only one way to settle this." Schmidt holds out a fist. "Winner gets first choice, loser gets the other one. One, two, three, shoot!" He grins when his rock crushes my scissors. "Looks like you've got Sarah."

Goody, goody, gumdrops.

"I am telling you, I don't know anything about the deaths." Sarah's face is tear-streaked, her voice pleading. She clutches the edge of the desk in her office, where I've set up shop.

"I'm not saying you do," I assure her, because really, I'm not. Sure, I don't particularly like the chick. I mean, who would, after the little visitors' badge stunt she pulled, and the fact that she's just...well, ya know...too frou-frou for words? But up until this point, I was not completely sold on the idea that she could be a killer. But still...

I consult my notebook. "But we did find nail polish at the scene, and you're a big-time manicure girl." I motion to her red nails. "Plus, Tyler did connect you to his murder. Now, that doesn't mean you're guilty. Schmidt and I would be shocked if you were. But if you know something, now's the time to tell me."

"So this is the price I pay for being taken into confidence about your true identity! I thought I could trust you, but I was wrong. Some detective you are, coming in here, disrupting the business..."

"I understand how rattled you must be, Miss Goodson, but..." Whoa, I sound like Gil. Maybe that's good.

"I have good reason to be upset, you flighty upstart. I didn't like you the minute you set foot in the door—prancing in here, driving Gil crazy...he doesn't need a woman like you..."

Oh, so that's it. Sarah's single, beautiful, and after Gilbert Montgomery with the determination of a starving barracuda. Why, that little...hold it. Focus, Keller. I turn back to her. "I understand you're upset, but it is in your best interest to calm down and do it now. Your anger is

translating into suspicion on my detective's radar. Now, once again, whether you murdered anyone—“

“I didn't!”

“Okay, you didn't. Do you know anything about anyone who would have?”

“I didn't even want to get involved. I don't want myself or poor Gil exposed to __”

Oh, for Pete's sake! Okay, think, girl. What would Schmidt do? Well, that's easy. Just because I was the flunky before this case doesn't mean he didn't work with me so I could prepare for this day. Oh, no, we worked, and he bossed me around like an older brother on steroids. One thing he's been drilling into my head is, 'Keller, it's okay to play bad cop. You're gonna have to do it sometime.' I've dreaded it, but it looks like “sometime” is right now. Deep breath, and...

“Okay, Sarah, listen up. Barney the dinosaur has left the building. Here's the deal. If you don't want to find yourself on my suspect list, I need names. I need motives. You got 'em, hand 'em over, and sooner rather than later.”

“I don't know anything! I just don't find you trustworthy enough...”

I smack the table. “You know what, Sarah? I don't give a flyin' flip!”

She backs off, and for a minute, I wonder if she'll start crying again, but finally, she sighs.

“You do believe me, don't you? That I didn't kill them?”

“I certainly want to. But if you didn't, why won't you tell me who did?”

“Because I don't know! I did see something, but...”

“Yeah? What was that something?”

She's about to lose it, so I switch back to Good Cop and get her some water. Once I return, Sarah shakes her head. “I saw him—this man—but just from the back. I was cleaning the foyer desk the day Nicole was killed, and I saw him walk through. It had started to rain, and he was wearing a slicker, but he had the hood up over his face. And I remember the slicker was red.”

“See? Was that so tough? Now, how big is our red raincoat guy, would you say?”

“I couldn't really tell. You're the sleuth, for better or worse. But...but the coat looked like it was large or extra-large,” she hurries on, as if afraid I'm going to yell again.

“Thanks. Anything else?”

She's got something. I can tell by the way her eyes slant to the right. But she shakes her head. "Look, I don't have anything to do with this, but I can't tell you who does."

"Why? Did this person blackmail or threaten you? Because if so, Schmidt and I can and will protect you."

"No. You could try, but he'd come after me. He...he'd kill me. He'd kill you too, and Brendan. Surely you wouldn't want anything to happen to your partner. I've seen the rapport you two have."

"We're good friends, yeah. But we're also cops. You need to trust us to take care of ourselves."

Sarah's face hardens. "Miss Keller, you must be just as stupid as I thought. You can't take care of yourself. You don't know what you're doing. Without Brendan, you can't do anything. You're worthless to me and to other civilians. Furthermore, if I say anything, there will be consequences you cannot face. And considering how I feel about you, plus how attached I am to my own life, I cannot—will not—protect you."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No. I'm warning you."

"I'm hearing a threat, Sarah. You better tell me what you meant by it. There are penalties for withholding that nature of information from a police officer."

She sighs. "Fine. You want a name? You really want to stay involved in this?"

"Yes, ma'am. On both counts."

"Then stop talking to me and talk to George Richmond."

I know as sure as I know my own name that she's lying like a perfect blanket of icing on a cake. I also know that, no matter what Schmidt thinks about her being too sweet and dainty to commit murder, it's all an act. I am so adding her to my suspect list, whether my partner likes it or not. But no way is Sarah saying anymore, so I say,

"Fine. Thank you, Sarah. I'll be in touch," and let her go.

I'm not fifty feet out of the office before I run into Schmidt. He smiles and taps the earpiece he's wearing. "I eavesdropped. I don't know what Tunney and Rawlings see when they look at you, but they're blind. You're good."

"But she lied to me."

"True, but you got a physical description, however brief, that we can use. Plus, you faced up to your anxiety about being the bad cop, didn't let her pull anything, and knew when to drop it. That adds up to a big fat A+ in Interrogation 101."

"Gee, and me without a shiny red apple. So I take it things went well on your end?"

"Not exactly. Things are getting sticky. George is still on the suspect list, but he claims he didn't do it because he had a crush on Nicole. He says that what Karen interpreted as "sneaking around" was him secretly dropping flowers and gifts at her door."

"Wait. I thought Richmond was an old guy. Miracle Max said he was 'getting up there.'"

"Yeah, well, he's forty-five, which I guess is old to you. Nicole was thirty-nine."

"Hmmm. So you think he could've been stalking her with intent to kill?"

"It's a possibility, but we've got to be careful with it. According to George, that 'get out of here' line Karen heard was him telling Nicole to blow this joint and go to a theater that appreciated her talent, if such a one existed, which it probably does not. And because the Chinese food he brought her was in a plastic bag, he never actually touched it. In other words, we don't have any evidence to arrest him and are back to square one."

"Crumb. Want me to call the morgue, have them get Tyler West outta here?"

"No, I'll do that. Gil's holding rehearsal until you can get there. Go relieve him." Schmidt winks at me.

"It's not what you think!" I call after him.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say."

CHAPTER 9:

“This mad adventure I’ve begun is unlike anything I know...”

-City of Angels

“Okay, people, that’s a wrap,” Gil says around six that evening. “Good work today. I’d like to see the customers early tomorrow for a run-through of their part in “Sounds While Selling,” but the rest of you, be here at the regular time. Amalia, may I have a word before you go?”

I should be anxious. I mean, I was never a troublemaker as a kid, but when you’re in foster care, the “troublemaker” label hovers around you like the threat of the flu bug. You might not have it, but you’re a risk. That tends to carry over to adulthood. When people want to have a “word,” it’s never a good thing.

But I’m not anxious, because I’m exhausted. I’m sitting in a chair that’s a temporary set piece, gulping down ice cold water, and I cannot even think about moving. But there’s euphoria behind this exhaustion that I haven’t felt in six years. It’s the euphoria that makes me smile, nod, and gesture “come on up” to Gil.

He does, and sits down in another chair. “Good job today. You truly love this, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I’ve been a cop for so long I’d forgotten how it felt.”

“How long has it been?”

“My last production was in college. *Steel Magnolias*. That’s still one of my absolute favorite productions, play and movie.”

“Anne liked it too, and I have to admit, it wasn’t bad for a chick flick,” Gil says.

“Oh, you are such a man.”

“I know.” His grin is unrepentant. “So, who did you play? Oh, wait, let me see if I can guess. A strong, indomitable lady like you would’ve had to play M’Lynn.”

I laugh. “Indomitable? Me? I don’t feel it these days. But no, you’re wrong. I got cast as Truvy. I wanted to be Shelby, though. That’s the role I said I wanted when they asked at the audition.”

Gil frowns. "I don't see it."

I nod. My director hadn't seen it, either. When the cast list went up, he called me aside to explain. "I know everybody else got their first or second choices," he said, "but I could not, in good conscience, let you play someone whose role basically hinges on sickness and death."

I knew deep down he was right, so I didn't fight the decision, but it hurt. Back then, I told myself I just had leftover audition jitters and a dash of PMS. But the truth was, I'd wanted to play Shelby because for once, I wanted people to see me as sweet, unselfish, and good, even if it wasn't really me. For once, I didn't want to have flaws. I didn't want to be...

"Maria the Mistake."

Gil looks up. "What?"

Crumb, did I say that nasty, scratching, needling, nibbling nickname out loud? Quick, girl, cover! Cover! "I mean, uh...it was a mistake. Wanting to play Shelby. I could never be her. Not really. I guess I just wanted to feel one hundred percent good."

"So you don't believe you're good?"

Crumb! Why do I keep spilling my guts to him? "So what if I don't?" But then I realize I've snapped at Gil and backtrack. "Ah, Gil, I'm sorry. I'm just tired. I have to run." Literally, or else I'll end up telling Gil all sorts of things I shouldn't, and he'll go all sympathetic and gentlemanly on me, and I'll melt like M&Ms in the backseat of an eighty-degree car, and then... I'm already making a break for the stage stairs.

"Maria, wait, please. You don't have to be afraid of me. I..."

"No, I do." You don't know the half of it, Gil. I do have to be afraid of you. Because if I'm not, I'll let you see all of me, and you'll be so disgusted you'll...well, who knows what. And I'd rather take a bullet than endure that pain. I'm halfway down the stairs.

"Maria, wait." Gil grabs my sleeve. I can feel the burn through the fabric, but it's just a tad less intense than usual. "What?"

"We agreed to be friends, right? Well, you look like you could use one. I have an idea. Why don't you forget about murders and rehearsals and everything else, just for a little while, and come have dinner with me?"

“Hold it, cowboy. What happened to ‘just friends?’”

“It’s not like that. The kids and I have a tradition. Friday nights, we make deli sandwiches for dinner and watch a movie. You could join us. I want to make up for being such a moron before.”

Whoa. Gil’s not a criminal, but since I’ve known him, he’s done a great job of shooting things at me that I’m not prepared for. It makes me wonder why the police academy spends so much time teaching you how to dodge bullets and so little time teaching you how to dodge wonderful, confusing men.

“Maria?”

Oh, right, he needs an answer. “I...no one’s ever done anything like that for me before. I don’t know why you would, except maybe you are the good person you’ve made yourself out to be. And let me tell you, that’s becoming extremely difficult to deal with.” I sigh. “Okay, here’s the deal. I’ll do it as a favor to you so you can make restitution or do penance or whatever you wanna call it. But after this, no more date-like activities until I say it’s okay, got it?”

“Got it. And remember, I didn’t invite you over to put the move on you. My kids will be right there, and young though they are, they’re pretty good chaperones.” He chuckles. “So, it’s 276 Lindell Street. You know where that is?”

“I’ll MapQuest it. Oh...should I bring anything over? Thank goodness it’s deli night, because I’m such a bad cook I scorch water, but I could bring chips, or if you don’t want the kids eating junk, I always have fruit, or I could bake something...I can bake, I don’t know why when I can’t cook, but...” Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP!

“Maria, relax. You’re invited to dinner, not a trial. If you want to, you may bring whatever you like, but no, it’s not necessary. See you in a few minutes?”

“Um...yeah, I guess...” But then the full implication of what I’ve agreed to nearly knocks me down. I have just told a single man that I will come to his house, and kids or not, that is completely freaky. I’ve got to make an excuse, quick.

“Oh, crumb, Gil, I’m sorry. I don’t think I can. I mean, I need to go over my case notes, and if Schmidt were to call...”

“What’s this about Schmidt?” my partner himself asks, poking his head into the auditorium. “Hey, Keller. I just wanted to let you know that I was heading out.”

“Have a good night,” Gil says. “Say hi to Dorothea and the kids. Oh, and by the way, did you need Maria to do anything, or can you spare her?”

The snake!

Schmidt shakes his head, a stupid grin plastered all over his face. I hope it cracks and he loses a tooth. “I can definitely spare her.”

“But...”

“Keller, you’ve got the evidence and case file memorized. Staring at the computer screen won’t make the perp appear. If it’ll make you feel better, you can call the morgue and check the status of Nicole’s autopsy report, but that’s all I want you doing right now, okay?”

No, it’s not okay. I’d like to argue, but Schmidt looks like he’d pull rank if I did. Plus, with Gil standing right next to me, it’s not the best idea. “Okay. See you in the AM.”

“And I’ll see you in...oh, about thirty minutes?” Gil asks.

“Your wish is my command, Mr. Punctuality.”

Wait a minute here. Did I just flirt with him? Yes, I did, and he looks like he knows it.

Oh, holy crumb.

I don’t know why, but before I head over to Gil’s, I decide to stop by the house and change. Oh, all right, I do know why, but I can’t think about it or I’ll completely freak. So instead, I dash upstairs, forgetting that that does absolutely nothing for my heart rate, and throw open the closet. I wish it were cool enough for one of my favorite jackets, but the thermometer seems permanently stuck on ninety these days. I wouldn’t mind if it was a dry Texas kind of heat, but with this blasted humidity...shut up, I tell my head. Focus, Keller, focus. What to wear? What...aha! I pick a three-tiered, jewel tone peasant skirt and a white blouse. Gil’s never seen me dressed like that, and he’ll be surprised, maybe even impressed...but I don’t care. I do not, I do not, I DO NOT!

I'm standing at the mirror, putting on a fresh coat of lipstick, when I notice the polish on my left thumbnail is chipped. I reach for the bottle of Cherry Rose, but it's not there. I step back for a better look. I don't have that much makeup, so if I misplaced it, it should be easy to find again. Foundation...clear gloss...one compact of blush...two red lipsticks...nail polish. Nude pink...frosted strawberry...firehouse red...yup, I'm missing a shade.

"Hey, Maria, do you—wow." Meg looks me up and down and grins. "You look positively hot. Who's the lucky man?"

I feel my face redden. "Tell you later, okay? Listen, have you seen my Cherry Rose polish?"

"No. Is it missing?"

I shrug. "Yes and no. It's probably under my nose and I'm just too distracted to look. Or else I ran out of that shade last week and forgot to replace it. No biggie. You and Mo eat without me. I'm going to dinner. Back in a few hours." I run for the stairs and out the door before I can lose my nerve.

I don't know what I'm expecting when I walk into the beautiful brick, two-story house with a turret, picture windows, and a swing attached to a blue spruce. But what I hear is definitely not it.

"Clayton, if you don't stop being ugly right now, I will spank you, and you can spend the rest of the evening cleaning up the living room." The voice sounds like it belongs to one of those old ladies with iron-gray hair and a perpetual frown that you see in movies set in Victorian England.

"But that's not fair! You shouldn't punish Desi...she never does anything bad! And Sophie was just sticking up for Desi, and all that stuff in there isn't even my mess!"

"Clayton Montgomery!" This voice is male, deep and stern. "You have one more chance to apologize to your grandmother."

The kid must've done it, because I don't hear anything else. Meanwhile, Gil is hustling up behind me. "Oh, Maria...how did you get here so fast?"

"MapQuest works wonders. Besides, no offense, but I think my little baby gets better mileage than your car. Plus, it's red, so maybe that helps. Say, is everything okay in there?"

Gil clears his throat louder than I've ever heard him do it. "Yeah. Listen, uh, why don't you go in through the back and set that grocery bag in the kitchen? I'll do damage control and be with you right away."

"Right-o," I say, a la Julie Andrews, and snap a salute at him. I find the back entrance and try to squelch my urge to rush upstairs and investigate what I'm hearing. It's a faint sound, but I know it all too well. It's the sound of crying children. Girls, to be exact. I wonder what the little boy's done with himself. Oh, well. Not my kids, not my business. I'd better focus on setting out the goods. Two bags of chips, plain and tortilla, fresh apple slices, and a gallon of vanilla ice cream, Hershey's syrup, and the works. I'm opening the freezer to put the ice cream away when I hear footsteps, and within two seconds, I'm facing the boy from Gil's photo. He gives me a strange look, and I expect him to do what his dad did and threaten to call the cops. But instead, he blinks.

"Hi. Are you one of the church ladies?"

I can't help it. I start laughing, hard. The kid's looking at me like I'm crazy when I finally manage,

"Oh...oh, no. No. Um, my name is Maria Keller. I'm a..." What am I, exactly? I can't say I'm Gil's friend because then Clayton might think we're dating. And I sure can't tell him the particulars of our relationship. "I'm a new actress at the theater. And you're Clayton, right?"

"Yeah. Wow, that's a relief. I mean, I don't care if we have chips for dinner. Some of those ladies sent us some pretty lousy casseroles after my mom died. But Grandma and Grandpa would freak."

"Do they...live with you?" Because if the grandparents do live here, I'm guessing Gil's kids might be enduring a semi-lousy childhood. Whatever happened to grandpas who swung you up on their shoulders and took you to the park, or grandmas who baked you double-decker brownies and let you watch Disney movies all day?

"Nah. They just stay with Sophie and Des when they get out of preschool in the morning, and they pick me up from day camp, or school when it starts. Then they're here 'til Dad comes

from work. But,” he sticks out his chest a little, “when I turn eleven, I get to be in charge, and we get to stay by ourselves. And I’m almost eight.”

“When will you be eight?”

“October.”

“Really? My birthday’s in October, too. What day is yours?”

“The eighteenth. When’s yours?”

But before I can tell him, I hear raised voices in the other room.

“Gil, look, your mother and I know you’ve done your best since Anne died, and we respect that. Most other single parents couldn’t hold this home together for half as long as you have. But it’s time to face facts. Your children are...”

“Falling through the cracks,” the female voice says. “They’re becoming...well, Clayton is becoming a hermit. One of these days, you’re going to wake up and find out he’s been playing violent video games and is in a gang.”

“Mom,” Gil sighs, “this is Cherry Creek, not Los Angeles. Name one gang that exists around here.”

“Well, all right, maybe not a gang, but...and Sophie...Gil, you must know Sophie is, for all practical purposes, wild.”

“You make her sound like an animal.” Gil’s voice tightens.

“What else would you call it when a child throws herself down in the middle of the floor, kicks, screams, and throws everything in sight just because her grandmother and I said she couldn’t play outside until she had a nap?” the older man asks.

“How about ‘being four?’”

“Gilbert, I do not need disrespect right now. Wake up, son. Your oldest is a hermit, your older twin is a wild child, and if I have to clean up one more of Desi’s accidents, I think I’ll...”

Clayton looks as if he’d like to bolt, and I don’t blame him one bit. I’m trying to think of what I could possibly do when he shoots a look at the door and says,

“Miss Keller, would you like to see my room?”

What is this kid, a butler? But I smile. “Sure, sport. Only, nix the Miss Keller stuff, okay? You can call me Miss Maria.”

“Okay. I like that better. C’mon. Let’s go this way.” He takes my hand and we head up a set of stairs that lead from the kitchen. At the top, I can still hear one of the girls sniffing.

“Hey, Clayton, are your sisters okay?”

He frowns. “Yeah. See, Sophie got in trouble ‘cause she didn’t want to nap, and she threw toys and movies and stuff all over the living room, so Grandma made her go to her room. And then Desi said she wanted to watch a video, but Grandpa said no ‘cause she didn’t eat vegetables at lunch, so she started crying, and then Grandpa got mad.” His face is a mixture of sad and frustrated. “But Miss Maria, Desi didn’t do anything. I don’t know why Grandma and Grandpa pick on her, just ‘cause she doesn’t like to eat some things, and she has accidents. She’s little. She can’t help it.”

Yeah, little kids being little kids. What a concept. Maybe the question of if we adults are smarter than fifth graders doesn’t just belong on a game show. I want so badly to say something—to comfort Clayton, to let him know that I know what he’s going through, to tell him he doesn’t have to worry so much about his sisters because that’s a grownup job. But that’s not what he needs right now.

“And this is my room.” Clayton opens the door at the end of the hall, and I see a portrait of the real Clayton Montgomery. Scenes of knights, castles, and a heroic captain fighting off pirates are painted on the walls. The shelves above the bed are stacked with kids’ books—Hardy Boys, Judy Blume’s Fudge books, the Narnia books, and so on. The nightstand holds a black composition book, and on the bed lies a well-used sketchbook and colored pencils.

“You draw?” I ask him.

He blushes. “Yeah, but I’m not good. Not like a real artist.”

“Oh, I bet you are. Um...” Okay, I’m taking a big risk here, but Clayton looks starved for interaction that doesn’t have the threat of punishment attached. “Would you show me?”

“Well...promise you won’t laugh?”

“If I do, you can drop a piano on my head.”

He laughs. “Okay. Hmm...oh, this one’s pretty good. It’s the big maple tree at school.”

I study the drawing. The kid’s no Rembrandt, but I know from looking at Monique’s drawings for years that he has definite potential. He proceeds to show me several more sketches—his sisters swinging in the park, boys playing kickball, the public library, even the Stage Door, with his dad smiling out front. He turns the page. The portrait is full of faces I recognize. It’s the Cherry Creek homicide squad, only with exaggerated features. Greenwood’s striking blue eyes practically leap out of his head. Schmidt’s hair, which is always a little tousled because of the way he runs his hands through it, looks like a squirrel played in it. The mole on Tunney’s chin looks like Mount Vesuvius. And Rawlings...

Clayton’s laughing along with me. “Mr. Brendan is Dad’s best friend,” he says, “and he’s showed me pictures of all the other guys. I made this as a joke. Except, Rawlings really looks like that.” He points out the bared teeth, the gut hanging off the page, the rodent nose, and the cruel, squinted eyes. “You better hope you never meet him, ‘cause he doesn’t like women at all.”

Before I can explain, Gil knocks on the door. “There you two are. Come on, it’s time for dinner.”

“Okay, so how does this deli thing work?” I ask once we’re all assembled in the kitchen, minus the authoritarian grandparents, thankfully.

“Well, you and I are deli clerks. The kids will give us their sandwich orders, and we’ll make them. Then we make each other’s.”

“Okay.” I put on a New York accent. “Youse guys take a number—whaddya want, I ain’t got all day—you, pretty lady with the curls and the Mickey Mouse sweatshirt, whatcha gonna have?”

“Roast beef and cheddar on rye with tomatoes, onions, and mustard, please.”

“Oh, Miss Adventurous! What, you goin’ bungee-jumping later? You’re my kind of girl, Sophie...you are Sophie, right?”

“Yup!”

Meanwhile, Gil takes Clayton’s order, and the fun begins. Gil and I get into a rhythm, slicing veggies, loading plates, and arranging fruit almost in sync. I turn his tomato so he doesn’t

get juice on his shirt, and he puts his hand over mine when my knife almost slips. I barely have time to register that the touch didn't burn before it's time to take Desi's order.

"Let me get hers," Gil whispers to me. "Desi is very dependent on routine. More so since Anne died. She doesn't trust many people to take care of her needs but me."

"Gotcha," I say, but Clayton breaks in with,

"Des, you need to eat vegetables. That's why Grandpa got mad."

The little girl frowns. "But they taste yucky."

"But everybody has to eat 'em."

"Clayton..." Gil warns. "Do not fight with your sister in front of our guest."

"That's okay," I assure him. "I didn't hear fighting. I heard a concerned big brother. But your dad's right, Clayton. I'll bet you've kinda had to be the man of the house since your mom died, with your dad working a lot. And I'm sure he appreciates you taking good care of your sisters. But you need a rest. We grownups will take care of Desi and Sophie. Don't worry, they're in good hands." I turn to Desi's sandwich, which I have to admit, looks bland. I think hard. I tried everything as a kid, so Mama never had to sneak veggies past me. But some of my foster families had biological kids who couldn't look at broccoli without throwing a fit. And one of my foster dads had...oh, that was it! I cut the sandwich in half, leave half plain, and sprinkle lettuce, tomato, and a smidgen of Thousand Island on the other. Either way, she'll eat.

A few minutes later, Gil has asked a blessing and all of us, even Desi, are talking and eating like nobody's business. Gil does mention that I'm a police officer, explaining that he knows his kids aren't going to tell anyone about my cover, and he wants them to feel safe. For a few minutes, I worry that this will spoil the mood, but the kids seem relieved, and fascinated that a skinny redheaded lady like me could be a policewoman. And they can't believe that I also sing and act. Soon, I'm surrounded with questions, and I'm so busy answering them and telling stories that I feel an inner jolt when I look up and notice Gil staring at me. Curious, I offer to help him do the dishes so I can see what's up.

“Sure, I could use the help,” Gil says. “Kids, why don’t you wait for us in the living room? Work on picking out a movie. Miss Maria and I will be in shortly with dessert.” He watches them leave and grins. “You’re great with kids.”

“I don’t think so,” I say. “I mean, I love kids, but being with them is easy for me. All they want is somebody to understand where they’re coming from and give them what they need based on that. Like with Desi. I know as well as you do what she needs to eat, but if she hates veggies, I’m not gonna force her to eat a whole plate of carrots. She’s not ready for that. She doesn’t like change. You have to go slowly or she’ll shut down.”

Gil shakes his head. “You are amazing. You solve murders, you sing like an angel, you can act, you love kids, you’ll try anything—I have never seen someone who likes pickles and tomato vinaigrette on a sandwich—“

“Hey, let’s not forget about you,” I say. “You own a theater and you’re raising three kids alone, and yet you’re so...calm. So steady.”

“You haven’t seen me on a bad day yet.”

“Yes, I did. As I recall, you were ready to arrest me, and I was the cop.”

“Yeah. And I’m sorry, again. But yes, that day was a low point. My youth theater lead quit, and when I went home to see the kids, I walked straight into chaos.”

“Ouch. Parent problem?”

“Yeah. I must sound like a wimp, but at that point, I couldn’t take anymore. I just didn’t know what to do.”

“You don’t sound like a wimp. You sound like a human. I think it’s honest and brave of you to admit you’re sometimes at the end of your rope. As for your parents, I get it. I’ve been there. Some people seem so powerful that even if you’re not the shy type, you just can’t respond to them the way you want to.”

“Like your coworkers?” Gil asks.

“No. I mean, yeah, but they’re not the first ones. It’s...” I sigh. “The kind of life I had—have—it makes you tough, even if you don’t want to be. You have to tell people exactly what you do and do not want, will and will not put up with. But then somebody comes along, like the wrong

set of foster parents, or an intimidating coworker, or...well, someone who's more powerful than you. And you try to deal with them, but the more you do, the more drained you get. And you try not to, but pretty soon you can't do it anymore. You have nothing left."

"You have God."

Okay, time to back off. "Whoa. Wrong, mister. You have God. I don't. He's not interested in me. Even if he were, I have no clue where I'd start as far as talking to him. My life is such a mess right now I think he'd need a whole team of angelic Merry Maids to clean it up."

Gil laughs, but sobers fast. "I see where you're coming from, but Maria, do you see what you've just done? You can't win. 'God doesn't want me, and if He says different, He must be an idiot, because He can't forgive what I've done.'"

"And what do you know about what I've done?" I ask. "Okay, so I wasn't the classic bad kid. I never smoked—would've ruined my voice. Never did drugs, never touched booze, never did the nasty under the bleachers after Friday night's game. No tattoos, no piercings other than my ears, no dyed hair, no motorcycle...not so much as a parking ticket. I wouldn't have done that stuff even if I wanted to, because the last thing Luke needed was for the town to think a police captain couldn't handle his own kid. And Jasmine was a Sunday school teacher, so you can guess how it was. Most people think my life's pretty clean. The problem is, they haven't bothered to look under the bed."

"Okay, but what if God did?" Gil asks. "What if God did look, and said it was okay? That He could and would forgive you for what's under there?"

"Then I'd be stuck," I say. "Even if I became a Christian, I'd still be me. I'd never want to wear fancy dresses, or sing slow hymns, or take meatloaf to sick old ladies, or teach women's Bible studies. Now, do I want what you have? Yes. But I can't have that. I'd only hurt God, and that would hurt me."

Gil stares at me, nods, crosses to the fridge, and takes out the ice cream. "Okay, Maria. I get it, I really do. One question, though. Do you want a dish of ice cream?"

"Sure."

"You want it, knowing that you run the risk that it could make you fat?"

“What? I’m not gonna gain weight from one dish.”

“But you could, couldn’t you?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think I will. I know how to control my sweet tooth. And I am not one of those women who lives on celery just to stay in her little black dress. I eat what I want, within reason, because it tastes good and it makes me feel good to eat it.”

“Right. Why deny yourself something you want, like an occasional dish of fudge-covered ice cream or a rich relationship with the God of the universe, just because outside influences—the nutrition label, self-righteous Christians—try to make you afraid?”

“I…” But I can’t say anything. I point at him. “Sneaky.”

“And proud, Gumshoe.”

Something bubbles and fizzes in my chest at the nickname. “Okay, okay. You win this round. I’m not ready to pray the Sinner’s Prayer and go down to the river, but I will think about it. I’ll badger you and Schmidt some more. I’ll… I’m not sure, but I’ll do something about this, okay?”

“I’d love that.”

“Great. Now are you going to let me have some ice cream or torture me?”

“I’ve got a better idea. Why don’t we dish up five bowls of the stuff and go watch a movie?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

About an hour and a half, a viewing of *Homeward Bound*, and a dish of vanilla, fudge-covered ice cream with M&Ms later, I’m headed home. Gil and the kids walk me to my car, amid thanks for the sandwiches, encouragement to come back soon, and best wishes on “catching that bad guy at the theater”. I don’t know what it is, but as I start the drive back to my place, something inspires me to talk to God.

“They’re really something, you know that?” I tell him. “You did a bang-up job creating them all, especially Gil. And yeah, I know it wasn’t too far back that I’d rather have spent the day in the morgue than with him, but now I know better. He’s a fantastic guy. And his kids… well, they’re wonderful, but they seem so sad. I know they miss their mom, and that’s part of it, but… okay, God. I never ask for anything for myself, ‘cause we don’t talk, so why should I come

knocking when I need something, right? But for Gil's kids—couldn't you make it so their grandparents ease up some? Oh, not that I think it's okay for Sophie to throw tantrums, and Clayton should probably get out more, and Desi..."

My prayer cuts off when I look in my rearview mirror and notice something. Is that the same car that's been on my bumper for the last three miles? I can't tell, but that's irrelevant. He's way too close. I thump the horn. Bumper Rider moves back a little, and I keep driving—and talking.

"Anyway, God, I'm not saying any of that's okay, because in itself, it isn't. But it's not because they're bad kids. And Gil—I worry about him. I don't know why, but I do. And if you could...whoa!" I slam on the brakes. It takes me a minute to realize what happened. Another car came this close to broad-siding me.

"Oh. Oh, my. Oh...okay, deep breath. In...out...sorry, God. Guess that means, 'hey, Keller, keep your eyes on the road.' Well, 10-4. I'll shut up now."

I do want you to keep your eyes on the road. But you can talk to me anytime. In fact, I wish you'd check in more often.

"Holy crumb!" That voice is so clear I snap my head around looking to see if someone's in the backseat. Of course, no one is, and I shake my head.

"Girl, you must be working way too hard. Hearing voices...right."

A little later, after sharing the details of the non-date with my cousins, I'm off to bed. But once there, all I do is dream about eating ice cream in a morgue while a phone screeches in my ear.

CHAPTER 10:

“Who could see that a man would come who would change the shape of my dreams?”

-Fiddler on the Roof

A few weeks later, I'm deep in my case notes when I feel rather than see a shadow fall over the keyboard of my computer. My nose wrinkles at breath that smells like chili, Twinkies, and Coors, just before a hand punches me in the shoulder. “Ouch!”

“Weakling.” Rawlings lumbers in and parks his fanny on my desk. “When are you gonna wake up and get out, Keller?”

“When you join Jenny Craig.”

“Real funny, Joke Lady.” Rawlings eyes my computer screen. “You won't solve it, you know.”

“No, I don't know. What makes you think that?”

“Hmmm. Maybe it's the fact that you're a bleeding-heart, theater-obsessed, redheaded maggot. Or maybe it's that you have suspects, but no perp. Could it be that your soft heart is letting you protect a killer?”

“How dare you insinuate...”

“Ooh, ‘insinuate.’ Mighty big word for a college dropout.”

Okay, now he's got my attention. “How do you know that?”

“I know everything I need to know about you.”

“What have you been doing, going through my records?”

“Oh, no, Keller. See, unlike you, I don't buck the system. And because I'm not trying to think up creative methods to get my own way and charm everybody's stinkin' pants off, I have more time to listen. I've heard what you've confided in Schmidt recently. How you've been going over to his place for dinner once a week and telling his wife sob stories about how you just had to drop out after your scummy boyfriend raped you.” He laughs. “Little tart like you, you deserved it.”

“Hey!” I’m standing now, poking a finger into his chest. “What I tell my friends—which you are not—is none of your darn business! And if I ever hear of you eavesdropping on my conversations again, I swear I will...”

“What? Tell Tunney on me?” he says in a high voice. “Right. Tunney’s starting to see you in a new way, Keller, I’ll give you that. But I’m still his right-hand man. And a man needs his right hand, but he doesn’t necessarily need his pinky toenail.”

I could use a good knuckle crack about now. My heart’s in metronome mode, and my throat is clenching. It’s not so much what Rawlings is saying as how he’s saying it. I don’t know if I’ve been hanging around too many Christians or what, but when I look in his eyes, I see evil. Not that I haven’t seen evil before, but this is a new breed, and I’m not sure how to stand up to it.

“Hey, what’s this?” Rawlings snatches the small Novel Idea Books bag off my desk and yanks out the contents. “The latest in the Jane Castleberry mysteries, huh? Yeah, should’ve stuck to those.”

“Oh, that’s real mature, Rawlings. Maybe you should stick to giving safety lessons to kindergartners.” That’s it, girl, nail ‘im. He doesn’t have to get to you.

“Like I’d listen to anything that comes out of your mouth.” He tosses the book in the trash, leans over my computer, and proceeds to highlight and delete my entire case report. Maybe that’ll teach you to walk around here thinking you’re a decent detective. Next time I’ll do more than that.” He slaps the back of my neck and leaves.

A few seconds later, the full impact of the confrontation hits me. I’ve got to get out of there, so I flee to the lounge, throw open the cabinet, and reach for the private stash of teabags I hid behind a stack of paper plates and cups.

“Keller?”

“Ack!” Teabags fly from my hands like possessed birds—or rather, frightened birds. I stumble backward and nearly trip, but Schmidt catches me just in time. “Whoa! I didn’t mean to scare you. You all right?”

“Yeah. I...I...” I start to pick up the teabags, but they fall out of my hands again, so I give up. “I...I’m just relieved it’s you. What’s up?”

“Gil just called. Something about the café scene not going well and needing you there to get an idea of how far he needs to go, whatever that means. He wants to know, can you...” He trails off. “Keller, what’s wrong? You look like you just saw somebody shot in front of you.”

“Nothing.” I start to sit down and almost miss the chair.

Schmidt frowns. “Don’t give me that, partner. What happened?”

“Nothing, really, I...” But then Rawlings’ voice zooms into my head, and next thing I know, I’ve told Schmidt everything he said and did. Once I finish, my partner looks ready to kill something, or somebody.

“Why that little...” He mutters a cuss word. “Whoops, sorry.” He takes the mug I was holding from me, fills it with hot water, and dunks a peppermint teabag. “Keller, listen to me. You listening? Okay. I want you to drink this, every bit of it. Then I want you to go to Tunney and explain how you’re being treated. He gives you any trouble, find me, Greenwood, or Adams. We’ll back you up. No arguments, okay?”

I drink the tea faster than I should so I can go to Tunney’s office and get the confrontation over with. But when I get there, I hear Rawlings’ voice on the other side of the door.

“I don’t care, boss,” he yells. “At this point, I just do not care. I want her out. I want her out of this division. I want her off this force. Today!”

Tunney snaps his fingers. “Watch your tone, pal. You know neither of us has the authority to get Keller stripped of her badge.”

“I’d like to strip her of something. I’d like to strip that idiotic smile right off her face. I’d like to get my nails into her voice box and strip...”

“Pete.” Tunney’s voice is low, icy, and serious, but I hear tough love in it. “How many drinks have you had today, man? Truth, now.”

“Just two. No, maybe three. No...but I didn’t finish the last one.” Whoa. Is it me, or does Rawlings sound contrite? Impossible, but...

“Well, you’re just this side of wasted, and you know my policy.”

Rawlings cusses. “Keller’s the one you should be telling about policy.”

Tunney sighs. “Rawlings, look. I’ll grant you she’s unconventional. I’ll even give you flighty. And half the time, I want to hold the woman down and meld a watch to her wrist. But she does her work and does a bang-up job of it. And she shows up sober.”

“Oh, for the love of...” More cussing. “Boss, you telling me you’re attached to that...” A very unflattering word.

“No.” Tunney’s voice turns as compassionate as I’ve ever heard it. “She’ll never be the kind of cop you are, and she’ll never have the friendship with me you do. But I don’t think this is jealousy talking. What’s up? Because if you don’t tell me now, you can leave early today.”

Rawlings thumps the table. “Don’t you get it? Until I got on the force, I was just a waste of skin. The town drunk. And I’m a good cop. I deserve respect. But that little...” There’s that word again.

Silence takes over. Finally, a chair creaking tells me Tunney’s standing up. “Fine. But hear this, Pete Rawlings. I ever hear of you touching her again, you are out of here, buddy. 10-4?”

“Yeah.”

I duck into the broom closet so the two men won’t know I heard the whole thing. Once I’m sure they’re gone, I take the back way out of the bureau, jump in the car, and head for rehearsal. I call Schmidt on the way, but his line’s busy. Oh, well, I’ll explain later. I’m having enough trouble processing this one. Rawlings used to be a drunk? And now he thinks that because he had to pull himself up out of the mud to get to the top, and I allegedly didn’t, that he can treat me like trash? Ha! He makes me so mad I could just spit! He thinks he had it tough? He chose to start drinking. I didn’t choose to be orphaned, go through foster care, be put under a microscope as a cop’s kid, and then...

Don’t judge him.

I whip my head around. “Okay, God. I respect you and all—what am I saying, I’m terrified of you if I think about you too long. But number one, would you please stop hitching rides in my car? And two, do not tell me that man deserves my pity. That’s the way it always is. The other

person always has some reason to...it is always my fault. I am so sick of it being my fault!" I slam my hand into the glove compartment, groan in pain, slam my car door, and stalk into the theater.

"I'm sorry," I tell Gil at the end of rehearsal. We worked the café scene until I was sick of it, but my big song in the middle of it still won't come out right.

"You're too hard on yourself."

"Well, at least one person thinks so. A lot of people think I'm not hard enough on myself."

"If you're talking about your moron of a supervisor, he wouldn't know a good person if one bit him in the..."

"No, I'm talking about... Forget it. I don't know what it is about you that makes me want to get personal, but I can't do it. If I do, you'll think I'm just being a baby, blaming everything on my bad childhood and my mean old coworkers..."

"Maria, no!" Gil cuts me off. "Maria, let me ask you something. I want to be your friend. I want to know you. All those misconceptions—I know now that's what they were, but I want to know the real you now. Why do you keep fighting me like this? Why do you insist on thinking everything I do is against you?"

I don't know why, but when he says that, I don't hear Gil. I mean, I do, but it's like someone else's voice is coming out of his mouth. Where have I heard it before? And then I remember. And suddenly, I'm so sick with my own guilt that I can't look Gil in the eye, because it is Gil, but it's not. I know who's inspired Gil to talk to me like that, and I can't face him.

"No—no, I don't...I'm sorry...I'm a horrible person, I...I can't...I don't know. I don't know." Oh, no. I'm...what am I doing? I'm crying. Why am I crying now? I never do. Why...

"Oh, Maria." And with that, Gil's holding me in his arms.

And for the first time in six years...no, much longer than that. For the first time in twenty years, I feel safe. Gil's arms feel stronger than any gun, taser, or bottle of pepper spray in the world. Maybe I don't have to be the strong woman all the time, because maybe he cares. Maybe I could let someone take care of me for a change. Maybe...

The reality of what I'm doing crashes in on me, along with the memories and the burning. I push myself out of Gil's arms, screaming at myself. *What are you doing? Are you trying to get yourself ruined—again? You are such a stupid little harlot!* And then I'm screaming at him.

"Don't...touch...me! Don't you *dare* touch me!"

"Maria, I'm sorry. I..."

"No!" And, fresh tears beating a path off my face, I run headlong out of the auditorium.

I'm not even sure where I'm going. I just know that my feet are flying across the theater's floors, and my body is simply following them. The further I go, the more I realize I'm not just running. I'm trying to outrun the nasty voice chanting in my ear—*stupid harlot. Charms everybody to get her way...not a decent detective...straighten up...* I've got to get somewhere that I can lock the door. My dressing room would be a safe place... I shoot around the corner, ignoring the sound of Gil's loafers pounding behind me. I wish I had the time to turn around so I could see what he looks like with that oh-so-proper suit soaked in sweat and that tie crooked. But I don't. One more corner, and...

"Oh, my God!" I'm praying, not swearing. Because I'm no longer alone. I'm facing down a runaway piano. Now what am I supposed to do? I consider shooting the instrument and actually reach for my gun. But before I can so much as click off the safety, a dark blur streaks across my peripheral vision and yanks me out of the way, pushing me against the wall in the process. The piano grinds to a stop, putting a hole in the script library door right where I would've been standing.

Gil takes my shoulders and lowers me to the ground. "Are you all right?"

I move my limbs. "I think so. Yeah. See? Nothing broken. I'm a tough egg to crack."

"Don't you mean 'nut?'"

"No, Humpty Dumpty was an egg. I meant...never mind."

"Okay. Stay right there. I'm gonna get Brendan."

"Too late. He's here," says my partner's voice.

I look up and give him a shaky laugh. "Schmidt, what are you, an angel? Because whenever I need you, you're right there."

“Well, somebody’s got to look out for you, rookie. But no, I heard a big commotion and ran down here to investigate, and it’s a good thing I did. Gil, thanks. You may have just saved my partner’s life.”

“How could I do less? Earth would be much too dark and quiet without Maria.”

I flutter my lashes. “Mah hero!”

“Proud to be of service, ma’am,” Gil drawls. “Brendan, did you see anybody with a piano on surveillance just now?”

“Yeah. Miracle Max and some guys from the tech crew were...”

“Thank the Lord nobody’s hurt,” Miracle Max interrupts. “We was movin’ that piano down to the second stage and next thing ya know...”

Schmidt’s got his cop face on. “The second stage is only used for youth theater.”

“Yeah, but Miss Sarah said we had to get it down there ‘cause the other stage is gettin’ cleaned in the mornin’.”

“I am having the janitor do that,” Gil says. “But that doesn’t answer why she’d have told you to move the piano now, of all times.”

“No, but it sure answers what caused this debacle,” Schmidt says. “Two greased wheels, coated with, of all things, lemon-scented dish soap.” He runs a hand through his hair. “Okay. I want all three of you to come with me. You’re not in trouble—yet. I just want to ask a few questions.”

“Do you want my help?” I ask.

“No, you stay with Gil. I’ve got to find Sarah, too. You could’ve been her target, and the force doesn’t need dead heroines. Gil, take her to your lounge and get her some water.” Schmidt checks his watch. “And you both better eat something. Looks like I’m going to have to tell Dorothea to hold dinner.”

“Thanks,” I tell Gil when we get to his lounge and he hands over some Aquafina and a packet of pretzels. “Seems you’re always saving me. I hate being a damsel in distress.”

“Maria, you’ll never be a damsel in distress to me. You have the strongest spirit and the purest heart of anyone I know.”

“Does that include Anne?” pops out of my mouth before I realize it. “Oh, no. Gil, I...I didn't mean it like that. It's just that Anne was probably so much better than me, and you probably don't know what you're talking about when you...oh, not that you're stupid or anything, but...”

“Maria, shhh. Yes, I know what you meant. And the answer to your question is, yes. Anne had both the things I said you do, but she had different versions of them. So yes, I included her in what I said. And no, Anne was not ‘better’ than you. A part of me will always love her, but I do not hold her up as an idol for other women to fall short of.”

“Well, that's good, because I could never measure up.”

“And that matters to you?”

“Sure it does. I...” Oh, boy, here we go. Can I really say this? “Gil, I...okay. I'm not proposing marriage or anything. That's the last thing I'm ready for. But I'm a straight shooter, and not just with my gun. You need to know that I care about you very much. And that scares me, because I know I can never be a woman like...well, like Sarah Goodson, for example.”

“Sarah? How did she get into this conversation?”

“Oh, c'mon, Gil. You know what she's like. She's this doily-crocheting, brownie-baking June Cleaver type. And the way she talks about you...she thinks I'm this big threat. When I first came here, it was...she wasn't ugly to me, per se, but there was this undercurrent, like ‘you're not good enough to polish my shoes.’ And ever since then, it's just gotten worse because of how she feels about you.”

“I know how she feels,” Gil says, “but I don't reciprocate. We did date for awhile, but it wasn't right. It felt like she was trying to be Anne's twin. So I ended it.”

I give him a thumbs-up. “Good call. You should always listen to your gut, especially when the opposite sex is involved.” I duck my head. “I didn't listen to mine, and it was the biggest mistake of my life.”

I'm waiting for judgment, but Gil gives me compassion. “Maria. Maria, look at me. It's my turn to play detective. Now, I don't see you as a bad person. You make mistakes, yes, but so do all of us. Yet you insist that there cannot possibly be anything good about you. What have you done that is so terrible?”

I sigh. "You sure you wanna know?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I...I told you I never finished college, right? Well, there's a reason. When I was a senior, I met this guy, and for awhile, he acted like Prince Charming. He even talked about us getting married. But he...he was a control freak. It was never about him supporting me or treating me right. I remember this one time, I had a horrific migraine, and he insisted that I still show up for his stupid baseball game. It was all about him and what he wanted. Except, he wanted sex, and that was the one thing I wouldn't give him. So one night, he...he took it. He raped me."

Gil looks like he's gonna fall out of his chair. "Maria, no."

"Yes. After that, I...my life just...fell apart. The only good thing that happened in the last few weeks of my college career was finding out that he didn't give me a disease or a kid." I laugh. "Although if he had gotten me pregnant, that would've made up for it. Nobody knows this, but I dream about being a mom."

"I'd believe it. So...so do your adoptive parents know?"

"No. They don't know anything. We stopped talking. Not because of the rape, but because of something else I'd rather not go into. Anyway, the day I saw the doctor, I came back to my dorm, packed my car, and just started driving. Monique was going to school here, living in an off-campus house with Meg, who'd transferred from Tulane the year before. They let me move in with them, helped me put myself back together as best we all three could, cheered me on through the police academy, and basically helped me survive."

Gil nods. "So that's why you don't let men touch you."

"Right. It literally hurts if they do. And that's why I'm so mixed up right now. You're such a great guy, but I don't deserve you. I'm secondhand goods."

Gil nearly comes across the table, eyes icy. "Maria Keller, you listen to me now," he says. "You are not secondhand goods. You are not dirty. You are not to blame for what that pig did to you. None of those things you've probably told yourself for the past six years are true. You're still clean. You're still a virgin."

I chuckle. "Uh, Gil, maybe it's time you and your dad had that talk."

He gives me an indulgent smile. “We did. Let me clarify. In my view, if a woman willingly gives herself to a man, then yes, she loses her virginity. But if a woman is taken advantage of as you were, it’s different. Physically, her virginity is gone. But spiritually, she still counts as a pure woman. And I know what you’re going to say—you’re a non-Christian, so what does that matter. But it does matter, Maria. Jesus knows you did not sin that night, and He will never hold that guy’s choice against you.”

Gil’s voice is so kind I nearly lose it again. “Are...are you sure?”

“Yes.”

I let that sink in. I don’t understand it all, but I do feel better about the whole rape thing than I have in years. I’m about to say so when my pager goes off. I snatch it. “Keller.”

“Keller, it’s Schmidt. You better get over to the prop shop, now.”

“Did you find Sarah?”

“Negative, but I do have something here that is not nearly as sweet as she is. In fact, soon, it’s gonna stink.”

“You mean...”

“Yup. Another body.”

“Who is it?”

“You are not gonna believe this, but it’s George Richmond.”

He’s right. I don’t believe it. Oh, man, this is just great. One of our prime suspects is dead. But I don’t have time to analyze the situation. I grab my gun. “Stay here, Gil.”

“Maria, let me come with you. After what happened with the piano...”

His offer of protection makes my heart turn to goop, but I tell it to harden up and do it now. “Thanks, but I’m a pro at this,” I tell him. “Just sit tight and pray.”

CHAPTER 11:

“Where is it written what it is I’m meant to be?”

-Yentl

I’m halfway to the prop shop when I run into—what else—trouble. Someone jerks me into a costume room, and a silver flash disrupts my peripheral vision.

“Don’t take another step, Maria Keller. You hear me? Not one.”

What is she expecting me to do, flinch, whimper, and agree to do whatever she says? Not on your life, sweetie. “It’s you who shouldn’t take a step. Because if you do, you will be charged with assault on a police officer.”

“Ha. You’re not a police officer. You’re a sassy little tart playing detective.”

“Tart, huh? Well, if I were a tart, I’d be a lemon. That is, I have just enough edge to arrest you. Want me to prove it?”

Sarah Goodson’s face pales, and she drops the letter opener she was brandishing at me. I nod. “Much better. Now, you wanna tell me what’s going on here?”

But the words are hardly out of my mouth before Sarah...

“Oh, no,” I tell her. “Oh, no, lady, you did not just throw a box of pins at me!”

“Oh, yes, I did, Sergeant Pepper. Now, watch this.” And the next thing I know, she’s knocking a sewing machine off a table. It crashes, and I advance toward Sarah, who rushes at me with the letter opener. I fire a warning shot, and she screams.

“Hold it!” It’s Gil’s voice, and I can’t help feeling proud. He sounds just like a cop. But the real cops are rushing in alongside him, Schmidt in the lead with his gun raised. He takes in the scene. “Sarah, what on earth...”

“I’ll tell you what,” I say, but Sarah’s too quick. “You’ll do no such thing!” she shrieks. I see what she’s going to do and start to turn and run, but trip over the sewing machine. The half-second I’m off balance gives Sarah her opportunity. Stinging, throbbing pain slices through the area just below my left knee. I look down to see blood soaking through my hose and the hem of

my skirt. I do have to admire Sarah's dubious talent, though. Straight, clean line, scarlet blood...snap out of it, Keller! What are you thinking?

"What the devil..." Tunney pushes to the front of the crowd. "Keller, are you okay?"

Stay on your feet, girl. Don't give Sarah the show she wants. "Yes, sir. You're talking to a lady who's been through taser tests. This is a cakewalk."

"That's the last thing it looks like," Gil says. He crosses the room and grabs a low stool. "Here, Maria, you need to sit down," he says in a voice that dares the homicide guys to say different. "Any of you guys have a first-aid kit in your cruiser?"

"I d-do," Adams says. Without waiting for an answer, he leaves and is back in a few minutes with the distinctive white box. He hands it to Gil, who leans close to my ear. "You're going to have to take off your shoes and your pantyhose, but I'm going to block the view, okay?"

"Okay."

True to his word, Gil turns so that anything my colleagues shouldn't see is blocked, and waits until I have my medium-length skirt pulled up so that it only shows my knee before going to work. He grins at me. "You're a blessed woman. A little deeper and you'd need stitches, but you'll be fine with some ointment and gauze. All right, now, brace yourself. This will sting." And the peroxide does sting, but I'm not thinking about it. All I can think is, *I just got gouged with a letter opener. This is terrible. I'll be taken off the case. Sarah was right. They're all right. I'm just playing detective. If only I could do it right. I can't do anything right. I've got to solve this case, because it could be my last chance...*

"Okay, now, just another minute and you can get back to work," Gil whispers. Ointment slides over my knee a second before Gil tears a strip of gauze and makes a sturdy, but efficient knot. He drops my skirt back into place and turns to the group. "She's okay. Now, where were we?"

I've never felt so grateful to one human being. If Gil had gone all Prince Charming on me and treated this like a gunshot wound, I wouldn't have been able to show my face at work for weeks. For a minute, I'm even tempted to hug him. But his words have galvanized me, and I'm

back in detective mode in less than thirty seconds. "Sarah here was about to explain why she just sliced me like a Granny Smith apple."

"Sounds like an interesting story," Tunney says. "Miss Goodson?"

Sarah harrumphs. "I don't see why it matters to you."

"Because number one, if you don't want to be labeled the perp, you better start talking. Two, this isn't just anybody you've messed with. Keller is one of our own, and when one of our own gets messed with, we all get mad."

Whoa. I think I'm gonna...I'm not sure what. Is it me, or is Tunney being nice? I glance at him from the corner of my eye. He's looking at me, but his face...he's never looked at me that way. It's not a kind look, but it's like he's looking at me, but seeing someone else. Who?

"If not you, who? Who's responsible for the piano incident and Richmond's murder if not you?" Tunney says, and I realize Sarah's been crying, insisting she's innocent. Well, we'll see.

"It's not what you think!" She's still at it. "I was here, like I said, stuffing publicity envelopes, and one of the chorus members came in—"

"Which one?" I ask.

"I don't know. He's average height, average weight. Hazel eyes. Clear hazel eyes."

The description doesn't ring a bell, but then again, there are dozens of chorus members. I'll go with it. "Okay, so this hazel-eyed guy comes in, and then what?"

"Well, he said he was looking for George. Something about a costume piece George borrowed that he needed. So I sent him to George's dressing room, but then he came back and said he couldn't find anything. So I went down to costume room six, where I knew the piece he asked for would be, and there you are, snooping around like a—"

"What? Detective? News flash, Sarah, snooping around is in my job description."

"But you weren't supposed to be here! Rehearsal ended ages ago! And I didn't want anyone to see you, so..."

"Oh, no, do not go there. Do not turn what you did into some twisted story about trying to protect me from the public eye."

“Twisted? Me? You were the one who shot at me, and may I add that it was unprovoked? I am taking your badge number...”

“Hey, Sarah, cool off right now or you can do it in the cooler,” Tunney barks. “I’ve got Keller’s badge number. I’m her supervisor, remember? I’m not sure I wouldn’t have pulled my gun, too.”

“I cannot believe you are taking that hotheaded, mannish detective’s word over mine. I saw her eyes. I knew what she was thinking. She was going to accuse me of multiple murders on sight, and...”

“So what if she was? You are on the suspect list, and we have over five witnesses who just saw you assault her. You’d better come on downtown. You play nice and I won’t use my cuffs.” Tunney steps forward and begins reading Sarah her rights.

I should let him take her. After all, she deserves it. But something stops me. She may very well have a connection to the murders, but I know she’s not our perp. And she is right. For a minute there...oh, all right, for a long time...I was ready to accuse her if the slightest thing went wrong. And as my parents always put it, how would I like it if somebody treated me that way? I may not have been to church in years, but back when, Mama and Daddy made sure I went to Sunday school, and that lesson on the Golden Rule is coming back to bite me.

“Wait, Sergeant. I don’t want to press charges.”

Tunney cusses. “Keller, do you have mild retardation? She could’ve put you in the ER!”

“True. But I did think for a minute there that she was the perp, or at least an accomplice, and even though I didn’t say it, I—“

“Oh, for the love of Mike, Keller. That’s called circumstantial evidence. People get convicted on its basis all the time.”

“Yes, but does that make it right?”

Tunney stares at me, and I’m sure I’m about to be cussed out. But then he sighs and steps back. “All right, you win. Miss Goodson, you’re off the hook for now. But be warned, from now on, Keller and Schmidt aren’t taking their eyes off you.”

“And neither am I,” Gil says. “Sarah, you’re on probation as of now. If not for your history here and the fact that I can’t get a new AD on short notice, I’d fire you.”

“And I’d do it anyway,” growls my supervisor. “How did I get thrown in with such idiots? Now, all you pansies get your butts out of here. Schmidt, stay with Miss Goodson, make sure she doesn’t pull any stunts. Montgomery, I suggest you drive Keller home. I don’t want lawyers showing up trying to sue ‘cause I let an injured officer drive herself and she veered off the road.”

“What is your boss’ problem?” Gil asks later. I’ve given him my address and he’s headed to 1351 Evergreen Street, face taut with frustration as he bypasses a black Ford.

“Darned if I know. Oh, I mean...”

“It’s okay. I’d like to give the guy a piece of my mind myself. Even when he’s treating you decently, it’s with selfish motives. I doubt he’d care if you got killed on one of his cases.”

“Oh, no, he’d care. Tunney worships the media and what it thinks. The thing is, the media’s all about political correctness, and I’m Tunney’s proof that he’s on the right side of social law.”

“So in other words, you’re a chip. A pawn.” Gil rolls his eyes. “Inexcusable, but I admire you for hanging in there. You’re quite a lady, Maria Keller.”

I give in to my urge to flirt. “And you’re my personal proof that chivalry isn’t dead.”

“Thanks, but you flatter me.”

“No, I don’t. I call it like I see it. I wish...” I bite my lip.

“What is it? What do you wish?”

I crack my knuckles three times in a row. I know what I want to say. I wish we didn’t have to keep our friendship at this level. I wish I could get to know him better. I wish I could really flirt—tell him how handsome and chivalrous he truly is, in a way that would make his toes curl in those polished wingtip shoes. I wish he could sit and listen to me for hours, know every skeleton in my closet, know that my weaknesses are part of the Maria Keller package, and say he loves me anyway. I wish I could be there for his kids and show them a life that’s not all about reward and punishment, even though right now, that’s basically what my own life is.

But I can't do any of those things, and neither can he. There is a huge obstacle in my way, and it's not any of my secrets. Oh, no, it's not nearly as dirty as those. That obstacle is Jesus Christ, the same guy who condemns everything I say, do, and think. And because Gil is committed to Jesus, he'll eventually want to condemn me, too.

If that's what you think, you truly do not know me.

I glance at the car ceiling. *Please, Jesus—if that's you talking—don't start with that. I know the truth. That image of gentle, kind Jesus is just for little kids in Sunday school. Once you get to be my age, you're old enough to understand. You might be able to forgive what I've done, but not what I am.* The voices of former foster parents back up my thoughts.

Maria, true ladies of God do not chatter incessantly. Your constant need to express your own opinion proves how selfish and unteachable you are.

Maria, theater is not an acceptable pastime. You're feeding an unhealthy desire for attention.

Maria, you don't get a choice in this matter. We go to church in this family.

Maria, how dare you insult former foster families? You should be grateful they were willing to provide for you.

Maria, maybe you should ask God why your parents are no longer here. If you ask me, you had growing up to do and a lot of lessons to learn.

Maria, you'd better watch what you're saying around some of the people in this town. The last thing I need is for others to think a police captain can't control his own kid.

The words are almost too much. I put my hands on my shoulders and tuck my chin into my chest like I'm folding myself up. It's a game I used to play with myself as a foster kid. *I'm invisible...invisible...if they can't see me, they can't hurt me...*

But you're not invisible to me. I can see you, and whether you know it or not, you want to see me for who I really am.

I sigh. *Okay, Jesus, we'll play it your way. If I really want that, how do I go about getting it, hmmm?*

I can almost see him wink. ***Start with what you have. Ask Gil.***

Okay, I'll try that. Big breath, and... "Hey, Gil?"

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

"May I," he teases me.

"Okay, may I?"

"Yeah, sure, anything."

"Okay. Why is being a Christian so important to you?"

He blinks and clears his throat. "Ah...good question. A very good question."

"You don't know?" Why am I so disappointed?

"No—yes. Yes, I do, but it's not something I can explain while driving."

"Oh, that's okay. You don't have to give me the whole plan of salvation. I know that part.

What I don't know is why you're a Christian, outside of wanting the get out of hell free card. Could you kinda sum it up in a sentence or two?"

He chuckles. "Wow. No one's asked me to do that since college English. Let me think...all right, try this. I am a Christian because it's my only guarantee of Heaven, but more than that, it's my guarantee of unconditional love and friendship. Humans are great, but they're not always available or helpful when I miss Anne, or wonder how to handle a situation with my parents or kids or at work."

"Yeah, I know. Humans can be downright flaky and mean. But..." I bite my lip again. Gil's explanation helped, but I feel like there are holes. Not that it's his fault. I'm just not good at the religious stuff. But maybe...

"Gil, could I come to church with you? I mean, not with you, but like in the same building? Maybe the same pew?"

He nearly swerves off the road. "W-what?"

"Oh, c'mon, Gil. I'm not a total heathen. I have been to church before, just not in a long time. And I...I..." Do I dare tell him what goes through my mind when I wake up some Sundays?

"I miss it sometimes."

"But couldn't you go to your cousins' church?"

“You don’t want me to? Why?” But then the truth hits me, and I spear him with my eyes. “Gilbert Montgomery, are you afraid I’m just asking questions about God so I can date you? Because let me assure you, I like you a lot, but that is not the case. Yes, you helped me get to this point. You’re one of a handful of Christians I’ve met who didn’t turn out to be a total jerk. But I’m mostly asking because I’m so mixed up and messed up I don’t know what to do anymore. Between the case, and Tunney and Rawlings, and Sarah, and you...I need help.”

He breaks down my defensiveness with the battering ram of his kind eyes. “Then I’ll make sure you have it. And yes, you may definitely join me for church. I was just surprised you didn’t want to go with Monique and Meg.”

“Yeah, well, I tried it a couple times right after...you know. I tried sharing my story and reaching out for help at this women’s Bible study, and all of a sudden, I wasn’t Maria. I was just that poor little girl who got raped. And plus, Monique and Meg are so anxious to see me walk the aisle, they take any little bit of interest as a sign that I’m one talk away from full conversion. Bless their hearts.”

“Do I detect a Texas twang there?”

“Why, yes, ah do b’lieve so. What can I say? Luke and Jasmine’s church was typical Baptist. Swaying choir, sweaty preacher, fried chicken in the fellowship hall afterwards—I used to wish just once they’d break with tradition and serve pasta or fish—and old folks clucking, ‘bless her heart.’” I laugh.

“Sounds like the exact opposite of the church I grew up in. We didn’t move here until I was around eight. Before then, we went to a big Anglican church in Raleigh. You’d have hated it. So solemn and dry people brought thermoses of ice water even when the sermon wasn’t on hell.”

“So you do have a sense of humor!” I’m cracking up.

Gil grins wickedly. “Yeah, Reverend Whitcomb’s sermons were like tennis. Watch Jesus and Satan go at it for an hour, knowing who’s gonna win, and when it’s over, everybody goes home happy. When we asked the blessing at lunch, ‘Lord, we are truly grateful’ had a whole new meaning.”

“Stop it! My stomach hurts!”

“And Communion...” Gil has no intention of stopping. “First time I took it, I thought, ‘hey, cool—these crackers are so stale, they’ve gotta be from Bible times. Maybe we’re gonna have a guest appearance from Moses!”

“Ahhh! Gil, seriously...”

“Okay, I’ll behave. And again, you are more than welcome on Sunday. New Life Community Church. The service my family and I attend is at nine-thirty, and we have several Bible studies afterward if you’re interested.”

I shake my head. “One step at a time.”

“Of course.” Gil pulls into my driveway. “Let me walk you to your door.”

“Oh...oh, no. That letter opener thing’s just a scratch.”

Gil frowns. “It’s more than that. Besides, your walkway is brick and your front steps have no railing. Humor me, please.”

“Well, since you asked nicely.”

“Come on, then. Easy does it there...” Gil doesn’t take my arm, but hovers just behind my elbow, as if to assure me he’s here if I trip. I roll my eyes skyward. I have got to get over thinking of this guy as my prince. Oh, not that I think he’s another rapist, because even I, with my uneasiness around men, know better than that. But I fell for the prince act before, and...

“Careful!” I realize my shoe caught on a brick, and Gil is steadying me. “There, now...”

“Maria!” Meg’s out of the house so fast I know she had to be spying at the window. “What happened tonight? We were worried...oh!” She’s noticed my bandaged knee. “Good heavens! Monique...Monique, get out here, quickly!”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, Meg, would you calm down? Maybe you should be the one in theater. If you’re this freaked out now, I hate to think what you’d be like if I ever took a bullet...oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...” I backtrack when I see Meg’s face. She hates to hear about the gritty side of my job. Of course, the argument for that is, what other side is there, but what are you gonna do?

“What’s up? Oh, my...Maria, are you okay?”

“Fine, Mo. Just had a little run-in with a letter opener.”

“And I suppose you’d call a third-degree burn a ‘little’ run-in with the sun,” Monique laughs. “If you couldn’t even drive yourself...”

“Hey, don’t blame me. Blame Tunney.”

“Oh.” Monique nods, and Meg visibly calms down. Monique takes my arm and nods to Gil. “Mr. Montgomery, thanks for bringing her home. When Brendan called and said she couldn’t come to dinner because she was hurt...we’re usually levelheaded about Maria’s job, but with the murders and all...”

“I understand,” Gil says. “I should be going, though. Maria, I’ll see you at work tomorrow, and...church on Sunday, right?”

“Right. Nine-thirty sharp.”

“Hey, I’m rubbing off on you.”

“Heaven forbid. But yeah, I’ll be there.”

As I know will happen, I haven’t been in the house for long after that before my cousins pounce on me. Meg is first to speak.

“Ooh-la-la. It looks like it’s finally happened. Maria Keller, who swore she’d never wear the marital ball and chain, is lovesick.”

“Zip it, Meg. I am not!”

“That’s not what it looks like to us,” Monique says. “It looks like you’ve got a thing for Gilbert Montgomery, and that his God is starting to light a spark in you, too. What’s this about church?”

“Nothing! Well, that is, uh...something...” I crack my knuckles a few times.

“Break out the chocolate, Meg,” Monique says. “Looks like it’s time to interrogate our favorite detective.”

CHAPTER 12:

“My head is saying, ‘fool, forget him.’ My heart is saying, ‘don’t let go...’”

-Grease

I know my cousins have tons of questions, but when we sit down a little later, dressed in our pajamas and holding our favorite hot beverages, it’s hard not to think about other things. The three of us have been doing this since we were kids. I remember the last time, when we were nineteen. Meg and Monique came home to Texas for fall break, and our first night together, we had a midnight “tea party.”

I can still see us as we were then. Meg, who came up with the whole idea, in her pink silk, lacy, rosette-studded nightgown, pinky crooked over a cup of café au lait. Monique in a big paint-splattered T-shirt and sweats, with whipped cream from her white chocolate mocha on her nose. And me, in my musical note-patterned pajamas, teasing the other two about how coffee will stunt their growth while I slurp away at my favorite raspberry tea. Everyone pretending she really doesn’t want that last cookie or brownie...doing each other’s hair...watching Disney movies like we’re all still five...talking about how it’s gonna be when I make it on Broadway, Meg gets into the New York Ballet Company, and Monique is the next Andy Warhol, except without the dorky soup cans.

Tonight, it’s as if nothing has changed. We’re all wearing slightly bigger models of the same nightclothes, all drinking the same beverages, and all munching away on Monique’s chocolate spice cookies (plus soup for me, since I haven’t eaten). Except tonight, we’re not giggling at cartoons or talking about dreams bigger than Texas. We’re talking about me and the mess my life has recently become.

“I can’t believe I asked to go to church with him,” I tell the others. “Can you beat that?”

“No, we certainly can’t,” Monique says.

“You’re not mad, are you? That I didn’t want to go with you?”

“No,” Meg says. “We understand. We’re too close. You can go to any church you want with our blessing, and if you hate it, we’ll still love you.”

“Thanks, Megs,” I say, using the name I haven’t called her in years. Meg smiles, but Monique looks bothered.

“Mia?” she asks. “What is it?”

I know I better tell the truth. Monique and Meg are the only ones allowed to call me Mia, just like we only call each other Megs and Mo. And we only use those names when things are dead serious.

“I don’t really know,” I say. “I do, but I don’t. It’s...well, one, Gil’s a Christian, and even if I do go to church, and even if I converted, I’m not sure if that could fix the religious differences between us. After all, I’d always be a different kind of Christian, and I’m not sure how that would go over with him, or his folks. They seem so prim and proper. Two, he’s a widower, and apparently, Anne and I were miles apart on the wife spectrum. Three, he and I are complete opposites. Four, he’s my partner’s best friend, which means if something went wrong between us, Schmidt and his family would be caught in the middle, and Schmidt would choose Gil, which means I’d lose his friendship and respect. I love Schmidt. Not that way, but you know. I don’t know if I could take it if he and Dorothea walked out on me.”

“Oh.” Meg nods. “Come here, sweetie.” She pulls me forward, and she and Monique hug me. Meg starts mumbling in Frenghish, and I can tell she’s praying. Monique must be too, from the way she’s making “hmmm” noises in her throat and whispering “yes, yes.” Fortunately, just before it gets freaky, Monique pulls back.

“Mia,” she says, “you should call Aunt Jasmine. She’ll know what to do better than we will.”

“No, Monique. The minute I tell her it’s got something to do with a man, she’ll think I’ve fallen for another Chandler. She always suspected he...and she’ll just be angry.”

“I don’t think so. Come on. I know you miss her and Uncle Luke.”

“I won’t argue with you there.” Because I do miss my adoptive parents. The last time I saw Luke was at my academy graduation. But we didn’t really talk, and when he tried to hug me, I

couldn't let him because of the rape. He assumed that meant I hated his guts and walked off. Debra Fortney, a classmate who'd been my friend and mentor through the eighteen weeks of training, saw the whole thing. She took me where nobody could see and let me cry for three hours straight. As for Jasmine, I haven't seen her since just before I left. So I get up my nerve, go to the phone, and dial. One ring. Two. Three...four...five.

"Hi, you've reached Luke and Jasmine. We're sorry we missed you. Leave a message and we'll call back as soon as we can. Look forward to hearing from you."

"Leave a message," mouths Monique.

"Hi, Luke, Jasmine, it's me. I..."

I slam down the phone. "I can't."

"What can we do?" asks Meg.

"Just pray for me."

"We always do," Monique says.

"Thanks. Listen, I'm dead on my feet here. I think I'll head up."

"Will you be okay?" Monique asks.

"Sure. And listen, thanks for doing this. It feels good to be a girl."

"Come on, Keller, quit acting like a girl."

Yup, you guessed it. It's Sunday morning, and I'm standing in the parking lot of New Life Community Church. The service doesn't start for another half hour, but I was so nervous I got up, got ready, and drove here early just to cut down on adrenaline. I'm dressed in a church-appropriate getup. Red blouse, black skirt, black bolero jacket with faux diamond buttons, black boots, and my hair in a French braid, courtesy of Meg. But for all the confidence I feel, I might as well be in rags. The force's Cinderella? Right. The church was the place that made me stay up to my eyebrows in my own dirt.

I look up. "God, I don't think I can go in there. I know I promised, but..."

“Miss Maria!” calls a familiar voice. I look up to see Clayton waving at me and force myself to move away from my safe spot leaning against my car. “Hey, buddy. Where are the others?”

“Oh, Sophie and Des had to go potty. Dad’s with them. Hey, you wanna come meet my friends? We get to play on the playground before big church starts.”

“Sure.” How scary could a bunch of kids be?

Not scary at all, I’m relieved to find out. In fact, Schmidt’s kids are among the group, and once they introduce me around, the others seem eager to get to know me. At one point, nine-year-old David Schmidt says,

“I wish you could come to school with us, Miss Maria. You don’t act like a girl. Well, you are a girl, but you wouldn’t like, make us play tea party and jump rope through our soccer games.”

I laugh. “Well, I do love tea, but you’re right, I don’t play tea party. However, y’all happen to be looking at the jump rope champion of Lone Star Elementary School.” First foster home, San Laredo, Texas. Jumping rope and doing math problems, both somewhat repetitive things, drowned the worst of my grief.

“No way.”

“Way.”

“But that was a hundred years ago,” says Nick Vercetti. “You’re old now.”

“Old? *Old?*” I pretend to be insulted, and David sighs. “Now you’ve done it, man.”

“Indeed you have, buddy. Somebody find me a jump rope, okay? In fact, bring two. We may be able to squeeze in some Double Dutch.”

Within five minutes, we’re all involved in a jump-roping fest, including Sophie and Desi, who ran out in the middle of “Little Dutch Girl”. Some of the kids, the ones who don’t know how or don’t feel confident enough to jump in, serve as chanters, clappers, and rope turners. It’s a good thing the church bell behind us is loud, or we might’ve gone on all day. Not that I’d have minded.

“Five-minute warning,” Gil says from behind me. “I’ve got to take the kids down to children’s church, but I’ll see you inside.”

“Okay, I’ll look for you.”

“We’re usually in about the third or fourth row.” Gil chuckles. “Nice hidden talent you’ve got there.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you kids later, okay? You’d better hurry if you don’t want to be late for your service.”

I’m halfway across the parking lot when I bump into an older version of Gil. It’s gotta be his dad. From what little of I know of the man, he instantly makes me nervous, but I remind myself to keep cool. He can’t pull any stunts in a church parking lot.

“Excuse me. Maria, was it?”

“Yes, sir. And you are...”

“Laurence Montgomery, Gilbert’s father. And you are the detective he mentioned.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Have you managed to solve the murder yet?”

My inner alarm starts going *ding-ding-ding!* “I’m working very hard on that. I promise you, whoever the criminal or criminals are, they will be brought to justice.”

“Such a promise is empty until fulfilled, Maria. Now, I’d like to ask you a question. You are a woman, correct?”

“Yes.” What’s with him? He doesn’t look blind.

“So, am I correct in assuming that the fact you’re living with your female first cousins is strictly based on friendship and business?”

Okay. I don’t care where I am or who he is, I could pop him a good one. But I manage to smile. “Absolutely. Whatever gave you the idea that we were...”

“No offense meant, you understand, miss. It’s only that Gil mentioned you’re from Texas, and in that state, marital relationships between cousins are legal. Again, I’m sorry. No offense.”

You are not sorry, and offense taken! “Yeah, sure. I mean, that’s okay.”

“Hmmm. And the fact that you have to share a house has no bearing on your sense of fiscal responsibility? You are financially stable?”

Okay, no more Miss Nice Girl. “Yes, I am. What I am not, is aware of why you’re putting me through an interrogation right now. Have I done or said anything to make you feel I deserve it?”

“No. Not directly. But my wife and I are concerned about how attached Gil seems to you, and about your behavior.”

“I thought you said I hadn’t...”

“Again, not directly. But playing like a little girl with my grandchildren. Flirting with my son. The way you’re dressed.”

“I’m not sure I understand. Do you see any cleavage? My midriff? Any inappropriate slogans or decorations? I’ll answer that for you—no. As for your other two objections, nothing happened between your son and I that was inappropriate, and if I choose to jump rope, that’s my business. It’s not like I was engaging the kids in a drinking game.”

“No. But your actions do raise concerns with me and my wife, not to mention your apparent lack of religious convictions. To be as kind as possible, Paige and I feel it best if you stay away from our family. I understand you must work closely with my son, but I would rather not see you at his home or around my grandchildren. I don’t think you’re too much of a negative influence, but until I know for sure, I’d like you to abide by my wishes.” He saunters off.

The nerve! The rotten, stinkin’ nerve! In less than five minutes, this...goon-in-a-suit managed to insinuate that I was a lesbian, an inbred Texas hick, a freeloader, childish, irresponsible, and a borderline hooker! I should’ve known! I never should’ve come here. This is just like every other church. I don’t care what I promised, I’m not staying. I head for my car.

Maria, stop.

“No! You want me to know you so bad, you go in that church and tell your high-and-mighty disciple Laurence Montgomery to take his half-baked opinions and stick them where the sun don’t shine!”

I will deal with him. But this isn’t about Laurence. This is about you, and me. I want my daughter back.

Hold the phone. That is *not* what I was taught God's voice sounded like. It's much too understanding and compassionate. In fact, his voice has been like that every time I talked to him. But still...

Please, Maria. I won't make you come inside my house. But I am asking you to, for the sake of your own life.

How can I say no to that?

"Hey, partner!" Schmidt waves me over to the pew where he's sitting with Dorothea and Gil. "I can't believe you got here on time."

"Yeah." It's all I can say because my throat is so dry. "Hey, can a gal get some tea around here?"

"Ooh, sorry, we're not big on hot tea. Coffee or cocoa—will that do?"

"Well, what do ya know? Maybe I'm the one who needs to convert some people. But yeah, cocoa sounds great. Where...oh, that back table? Okay, be right back."

The lady manning the beverage table gives me a genuine smile and handshake. When I mention I'm new, she laughs and says relax—they only take out the snakes on special occasions. I'm chuckling to myself, walking across the room and thinking maybe I really can do this when I bump into someone's chest.

"Ouch!"

"Oh, crumb..." Too late, I realize two things. One, the person I've crashed into is Laurence Montgomery. Two, I just splattered a quarter cup of cocoa on his pinstriped suit. The gray-haired woman on his arm gasps, a gloved hand going to her pink mouth. Great, now I get to meet the wife.

"Miss Keller." Montgomery Sr.'s voice is coated in ice. "What part of 'stay away from my family' didn't you understand?"

I'm a professional at what one of my old choir directors called "thinking on your feet." In other words, I should have some snappy comeback. But all I can think right now is, *Jesus, help!*

Thought you'd never ask. And I have a comeback, almost as if it were whispered in my ear.

“You might have told me to stay away from your family, but Jesus didn’t tell me to stay away from him.”

“Well, I never!” Mrs. M gasps. “Just who do you think you are, young woman?”

Montgomery Sr. looks like he’s swallowed a whole glass of Mama’s lemon juice. “No one to concern yourself with, Paige.” He glares at me. “Fine. But you will not sit with us, nor speak to us.”

“And just where am I supposed to sit, O Great One?” Okay, Jesus. Not so nice, I know. Look, don’t hold it against me, okay? One step at a time, remember.

“Anywhere but in my pew, smart-mouth. You can sit on the floor for all I care.”

“I’ll pray for you,” Paige sniffs.

Okay. That was downright ugly. But I am not responding. I turn on my heel and go...where? Ah, there’s a whole pew open in the back. I’ll explain to my friends later.

The singing starts almost before I can sit down. Despite the more traditional-looking members of the congregation (read: Monstrous Montgomerys) the songs are mostly praise tunes I’ve only heard now and then. I ache to wrap my voice around them, especially the highest soprano notes, or even add a descant the way a couple of women do. I want to somehow tell God that even though I don’t know him, I appreciate the voice he gave me and want to symbolically return it. But a mixture of hurt and shame keeps me seated and silent. All too soon, the pastor is striding to the stage, and I’m praying I can pay attention. I used to flip through hymnals when Mama and Daddy took me to church, because we didn’t have a children’s service. But I doubt I can get away with it now, especially since there is no hymnal. Oh, well, maybe God will give me a break if I daydream. I’m out of practice.

As it happens, I don’t have to worry. Pastor Ken is a great speaker, and his sermon on a woman with a blood disease has me riveted from the get-go.

“If you’ve ever been through a fiery medical trial, you know, at least in some form, what this woman went through. And if you haven’t, picture it. Shelling out so much money to so many doctors, she probably had to fight to afford the basic necessities. Going from physician to

physician, hoping this one would have her answer, only to be let down over and over and slowly lose hope. But you know what I think the worst part of her situation was?”

Well, Pastor, my guess is the blood. As a cop, I oughta know, that's nasty stuff. Takes forever to get out of your clothes. And on the few occasions I've come home covered in it, it's taken a good hour in the tub to feel clean.

“She was unclean,” Pastor Ken says. “No one was allowed to have close fellowship with this woman. She wasn't allowed in God's house because of Old Testament law. She could hemorrhage at any time, and she'd be reminded of the ugly, disgusting side of her disorder. But even all that—I don't think that was the most painful. Focus here, folks. Do you remember what we said she had? A blood disease. She'd had it for twelve years. Scripture doesn't tell us she was born with it. But nor does it tell us she went out and asked for it. Essentially, she was labeled unclean and unworthy for something that wasn't her fault.”

Oh...holy...crumb. I hear someone suck in a sharp breath that's almost a scream. Oh, crumb, that was me!

“I see I'm talking to somebody.” The pastor's face and voice are impossibly gentle. And the next second, he's coming down from the platform.

No. No, he wouldn't. But oh, I want him to. No, I don't...but I do...but I don't...

“Hello. What's your name, honey?”

Oh, why can't I just die now? “I'm sorry. I messed up your whole sermon.” Pastor Ken's the only one who hears me.

“I realize this is unorthodox, and let me assure you, I have never done it before. But you should know that the Spirit prompted me to come over here. So you don't have to worry, because He and I take full responsibility. Now, can you tell me your name?” Pastor Ken asks. He's using the mike, as if he wants the congregation to know they can't blame me for this. But...

“I'd rather not say.”

“That's okay. Jesus knows it, so I don't have to. But I do have to tell you this, sister. Whatever you're carrying around that has made people label you unclean, whether it was your fault or not...”

"Some of it was," I feel compelled to say. "Some of it was me being incredibly stupid. But some of it wasn't. Not that it matters. No one will forgive me."

"Wrong, sweet sister. Jesus will. I promise."

"Well, I've met a lot of Christians who lie, but no pastors yet. I'll..."

The *Mission: Impossible* theme rips through the church, magnified by the pastor's microphone. Crumb, I forgot to turn off my phone. Maybe if I don't answer...

"Hi there, you've reached Maria Keller. As you can guess, I'm not here, but if you leave a message, I'll get back to you, unless of course you're a telemarketer or one of my idiot colleagues playing a joke, in which case don't bother. Over and out."

"Keller, does this sound like an idiot coworker to you? Pick up your phone!" Tunney yells.

Oh, why not? The whole service has already gone to pot. I turn and run out the back door.

"Sergeant, what is going on? I am in church!"

"A likely story, Keller, but I don't feel like probing it now. Wherever you are, get out of there and get to the Stage Door on the double. You heard from Schmidt today?"

"Yeah, he's in church, too."

"Well, you two drop your Bibles and pick up your badges. We've got an urgent call from the forensics team that was brought in to investigate the Richmond murder. They're at the Stage Door right now. Move it!"

CHAPTER 13:

"I hate men. I can't abide 'em even now and then..."

-Kiss Me, Kate

I don't know how I get to the Stage Door without wrecking my car. I'm so keyed up from the whole church incident, I'm surprised one of my former patrol-mates doesn't pull me over for reckless driving. When I reach my destination, I almost wish one had.

"Keller, you have pulled some doozies in the time I've known you, but this one takes the cake," Tunney says. "Thanks to your voicemail, New Life Community Church has turned into exactly what I didn't want—a complete media circus. I've already had to kick one reporter out of here for insinuating that I discriminate against religious cops by not letting them have Sundays off. How dare you let your stupid phone go off in church?"

I take a deep breath. After what I've just been through, I'm not about to take Tunney's mouth. "That may be, sir, but number one, we are at the Stage Door right now. Number two, you have commandeered Sarah's office without her knowledge or consent, which I can tell you from experience she is not gonna be happy about. Number three, this whole building can hear you, which my mom always taught me was completely undignified. And number four, reporters usually want truth. If you had given them that, maybe..."

"When I want your opinion, I'll ask for it, missy. Now, I want to know, who put you up to it? Was it Schmidt? Greenwood? Or were you just sick of your boss being a big old meanie and decided to get a little revenge?"

"Sir, no! I swear, I didn't know."

"That's right, Keller. You don't know. You don't know anything except that you want to protect your own skinny neck. And with that selfish motive, you'll do anything to put the rest of this team in a bad position."

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it, why don't you just fire me?"

"Nice try, missy. No way. But I will tell you the truth. The one and only reason I don't fire

you is because I need you. See, you're not a cop. You are a brownie points chip. You're my living proof I'm following affirmative action. I kick your butt out of here, I become an evil, uncaring jerk in the eyes of this town. And I'm not gonna let some skinny, show-tune-singing, flaky, irresponsible, pathetic excuse for a detective cost me my public respect."

"And what about the respect of your subordinates, sir? What about your self-respect? Did you ever have that?"

"Shut up, Keller," a new voice says. Rawlings is on the scene as fast as his bulk can carry him. "The boss doesn't take sass, and I won't, either."

"Hey, since when are you..."

"Since now." Rawlings turns to Tunney. "Sir, if I may make a suggestion?"

"Make it."

"I suggest you dissolve Keller's current partnership. Schmidt's let her get away with murder, no pun intended, and as a result, she's the equivalent of a spoiled brat. Plus, you have to take into account that half of the media circus is Schmidt's fault. If he weren't a Christian, and if he hadn't made Keller his little evangelism project, this wouldn't have happened."

"That's a lie! Schmidt didn't invite me. If you wanna know, I invited myself."

"I don't care, Keller," Rawlings says. "No one in this division does. And if I have my way, you won't be able to sucker Schmidt or anyone else into caring. You'll be working with me, and you'll learn real quick what your place is in this division. Furthermore, you'll stay in it."

"Sir, are you hearing this?" Schmidt asks from his place behind my chair. "You have to know how he treats her, you..."

"Stay out of this," all three of us say at once.

"Sir, let's cut the touchy-feely stuff," Rawlings says. "You're a logical man. You've seen sassy rookies before. They're not bad cops, per se, but they don't need sympathy and friendship. What they need is to be, shall we say, broken."

I clench my hands to keep myself from shaking. Oh, crumb. Oh, crumb. Tunney wouldn't do this, right? He'd see Rawlings' real intentions. Or would he? I remember the conversation I overheard, and what Tunney said about the friendship between him and Rawlings. Oh, man, I'm

toast. I switch into prayer mode. *God, help me. If Rawlings gets his way, he'll hurt me—really hurt me, and no one will stop it. Please.*

This time, God doesn't answer, but just as I finish praying, I remember what Tunney said about the media. A-ha!

"Sir," I begin, my voice cold and calm like it is when I deal with a hostile suspect, "I advise strongly against this. You mentioned you don't want a media circus. Well, let me put this clearly. What is going to happen when the only female cop you have, one who is working herself to death to solve a rash of murders, reports to the media that she's being forced to work with the very man who has tried to drive her away through insults, intimidation, innuendo, and who knows what else? What's going to happen when said cop reports that her supervisor saw this and turned a blind eye?"

"Oh, so you're threatening the boss now?" Rawlings says. "Honestly, Keller, you really are a brat. Somebody ought to make you spend the weekend in jail. Maybe that would teach you how to act."

"And somebody oughta have your butt kicked off this force," Schmidt growls. "One more word and I don't care if I did just leave church, I will sock you so hard..."

"Will both of you shut up!" Tunney breaks in. He waits a minute and points a finger. "You two, out. I want a word alone with Keller."

He wants what? I watch Schmidt and Rawlings leave, barely able to register the fact that they're still going at it under their breaths. I hope Schmidt does sock Rawlings, and clear to Timbuktu at that. It might be the last bit of pleasure I have, because I am most assuredly a dead woman. I bite my lip so hard the skin cracks, and Tunney swears.

"Keller, will you cut that out? You're a cop, not a slave. Here." He hands me a Kleenex. "Blot. We've got enough blood to worry about."

"Th-thank you, Sergeant. Listen, I know how upset you are, but really, I didn't..."

"Shut your mouth and listen up." He sighs. "Congratulations."

"For what?"

“Beating me at my own game, kid. I’ll admit, when you first came in, I was hoping one week with me would send you running back to Davenport. It was the only way I could keep myself safe.”

“Excuse me?”

“Okay. I am gonna tell you something I have never told any other cop in this town. And I will also tell you that if I hear you told anybody, even Schmidt, you are fired. You ever hear of a cop named Evelyn Hausten?”

I reach into the messy file cabinet that is my memory. “Oh, yeah. She was on the force back in the ‘70s, right? Cherry Creek’s first female cop? As in, Hausten Street?”

“Yeah. And she was also my partner.”

“Say what? I mean, um...”

“Go ahead, be shocked. Doesn’t bother me. Look at me, Keller. I’ve got at least thirty years on you. Gray hair, doughnut gut, the whole shebang-bang. And truth is, I’m still old school. Women in the force—it don’t sit right with me. A lot of other things don’t, either. But this was the ‘70s. Things were changing. I was young. I wanted to be in on it. Be a revolutionary, spark something, be a hero. Kinda like you. So when everybody else made Evie miserable, I volunteered to team up with her. It paid off. Evie was a sweet kid. Spunk out the wazoo, like somebody else I know. ‘Course, she could organize better than you, and she didn’t flap her gums near as much. Couldn’t sing, either. But that’s not the point.”

“It went well for a year, and, long story short, we got involved in a big drug bust. Some crackhead blew Evie’s cover, and before I could turn around, she got shot. Died right in front of me.”

He couldn’t have shocked me more if he told me he had terminal cancer. I take a minute to pull it all together in my head. “Man. That explains a lot. So...so that’s what this was? Because of her, you’ve spent the last six months punishing me? With all due respect, sir, that is low. That is criminally low.”

“You don’t think I know that? Honestly, Keller, what would you have me do, bring in every Jane Doe who wanted to wear a badge and start Mary Kay parties after hours? Evie Hausten was

my friend, Keller, just like you and Schmidt. You think for one minute I was gonna let another female officer go down on my watch? I didn't want to. But no, those politically correct pansies down at Internal Affairs insisted. Blast it, Keller, what was I supposed to do?"

"Give me a fair chance. I understand sir, and I have nothing but compassion for you. But at their core, your actions were mean and selfish. And I think you know that."

Tunney's face is blank. "I will neither confirm nor deny. But one question. Are you leaving or staying? If you stay, you will stick it out with me. We will pretend this never happened, and although I will be easier on you, do not expect a 180."

"I won't. But I do expect a serious increase in the amount of respect I get around here, starting with you allowing me to remain Brendan Schmidt's partner. You owe me that much."

"Done. I'll see you in the conference room on the second floor in five minutes exactly."

"What happened in there?" Schmidt whispers. I've told him we're still partners, and he looks like somebody slammed him in the gut with a basketball.

I shrug. "If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

"Okay. I won't pry. I'm just happy you still have a badge and we're still together."

"You and me both." He has no idea how happy. I look around at the other detectives sitting alongside their partners—Adams and Greenwood, Farris and Doyle, and Rawlings and Tunney, who aren't officially partners but go together like lemons and puckered lips. There's something about a police partner relationship that goes beyond just being buddies. Your partner's gotta be willing to save your life. And from the look we just exchanged, I think Schmidt and I know we basically saved each other. Now if we can just save this theater. I sure hope we can. I'm so worried about Gil and the kids—especially the kids. What if Gil's next on the hit list? The thought makes me want to puke.

"Don't worry," Schmidt says as though reading my mind. "We're gonna get this guy. I've got a good feeling about today."

"Holy day and all that?" I ask, but before Schmidt can answer, Sergeant Davenport, who brought in his squad, is up front and asking for everybody's attention.

“Good morning,” he says. “I apologize for interrupting anyone’s day of rest or worship, but as God Himself said, thou shalt not murder, and we’ve got a serious murderer on our hands.” He gestures to my partner. “Detective Schmidt, as lead investigator, will you give a recap of where we stand as of now?”

Schmidt does so, ending with the murder of George Richmond. “My partner was not present due to injury at the time I examined the body. However, my findings and the autopsy report indicate that George Richmond died of poisoning by ingestion. His system had the same poison amount in it as the other two victims. His body also carries a signature, though not the same one as Tyler West’s. This signature appears to be melted chocolate.”

Sarge holds for the obligatory snickers. “Chocolate. Well, they do say revenge is sweet. Detective Keller, can you confirm that this was a signature?”

I memorized the notes Schmidt gave me back to front, but now, in front of everyone, they’re booking it out of my head. Keep it together, girl, keep it together! “Ah...yes, sir, I can. The smear was approximately the size of the nail polish one we found on West’s cheek, and it was in the exact same place.”

“Any idea why our perp switched from makeup to chocolate?”

Good grief, Sarge, I wasn’t prepared for an open-ended question! I crack my knuckles. “Well, barring the idea that the perp was just hungry that day,” I begin, “I do have a theory. Now, I make it a rule not to play into gender stereotypes...oh, not that I’m a Femi-Nazi, because I’m not, but you know how it is in this job, you get one manicure and suddenly you’re a prom queen instead of a police officer...”

“Keller, make your point,” Tunney warns.

“Right. Sorry, um...nervous. Uh, where was I? Oh...right. Based on the use of makeup and chocolate, both traditionally feminine items, I would deduce that either our perp or our accomplice must be a woman. As to her motives, I can only guess that this woman is power-hungry. By killing off three prominent people at the Stage Door, two of whom are men, she might be trying to tell us that, despite the sweetness usually associated with...I mean, despite the fact

that she..." Crumb, I sound like a bumbling college freshman. When will I ever learn? "Uh, she's just not one to mess with, no matter how harmless she seems."

"Duh," Rawlings mutters, but Sarge quells him with a dare-you-to-keep-talking stare.

"An astute deduction, and quite possibly correct," Sarge tells me. "Because the unchanging amount of poison reveals that whatever's motivating our perp, it's not personal. That is, he—more likely, she—is not choosing victims she already had something against. This is more likely about the theater itself, how it's run, or some such. That's what you guys are here to find out. Now, listen up. In the prop shop, there is a shelf of disturbed props near the outline of Richmond's body, almost as if the perp wanted to stop and admire the scene of his or her handiwork. And an empty packet of Sweet 'N' Low."

"Oh, I get it." I speak up before I remember how many people are in the room to make me look stupid. "And since the poison mimics sugar..."

"That means there are trace elements somewhere in this theater. Kudos points for you," Sarge says, just like he used to whenever I'd make connections like that in meetings. "So what that means, people, is that we need to search every inch of this theater, particularly the third floor, which is why we've brought in extra officers. We'll start on the third floor and work our way down, then up. I want two teams of either detectives or patrol officers, plus one forensics expert, in every room. Listen for your assignments."

Schmidt, Tunney, Rawlings, and I get the music library. The Rawlings part is the downside, of course. But the upside is that Debra Fortney, who got promoted to forensics two years ago, is our assigned expert. She and I knock knuckles, promise to talk later, and get right to work.

Thirty minutes later, I still haven't had any luck. Either this perp is getting smarter or my instincts are way off. I edge over to a shelf, take down a folder, and start going through musical scores. If anybody asks, I can say I'm looking for those trace elements, which I am, but I'm also de-stressing.

I flip the folder open and smile. One of my favorite numbers, "Wouldn't it be Lovely" from *My Fair Lady*, is on top. I start humming and skimming at the same time. The sheet comes up

clear, and I go on to the next one. Hmm...“Learning to be Silent” from *Footloose*? Somebody needs to give this library’s organizational system a serious overhaul, and when I say that, it’s...

“Hey there,” Schmidt says. “Anything?”

I fold back a copy of “The Small House of Uncle Thomas”. “Not yet. Help me. I don’t know what I’m looking for yet, but...wait! Don’t touch that!” I pull my gloves from my pocket—thank goodness I always keep a spare pair in the car—and yank them on with a snap of latex. Even then, I hold the copy of “Cell Block Tango” between two fingers. “Look at that—right there, next to measure seventeen.”

“Where’s measure seventeen?”

“Right there, see? I think that’s it!” I point to what looks like a grain of sugar.

Schmidt leans in, his face going from curious to anxious. “Don’t touch or inhale it. Hey! Hey, Fortney, get over here!”

“Right here,” Debra (I still think of her as Debra no matter what the rules of our division say about using last names) says. She nods when she’s studied the substance. “Ten to one, that’s our poison,” she said. “But what’s it doing here?”

“I don’t know, but I have a theory.”

“Go with it, Keller. Your last theory was good. Just keep the explanation short,” Schmidt half-jokes.

“Okay. The musical scores in this folder don’t match. That is, usually, a music librarian will organize pieces alphabetically by title, composer’s name, genre, or show title. I know. Mama loved to help our music librarian when I was a little girl. But there’s no system to this.”

“And this bothers you?” Schmidt cracks up.

“When it ends up killing someone, yeah, you better believe it does. Besides, I may be a disorganized, flighty Froot Loop, but I’m a Froot Loop who knows and respects her music.”

“Grape, cherry, or lime?”

“Whoa, aren’t we feeling punchy today? Just help me take care of this without disturbing the evidence.”

“I’m there. Hey, go check in with Tunney. He’ll let the others know about our progress.”

My intention is to obey Schmidt's orders, but you know what they say about good intentions, right? Right.

I'm just getting up to go talk to my supervisor when a shadow flashes across my vision. A quick turn gives me the info I need. The person is female, about five-nine, skinny, eyes covered with sunglasses, and dark brown hair I can tell is a wig. Without waiting for Schmidt or Debra to follow, I take off.

CHAPTER 14:

"I don't know how to take this, I don't know why he moves me..."

-Jesus Christ Superstar

"Keller," Schmidt pants from behind me, "you have got to be the craziest cop in this town."

"Either that or one of the best," Debra says. "I can't believe this girl hasn't told you some of her patrol stories. She was really something else. I wanted to be her partner, but it never worked out."

"A fact I still regret, but y'all need to worry about my mental health and my cop skills later. C'mon, we're gonna lose her!" We rush past a bank of orchestra instrument lockers, whip around the corner, and...

"Oof! Oh, crumb..."

Debra helps me up. "Girl, what did I always tell you about running in heels?"

"What can I say? Sometimes you've gotta throw the rule book out the window. She went in the prop shop." A second later, I'm slapping the door open. "Police officer! I demand that you reveal yourself now!"

Nothing. I don't see a single trace of our perp. It's all I can do not to cuss, hit something, or both.

Schmidt notices my frustration and brushes my shoulder with his fingertips. "Wait. Be really quiet. How many people are breathing in here?"

I look at Schmidt like he's lost it, but count anyway. One, two, three...yes! "Yeah, she's here."

"We'll have to split up. You take the right side of the room, I'll take the left, and Fortney, you block the exit. Keep your guns up, everybody."

We nod to each other and head for our posts. My side of the room is crammed with sets, and I make quick work of pushing past them, sweeping aside drapes, and skirting stray nails. Where is that scum, anyway? With no alternative exit...

I spot a half-finished living room set, complete with a functioning window, and get a flash of inspiration. Okay, girl, you better take this easy. Remember, you're in a skirt and heels. Keep your right hand on your gun, use your left as an anchor, and...ah! Up and over we go. Now all I'll have to do when our perp shows up is dash around the side of the set, and I'll have her.

Schmidt's voice, raspy from whispering, crackles over my radio. "Keller, what you got?"

"Zilch. You?"

"Zilch here, too. I hear breathing, but she's throwing the sound. Be careful, because..."

The sound of running footsteps comes from my left. A split second shows me sunglasses. She's headed up a ladder in the corner, taking the rungs three at a time. What's she gonna do, hang from the ceiling? I edge around the set and head up the ladder. Halfway up, I have my answer. There's a balcony up here. Well, not a full balcony. More like a landing, but who cares? I do not do balconies. The last time I was on a balcony was just after the rape. I lost my footing, and officially lost my good name and decent life.

"Oh, Keller, stop it," I mouth at myself. "Now is not the time for a flashback!"

I've got some catching up to do, but I'll manage. One more rung and I can grab her foot. Hang on—crumb, she's already at the top, but this ain't over 'til it's over. I grab my gun. "Stop right there! I've got a gun and I'll use it!"

I don't hear a voice in response. Instead, I hear a series of bumps and scrapes. The next thing I see, perched at the edge of the balcony, with no one visible behind it, is a...

Oh, no way. I have got to be hallucinating.

The murderer is about to drop a ceramic gnome on my head. Looks like my only recourse is to...

May God help me. I jump. The gnome hits the floor, and to throw the perp off, I scream and throw myself down headfirst.

Schmidt and Debra are there in two seconds. Schmidt glares at me. “Keller, I ought to kill you...Fortney, get the paramedics on the phone...Keller, do not stand up, you...”

“No! No, it’s okay—I’m okay. I’m faking it. The gnome’s over there.”

“Oh. That’s a relief. Still, are you completely crazy? What are you trying to do, commit suicide? You just jumped off a ten-foot ladder!”

I hear him, but I don’t. All I can think of is that my partner just said the “s” word, and I’m not talking the one with four letters. I glare at him. “Out of my way. She could still escape.” I make a run for my old spot, but trip over a loose board and lurch forward. Oh, great. I’m now irreversibly trapped, halfway in and halfway out of the window.

“Gilbert Montgomery, this isn’t funny! And would you please tell those blue-suited yokels over there to put socks in it?” I jab my finger at Sergeant Davenport and a few members of his squad, who are having a high old time at my expense. I hope they wet their pants.

“Humor is in the eye of the beholder,” Gil says. “What were you doing here?”

“Catching up on my reading. What’s it look like I was doing, Sherlock?”

“Hey, I’m supposed to be Sherlock. Senior partner privilege,” Schmidt says.

“I’ll senior partner your privilege in a minute. Gil, how’d you get here?”

“Sergeant Davenport called. Said you may have found the murderer and I needed to be there to identify him, so Mom and Dad took the kids home.”

“Yeah. I bet this wasn’t what you had in mind for Sunday afternoon. More like, grilled cheeses, blue jeans, and a trip to the park, huh?”

“Well, yes, but we’ll still get there. In all seriousness, Maria,” Gil asks, “how on earth did you end up stuck in a window?”

“As with everything else around here lately, it’s all the perp’s fault. I’ll explain later, but I’m so sorry I couldn’t...”

“That’s all right,” Gil interrupts. “I’m just relieved you aren’t hurt. Now, let’s get you out of this window. Brendan, help me. Okay...heave, ho!”

“Thanks,” I tell both men.

“No problem,” Gil says. “Does anything hurt?”

“Just my ego, but it’s taken harder hits. C’mon, guys, let’s get back to work.”

We all troop out, and I feel hot, Twinkie-laced breath on the back of my neck. “And so ends another chapter in the Adventures of Calamity Keller.”

I’m about to turn around and give Rawlings a piece of my mind when I hear a chuckle.

“Well, at least she’s free entertainment.”

I sigh. Tunney may have promised me respect, but it’s clear Rawlings is always gonna be his right-hand man.

Later, the other cops are gone, and I’m in my dressing room, trying to sort things out, but it’s not working too well. The silence is so loud I could scream. If there’s one thing I hate, it’s dead air. If I had it, I would slip on my iPod and supplement my thinking with some show tunes, maybe a few calming classical pieces or fun songs from my favorite female country artists. But since that’s not an option, and since I did go to church this morning, I turn to a kind of talking/praying combo.

“God. Oh, God, what’s wrong with me? Why am I letting Rawlings...no, that’s wrong. Even I know it’s wrong. He’s evil. No, I’m being melodramatic...there’s no call for...but I can’t help how I feel, I...well, yes, I can, but...you understand, don’t you? No, impossible. I’m just not good enough. But...oh, God, help me.”

“He will.”

I almost fall off the chair. “Gil, you scared me.”

“Sorry. I just figured you’d come here and I wanted to see if...oh. Did you know you’re bleeding?”

“Yeah. Accidentally bit my lip too hard. It won’t stop.”

“Ah. Here, try this.” He gives me his handkerchief.

“Thanks. Man, we have got to quit meeting like this. Seems like lately, every time I see you, I’m bleeding.”

“Yeah, I noticed. And Maria, it’s not just your body that’s bleeding. It’s your soul.”

“Thanks for the diagnosis, Doc.”

“No, I mean it. You’re trying so hard to be the big tough lady, but that veneer can’t hold up forever. You’re going to have to face who you are and how you really feel sometime. For example, you’re right about Rawlings. He’s evil, and if someone doesn’t do something, you’re going to get hurt.”

“Please,” I interrupt. “Can we not...can we just...not?” I drop my head into my hands for a minute. “I feel like it’s been a week, not a day.”

“I know. It’s been beyond tough on you. But you are going to solve this case.”

“I know I am. I’ll make myself do it if I have to. But Gil, there’s something else. Your parents...” I fill him in on what happened, and his lips draw into a straight, skinny line.

“No one has been that ugly to me in years,” I finish. “I knew they were unnecessarily hard on your kids, but why didn’t you tell me...”

“Maria, I’m sorry. I’m sure they didn’t mean it. You have to understand, they’re old, and the Christianity they grew up with is different from ours—er, mine. I even have trouble breaking away from their rules and standards now. What probably happened is that they saw a woman dressed in red, jumping rope on a playground, with a soft Texas twang, and just overreacted.”

I sigh. “I do understand all that. What I don’t understand is...Gil, you’ve got to know. They’re treating your kids like—well, like miniature felons, and it’s not right. The night I came to your place...”

“Yes, I know. That was a bad night for everyone concerned. And yes, I do know that Mom and Dad’s discipline can be, um, excessive. But it’s as I told you, they are not the easiest people in the world to stand up to, especially considering everything they’ve done for me. They never abused me. They gave me food and clothes, made sure I showed up in church, and gave me all kinds of opportunities—soccer leagues, Knowledge Bowl, acting lessons—well, Dad didn’t approve of that at first. Said it wasn’t a proper pastime for a boy. Still, they...and if they hadn’t been there when Anne died, I’d have died, too.”

“I can empathize there,” I say. “My social worker, Mrs. Ravensworth—I called her Ms. R for short—she kept me from drowning in my own grief. But Gil, you’re a thirty-two-year-old man.

Surely you could find some way to...to gently remind your folks about the Golden Rule they succeeded in teaching you.”

Gil studies me for a minute, looks up, and back to me before nodding. “You’ve got a point. All right. I’ll talk to them. And hey, you just broke open a huge lead. You should be celebrating, not moping in here. Why don’t we celebrate together? Not as a date, just as a...well, a celebration. This is my theater you’re saving.”

“Really? You still want to be seen with me?”

“Of course. I was going to take the kids to the park, and they have a tennis court. You and I could play...you do play tennis, don’t you?”

“Not since high school PE, but my muscles probably remember how.”

“Okay. So what do you say we do that, go to the mall for awhile—the kids all enjoy window-shopping—and grab some lunch?”

I hesitate, but only for a minute. “I’d love that.”

“Why didn’t you warn me you were lethal?” I laugh an hour and a half later. Gil has slaughtered me in three out of three tennis matches, and I’m shaking my head in disbelief over how rusty I’ve gotten at this game. On the other hand, it’s worth it to see straitlaced, perfectly pressed Gilbert Montgomery sweaty, rumped, and in a T-shirt and khaki shorts. Man, he looks hot...hold it! Down, girl! You have no business caring what he wears, even if it’s a kilt or...or lederhosen! But the thought of Gil in lederhosen makes me giggle.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.” I force myself to think about corpses and caskets so I’ll frown. “Seriously, though, great game. You’re a natural at this.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Oh, come on, I’m terrible.”

“No, you’re not. Your athleticism impresses me.” Gil chuckles. “I was so timid and afraid of failure in school, the closest I got to sports for a long time was a Knowledge Bowl team.”

“Meg did that in school, too. It never interested me, and Meg tried to get Monique to do it, but she wouldn’t. She’s severely dyslexic, so she doesn’t go for anything where brains matter because she mistakenly thinks she hasn’t got any. But I say you’ve gotta have some mind to wow a whole art school. She’s even sold a few of her paintings.”

“So she didn’t go to college with you?”

“No. She had a tough enough time getting through school with a 3.0 GPA. A lot of the teachers just thought she was retarded, which naturally obliterated any self-esteem she had. By the time we were all ready for college, Monique wanted to leave Texas altogether. She went to Cherry Creek Lutheran University, and once she got through her core requirements, she was one of their best art students. I was thrilled to finally see her happy.”

“But you missed her.”

“There ya go, being Mr. Perceptive again.”

“Well, am I right?” Gil gives me his cocky smile.

“Okay, yeah, you are. I hid it from her, but for a long time, I felt like she abandoned me. I had Meg, and I love her to death, but you know what Meg and I are like.”

“Hmmm,” Gil said. “Chocolate and salsa.”

“Right. We’ve always gotten along, but I’ve never been as close to her as I am to Monique. I said I understood when Monique told me she was leaving, and in my head, I did. But I figured, college kids are supposed to be more mature, aren’t they? They wouldn’t make fun of her the way the kids did all through school. And if they did, I’d be there for her. After all, I was the one who beat up Bobby Judd in sixth grade. It was partly because he started in on me about being an orphan, but it was more because he said Monique couldn’t read and needed to go back to kindergarten.”

Gil loses it laughing. “You—you did what?”

“Yeah. I got a scraped knee and a broken nose.” I tap the bridge of my worst feature.

“He, on the other hand, got two black eyes, a busted lip, scraped elbows, and a year’s worth of teasing for ‘getting wailed on by a girl.’” I laugh. “Monique was grateful, which was what kept Luke and Jasmine from being too rough on me, except that Luke gave me this big lecture about self-

control and setting a good example as a policeman's daughter. I think he knew deep down he'd have done the same thing. We're a lot alike."

"It sounds like you miss him."

"Yeah, I do. I miss them both a lot. Sometimes, it physically hurts. It's like I've lost four parents, not two."

"Maria?" Gil's voice is soft. "You never told me why you don't speak to them."

I shrug and look up for a cursory check on the kids. Clayton's still on the slide, and Sophie and Desi have moved from the swings to the jungle gym. I clap for the girls' attention. "Sophie...Sophie! Not that high, please...you might fall. Thank you!"

"You're avoiding the subject," Gil says.

"Okay, yeah, I am, but..." Do I dare tell him? Yes, I think I do. "Gil, it's time for you to know who you're really hanging out with. Determine if you want me around these precious kids you're trying so hard to raise right."

"Maria..."

"I was accused of trying to commit suicide," I burst out. "Senior year—the year of that mess with Chandler—I was the lead in the musical, but I was also taking a killer English class. It made me nervous, the show made me nervous...what it comes down to is, I failed my midterm. And by then, the Chandler thing had gone down, and I was so lost and angry and depressed and scared, I...well, I went to the theater building to think. There was a balcony in one of the rehearsal rooms that was my retreat. But I was wearing heels, so I took them off and climbed up there in stocking feet. Huh, like that was any smarter."

"You fell?"

"Yes. But see, before that, I was in my dorm room, and I did write a suicide note that specifically said I'd jump off the balcony. For five crazy minutes, I wanted to do it. Forget I'd ever been Maria the orphan, Maria the reject, Maria the mistake. But—I don't know. I'd taken my pin off and saw it on the dresser. It made me think of Mama... and I couldn't. So I threw the note away. But I didn't rip it up. So back on the balcony, I was in my stocking feet, and just as I got to the top, my hand missed the railing and I got thrown off balance. I fell, I was unconscious for I

don't know how long, and the next thing I know, I'm in a hospital room and Jasmine's got the note."

I'm prepared for Gil to scoop up his kids and run. I'm prepared for him to call me a bunch of names and condemn me to hell. I'm prepared for him to drag me to the hospital for a psychological evaluation. What I'm not prepared for him to do is frown and say,

"Your hair," before brushing stray strands back from my face. No one ever did that, not even Chandler. He'd have just told me to quit being a slob and pull my hair up. But Gil is using his fingers to brush it away, and then using his palm to barely caress my left cheek. And my body is not screaming at me to freeze, push away, hit him, or run. I'm trying to process that when he cups my chin and brings it up so we're looking each other in the eye.

"My Gumshoe," he says. "My sweet, spirited girl. I am sorry, so sorry, that any of this happened to you. What can I do to help you heal?"

What kind of question is that? Well, a sweet, gentle, wonderful one of course, but...

"I don't know. I honestly don't know. Unless you can go back in time and shake some sense into the young, stupid, twenty-two-year-old version of me."

"Sorry. My kids may think I can do anything, but time travel's not on the list. How about we start with lunch? They just opened a new place in the mall. Ever been to a McAllister's?"

"No. How's the food?"

"Unbelievable."

Yeah, just like my life at the moment.

CHAPTER 15:

“Baby, talk to me...”

-Bye, Bye Birdie

A few hours later, Gil and his kids are beginning to have that effect on me again. You know, the effect that makes me forget I'm trying to solve grisly murders, or even that I ever was a cop in the first place. The kids and I are chattering to beat the band—forget what those strict, legalistic, so-called foster parents ever said—and Gil and I are enjoying each other's company, even exchanging meaningful smiles now and then. And by the way, Gil was right about McAllister's food. Their tortilla soup is the best thing I've put in my mouth all week.

“Maria?” Gil asks a bit later. The kids are playing at the indoor playground in the center of the mall. “Can you keep an eye on the kids? I need to run to the costume shop and see if an order came in yet.”

“Sure thing.”

“Thanks. You're an angel. I'll just be down there.” He gestures with his open palm toward the costume shop and heads that way. Meanwhile, I keep one eye on the new book I just bought and one eye on the kids. They wave to me once in awhile, or look over their shoulders to make sure I'm still there, but they basically seem okay. That is, until I hear nasty, nasal, taunting voices in the play area.

“Look, it's Diaper Desi!”

“Don't say anything to her. She'll just cry.”

I see one offender, a dark-haired little beauty queen type, yank Desi's curls. The other two with her take their cue, and the teasing starts to escalate. I look around for Clayton or Sophie, but they've disappeared into a long plastic tunnel. I stand up, prepared to go in and give these mini-mean-girls what for. But isn't part of the problem that Desi doesn't feel strong enough to fight for herself? I look up. “Should I or shouldn't I?” Who did I say that to, exactly?

The choice is taken away from me when Desi spots me on the bench, runs headlong out of the play area, trips on her shoelaces, falls, picks herself up, and runs into my arms, sniffing.

"I know. I know." Am I crooning? Apart from singing, I never considered myself a crooner. But whether she can fight for herself or not, this girl needs help. She doesn't need to be a little soldier right now. So I turn my back on the mini-mean-girls' stakeout and do for her what I secretly wished somebody, anybody, would do for me. I hold her. I let her cry until she runs out of tears.

"I'm sorry," Desi sniffs at the end.

It galls me that she thinks she's got to apologize. "That's okay, honey. Everybody cries sometimes."

She shakes her head. "Not you."

Ooh. She has me there. "Well...uh, maybe I've just forgotten how. But that does not mean you can't cry. Here, I should probably tie your shoes so you don't trip again...oh, you can do that? Smart girl. Okay, go to it. Ah, good job. Now, can we talk for a minute?"

Desi nods. "Okay."

"Okay. You know those girls?"

"Yeah. They go to my preschool. They're all best friends, and all the girls like 'em."

"So...are you the only one they pick on?"

She sniffles. "Yeah. They call me Diaper Desi, and Crybaby, and one of 'em, Blair—she scares me sometimes, on purpose. If Grandpa's late picking up me and Sophie, and 'specially if Daddy picks us up 'cause he gets off work, Blair says maybe he died like Mommy, or left 'cause he doesn't want a crybaby kid who has accidents."

Oh, really? I crack my knuckles, 'cause if I don't, I'm gonna find that little brat and shake her teeth right out of her head. "Which one is Blair?"

"The one with the black hair." Desi smiles. "You're mad at her, huh?"

"How can you tell?"

She points. "Your whole face is all red and blotchy, and you're biting your lip, like when you talk about bad guys."

“Oh. Yeah, guess I am. Sorry, kiddo. I shouldn’t be encouraging you to get mad at her.”

“I already am. You didn’t do anything bad.”

I squeeze her shoulder. “Thanks, sweetie. Now, let’s think about how you can handle these girls next time so they won’t tease you.”

“I can make them stop?”

“Of course you can. Desiree Montgomery, you are a beautiful, smart, very sweet girl, and you can do anything.”

She beams, but frowns just as fast. “But what do I do?”

“Well...” I think for a minute. “Okay, first of all, I noticed that while those girls were teasing you, you were slumped over looking down at the floor.” I demonstrate for her. “Try this instead. You’ve seen a lot of princess movies, right?”

“Right!”

“Okay, so you do what my choir directors used to tell me to do. You pretend that you’re tall, and you walk up to those girls the way a tall, regal princess would walk. You can even pretend to be wearing a ball gown if it helps. Watch me...okay, now you try. Got it? Okay. The next thing you have to do is talk back.”

“Grandma says I shouldn’t do that. Only bad girls talk back.”

Hmmm. And somebody obviously needs to have a talk with Grandma. But back to Desi. “I don’t mean being a smart-mouth, honey. You shouldn’t say ugly things, because that’s just doing what they do. What I mean is, when they start calling you names and stuff, you don’t just stand there and take it. You look them in the eye and calmly say something like, ‘leave me alone’ or ‘you’re not being nice’ or ‘my name is Desi, not Diaper Desi.’ Then you turn around and walk the other way. You don’t give them a chance to respond.”

Desi nods. “Like this?” She turns away as if one of the other girls is standing there and says, “Don’t call me names. It’s mean.”

“Perfect.”

“But Miss Maria? What do I do if they keep doing it, or pull my hair or pinch me? They do that too, you know. And Sophie gets mad and yells at them, and we both get sent to time-out.”

I nod. "In that case, don't say anything. Immediately walk away and find a teacher. Not Sophie, but a teacher. They're grown up and they are there to help you."

"But that's tattling."

"No, it isn't. It's like if I'm trying to get a criminal to listen to me, and he tries to hit me. I don't handle it myself; I get Mr. Brendan in on it. That's not tattling or whining. That's me saying, 'I can't do this by myself. I'm getting hurt, and I need extra help.'" Okay, so normally, in that simplistic of a situation, I'd just slap the soup out of the perp, but Desi's four.

"Thanks, Miss Maria." She hugs me.

"That's why they pay me the big money."

"Huh?"

"Just joking, Des. So you want to go play?"

"Can I stay with you a little while?"

"Sure." I'd love to see Desi feeling brave enough to really get in the game, so to speak, but one step at a time.

Desi's quiet for a few minutes, and then she looks over my shoulder. "Would you read to me?"

"Oh...sorry. This isn't a book for little girls. But how about if I tell you a story?"

"Yeah, I'd like that. Except...well...could you maybe tell a story about me? Grandma and Grandpa won't 'cause they say I shouldn't want 'tention all the time and stuff. And Daddy won't 'cause he always listens to Grandma and Grandpa."

Sheesh! Who's the kid in this family? And what brand of Christianity do the senior Montgomerys come from, anyway—First Church of the Modern Guilt-Ridden Puritans? Gil and I are going to have to have a serious talk. But that's later. I pat my knee, Desi climbs up, and I begin a story about Princess Desi, who stood up to Wicked Witch Blair in order to rescue the entire preschool kingdom from her meanness spell that was making everyone insult, hit, pinch, and bite each other. Desi pipes in with details about getting help from her daddy, King Gilbert, and her brother and sister. We even come up with the funny detail that once, Princess Desi and Princess Sophie switch places so Princess Sophie "who's braver than me," Desi said, could

sneak into a secret passageway to get the toys and candy Blair made disappear. For somebody who hated English in school, I have to say my creative writing skills are pretty good, even if I am getting an input from a four-year-old.

Desi yawns, and her head finds my shoulder. “And then Princess Desi went home to the castle for a party with her brother and sister, and King Gilbert, and...” She stops. “Oh. King Gilbert doesn’t have a queen anymore.” She shrugs and snuggles deeper into my shoulder. “Maybe next story.”

A minute or two later, King Gilbert himself races up to me. “Maria, I am so sorry. The line was a mile long, and this idiot kept arguing that he was being shortchanged, not to mention the computer ate my...”

“Shhh.”

“What? Oh...oh! Of course. Here, let me take her. Sorry—her sleeping patterns have been erratic since Anne died. Recently, the nightmares came back.”

“No problem. You want me to get Clay and Sophie?”

“No, I’ll do that. After all, I’m the one who stuck you with an impromptu baby-sitting gig.” He shifts Desi to his shoulder just as his cell phone rings. “Hello?”

“Gil, it’s Mom,” I hear through the line. “I just wanted to see if you were all right. What with the hoopla that Maria woman caused...”

“Mom, I’m not discussing Maria with you.”

“Well, you had better. If you ask me, that little hussy is seducing you, probably pulling you away from Jesus...if you want, I can call and tell her in no uncertain terms to stay away...”

The next second, I’ve got the phone. “Hello, Mrs. Montgomery,” I say through gritted teeth. “This is the hussy. And I have only one thing to say to you. I’ll stay away from Gil when and if I feel like it, which may be never, so stick that in your juice box and suck it.”

And the next thing I know, I’m tossing Gil’s cell phone into a nearby fountain.

I ran.

Gil called to me to come back, that he wasn't really mad—but I didn't believe him. The man was a wimp. His parents ruled his life, as did his stupid social conventions. Not that I can blame him, I think now as I drive my car around Cherry Creek. What decent, respectable woman, especially a policewoman, goes around doing something like that? Thank goodness Desi wasn't awake to see, and that the other kids didn't, either. What kind of moron was I to think I could ever be worthy of a wonderful family like that? Worthy of anyone, for that matter? Oops, nope, can't go there. That's what "inspired" me to nearly jump off a balcony and end it all.

Instead, I keep driving. I've got to go somewhere. Not home, because my cousins have plans, and no way am I sitting alone with my thoughts right now. I have to talk to somebody, but who? Then I remember. I make a left-hand turn and drive toward the home of the closest thing to a mother I've had in years. Once I get to her house, I start pounding on the door.

"All right, all right, cool your jets...Keller?" Schmidt's jaw drops. "What is it?"

"I...I..." Crack, crack go my knuckles. "I've just done something terrible."

Schmidt gives me a sardonic smile. "You want me to read your rights here or inside?"

"Oh, no. No, it's not illegal. Sheesh, you oughta know that."

"You're right. Sorry. You just shocked me. You are never emotional. But what's going on?"

"I need Dorothea. Is she here?"

Schmidt nods in complete understanding. "Of course. Come in the breakfast nook and sit down...Dorothea! Dorothea, honey, you've got company!"

"You did what to his cell phone?" Dorothea asks after I explain the whole ugly story.

"I know. I didn't mean to, honest. I just heard his mom on the other end—I swear, she was screeching, the whole place probably heard—and I just...lost it."

"You want the truth?" Dorothea asks. "If you were one of mine, I'd put you on punishment. I don't want to treat you like a cop, but as my husband has probably told you, cops don't lose it."

"They clean up the mess after other people lose it." I drop my head onto the table.

“Yes. But that said...” Dorothea pats my hand. “I can’t blame you. Laurence and Paige have always put a ton of pressure on Gil to be the perfect Christian and act the way the perfect Christian should. That’s half the reason he married Anne. He loved her, but keeping up appearances was also part of the deal. As I’m sure you won’t be surprised to learn, that’s why he gave into familial and church pressure to date Sarah.”

“Oh, there’s a shock.” I take a long drag of Earl Gray. It’s my least favorite flavor, but I figure I deserve it. “He doesn’t seem like his own man, you know?”

“No, he doesn’t, because he isn’t. And that isn’t good, or even safe, for his children. Not to mention him.”

“Then why...”

“Because he’s had it drilled into his head, thanks to his parents and the church, that he owes his parents something. And he does. He owes them honor. But that doesn’t mean he should let them run his life now that he’s an adult.”

“Amen. And...” It’s painful to push the words out. “He shouldn’t let them hurt me. I didn’t do anything to deserve it, and I’m so sick of that.”

“Sick of what?”

“People judging me on the spot. People thinking that because I dress, talk, and act a certain way, I must not be a good person. And Gil should’ve stuck up for me. He says he knows I’m not...not...but he won’t, because he can’t risk me messing up the picture of his perfectly pressed, organized, up-to-the-minute Brady Bunch life.”

Dorothea studies me. “You love him.”

“Yes. No. Not like you and Schmidt—I mean Brendan. That takes time. But I’m beginning to. Otherwise, why would I hurt like this?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Right. But how can I...Dorothea, it’s impossible, because I’m not a Christian. I’ve been trying, and not because of Gil. I want to because I’m mixed up, messed up, and tired of feeling alone.”

“And that’s the best reason to embrace faith. So why don’t you and I take care of this now?”

Oh, man. Oh, crumb. I want to. I suddenly want faith so much my chest hurts. I put my hand against it. “Ow.”

“Are you all right, dear?”

“Yeah. Just...I...I’d love to, but I’m not sure I can. Until recently, God and I hadn’t talked in twenty years.”

Dorothea holds my hand. “I’ll help you.”

“I...” My cell phone rings. It’s a mockery. I pull back my hand. “I should take it.”

“No. Nothing’s more important than this, dear. Your life—your very eternity—is on the line.”

My phone goes to voicemail. “Maria? I don’t know if you’re there or not, but if you are, pick up. This is important,” Monique’s voice says. “Please, please pick up.”

Dorothea nods. “Okay. But the minute you get off that phone, dear, we’re finishing this.”

“Hello?”

“Maria...” Monique sounds like she’s crying.

“Monique? Mo, what is it? Was there a thief? A vandal?”

“No, no,” Monique says. “It’s just...Luke and Jasmine just called. They begged me to get in touch with you.”

“Oh!” My heart slams my rib cage with such force I know I have bruises. My body is Jell-O. “Are they on the phone with you now?”

“No, but wherever you are, please call them.”

“Okay.” I hang up and give Dorothea the quick and dirty details of my prodigal daughter status. “I know it’s stupid, but will you stay while I...”

“Of course. Dial, dear.”

I try, but my hands are shaking so much I keep messing up. “Dorothea, I’m gonna have to give you the number.” I do, and she gives me back the phone with a nod. “It’s ringing.” She turns away and bows her head.

“Hello?”

“L-Luke?”

“Maria.” His voice is the same warm, Texas-laced bass I remember. “Maria, baby. We didn’t think we’d ever hear your voice again.”

I make myself laugh. “You’re not gonna cry, are you?”

“No. We both hate that mushy stuff, remember?”

“Yeah.”

“So, imagine. My favorite patrol officer, a detective. Great job, honey. I’m proud of you.”

Took him long enough. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry Jasmine and I didn’t call back sooner. We’ve been out of town—Kansas City. I was at a conference, and I took Jazz with me. From the time on the machine, you called hours after we left.”

“Oh.” I nod. I remember those conferences. They were usually in the summer, so Jasmine and I would go with Luke and do some mother-daughter bonding while he was in meetings or class. Then we’d all spend the evenings together. “How’d it go?”

“It was pretty good. Lectures weren’t so hot, and the doughnuts were stale, but I coped. And guess who was there?”

“Who?”

“One of your old instructors. Remember Sergeant Langley?”

“Do I ever. Scary lady.”

“Well, maybe, but she did say that secretly, you were her favorite. Wants to know if you still shoot a perfect score.”

“As if I’d settle for anything less. You taught me better than that.”

“I did my best.” Luke breathes in. “Look, Maria, I know the three of us haven’t been close in recent years. But I’d like it if that changed. We don’t know what all happened at Texas A&M. But I do want to assure you that whatever you did, you don’t have to feel guilty anymore, because we forgive you, and...”

“Feel guilty? So even after six years, after I pleaded with you to believe me, you still think I tried to commit suicide? You still don’t trust your own daughter?”

“Maria, there was a suicide note. I ask you, as a cop, what was I...”

“As my father, you were supposed to believe me when I told you about how I changed my mind. How it was an accident, the way I fell. But then, I don’t suppose I could expect that, because really, you’re not my father. My father’s dead.”

“Maria Magdalena Keller, don’t you play that card with me.”

“And don’t you talk to me like I’m twelve.”

“Then stop acting twelve.”

“Oh, now who’s playing cheap cards? Do you have any idea what your favorite patrol officer has gone through since her promotion? I’ll tell you.” I spit out a few incidents. “So if asking to be trusted constitutes acting like a child, then slap handcuffs on me, because I am as guilty as sin. Or should that be, the sin you think I committed?”

“I only wish you were still twelve. Then I could ground you.”

“Oh, you’d love that, wouldn’t you? Somehow, my leaving college, abandoning theater, falling in with a sexist supervisor...that wasn’t punishment enough?”

“You made those choices, Maria.”

“Yes, I did, and I accept responsibility. But you made the choice not to listen to me, and that makes you guilty by association, Captain.”

“I’m not guilty of anything. I acted on what I saw, which was a suicide note. As far as I’m concerned, when you signed that note, you signed your own arrest warrant. You were an adult, Maria. You were old enough to know better than that.”

“And too old to get hurt? Too old to feel alone and desperate?”

“So you could’ve gone to a counselor. There would’ve been no shame in that.”

“No, but I didn’t want some shrink. I wanted you. I needed you. But you were too busy listening to the evidence to hear me.”

Luke sighs. “Well, Maria, as with every other time you and I fought, this is going nowhere, so I’ll tell you what I always did. Call back when you’ve cooled down and are ready to be

reasonable.”

“Ooh, no, not this time. You go find somebody else to be reasonable with, because it sure as shootin’ isn’t me.” And I hang up.

Dorothea faces me, eyes filled with compassion. She opens her arms. “Come here, baby.”

And just like that, I’m a little girl. If I close my eyes, I can tell myself she’s Mama. “Oh, Dorothea. How did I get like this? How did I turn into such a rotten person?”

“Now, you hush with that kind of talk. You are not rotten, Maria Keller. You are broken and hurting, and you have reason. So for once in your life, let someone take that pain away.”

“You mean Jesus, don’t you? I...no. I’m sorry. I can’t. Not now. If he’s anything like Luke, he’ll never want me.”

“Then it’s a good thing He isn’t like Luke. There’s a verse in Isaiah that explains it. Humans expect God to be just like them, but He isn’t. He can’t love you anymore than He already does. But right now, He’s aching and mourning with you, and He wants to show you that love in order to comfort you.”

“I want to believe that, Dorothea. But right now, God seems so far away.”

“Then I will pray He comes close to you, and soon.”

CHAPTER 16:

“Soon it’s gonna rain, I can see it...”

-The Fantastiks

The next morning, I’m still feeling low, so I get up early and head for the theater. Gil gave Schmidt and I keys, so I let myself in the back door, go into a music room, and sit at the piano. At first, I keep my hands poised over the keys like a statue because I don’t know what to play. But then a scene from *Fiddler on the Roof* comes to mind. It’s the one where youngest daughter Chava, who has committed a huge religious no-no by marrying a non-Jew, begs her Papa to take her back. And then the song from the Disney version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* about the outcasts, and the one from *Yentl*, where the title character tells her Papa how much she misses and needs him. I start singing those songs, slowly and softly at first, and then letting myself go all the way to fortissimo level and full vibrato.

A door slams. “Miss Keller, what in heaven’s name are you doing?” It’s Sarah Goodson, and she looks, as Sergeant Langley used to say, madder than a one-legged man at a butt-kicking contest.

“I work here. I can come in if and when I want to.” My eyes dare her to say different.

Sarah laughs. “You don’t work here, and you don’t belong here. You know exactly what you are, and so do I. Now, get out.”

“If anyone should be giving anyone walking papers, it should be me,” I say. “I’m not the one who assaulted a police officer the other night. And as I recall, if it wasn’t for me, you’d be in jail right now.”

“I’ve had just about enough of your sassy mouth, Maria Keller. Your attitude’s going to get you in trouble, and when it does, I will do nothing but laugh.”

“You know, for somebody who looks so fragile, dependent, and angelic, you are one cruel, calculating chick, Sarah. Just answer me this. What is your problem with me? Don’t think I haven’t noticed the vibes you’ve been sending me since day one.”

“Vibes?” Sarah says. “Christians don’t believe in vibes, Miss Keller. And that’s the point. You are not a Christian. Gil Montgomery and his business do not need you.”

“Ah-ha. See, I knew it. This is about Gil. You want him. You think I’m after him.”

“I don’t have to think anything. I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

“So what? It’s up to him to choose who he wants. And I’m just as good a candidate as you.”

“Wrong, Maria. You are not good. You are the furthest thing from it.”

I jab a finger at her. “No way, Sarah. Do not even try it. I am not getting into a catfight with you. But know this. I am sick of people like you telling me to shut up, shape up, get out, and stay away. And let me tell you something, lady. If you continue to push me, you will not like what happens.”

I walk out and drive straight to work for another day of weeding scum out of the criminal underworld. After all, that is where I belong.

“Keller, do you know what time it is?”

I’d normally smile and joke back, but I’m not in the mood. “Yeah, Greenwood, I do. I’m an hour early. Go ahead, say something about the world ending or me being abducted by aliens.”

Greenwood crosses the lounge and tries to touch my shoulder, but I pull away. “Sorry, forgot. But what’s up? You sick or something?”

“I only wish.”

“Can I help?”

“Huh. Not unless you can wave a wand and turn me into June Cleaver.”

“You and Gil having problems?” He laughs at my dropped jaw. “Don’t worry. The whole place knows except Rawlings the Rat, but we’re keeping it on the down low.”

“Even Farris and Doyle? I thought they’d be anxious to blow the whistle.”

“Yeah, well, they’re not blind. They’ve seen how Rawlings pushes you around, and they’re starting to understand he’s been doing it to them, too. They’re pretty sick of the whole thing.”

“Will wonders never cease. But no, we didn’t have a fight or anything. This whole Stage Door case in general’s just gotten a little rocky.”

“It’s a tough one all right. Adams and I don’t envy you. But let’s talk shop. It might help. Any new developments?”

“Not really, unless you want to consider that the body count’s up. Three corpses, all poisoned with some form of tea, and two with a feminine signature on their cheeks. And Sarah Goodson’s conveniently been around since day one, but somehow, I don’t think she’s the perp. But she fits in there somewhere, like she’s helping or protecting somebody. I just wish I knew who the somebody, or somebodies, were.”

Greenwood frowns. “Hey, you’re really down about this, huh?”

I shake my head. “No. Well, yeah. But no...I don’t know.” Because I don’t. How can I explain to Greenwood how much is at stake here? It’s not just that this is my first case and my one shot at proving myself, although that plays into it a lot. Gil and his family are involved, and Schmidt isn’t sure he believes me about Sarah, or at least he wasn’t last time I checked, and... I touch my angel pin. I don’t care how wimpy it is, I wish Mama were here now. She’d make me sit down and have some fake tea—one-quarter tea, three-quarters milk—because she wouldn’t want me all jittery. Then she’d make me eat a cookie, breathe deeply, and tell her everything. And once I did, she’d say,

“Maria, honey-girl, you’re gonna be all right. Just remember, you’ve got me and your daddy and all of Heaven looking out for you. And not every day can be as good as opening night. If you want an opening night, you gotta put up with rough rehearsals. The good part is, if anybody can get through a rehearsal kind of day, it’s you.”

And she’d still say that now, I know. She’d be right too, but it doesn’t help much at the moment. “Listen, Greenwood, I’m just gonna hang out at my desk for awhile. Maybe go for a quick drive.”

He nods. “Sounds like that’d do you good.”

So I head for my desk, slap on my headphones, and stick my nose in the Jane Castleberry I rescued from the trash last time Rawlings invaded my space. About two chapters

later, I decide chocolate sounds good, so I throw my diet rules out the window and reach for a miniature Hershey bar from my private stash. But instead of a bag full of chocolate, my hand hits empty air.

Okay, that's just weird. I know—absolutely know—that I did not eat all that chocolate, and I didn't misplace it, either. I don't dip my hand in often, so that bag never moves. So then what...ah, of course. I smile. That must be it.

"Mornin' Keller," Schmidt says just then. "Hey, you're early. I pity that perp."

"Thanks. Hey, listen, Schmidt, while you're here—you know I have a my-chocolate-is-your-chocolate policy, but I really needed a fix just now, and this is getting out of hand."

Schmidt blinks. "Your chocolate? I haven't been eating it. I'd normally say Rawlings has been here, but you know him..."

"He wouldn't be caught dead in contact with anything I touched." I shrug. "Maybe Adams helped himself. He knows he doesn't have to ask my permission, but he'd want to. Except, he's probably shy, with that stammer and all. Somebody needs to give that guy a confidence shot."

"You're one to talk," Schmidt says.

I sigh. "Schmidt, did it ever cross your mind that there's a reason you're my partner, not my shrink?"

"Yeah, and I know what it is, too. A shrink couldn't handle you," he says.

"Funny. So, we gonna get some work done today or what?"

"Yeah. Fortney called me 'cause she was counting on you running a little late—wait until I tell her what really happened. Anyway, she wanted you to come down to the forensics lab and take a look at the poison report."

"Okay, cool. You wanna come?"

"Wish I could, but Rawlings is gonna be late, so I've gotta pick up his slack."

"What? That guy prides himself on being on time."

"I know, weird, right? Who knows with him? Probably stopped off to pull the wings from a few flies. So Saintly Schmidt is stuck holding the bag."

“Ouch. Been there, done that. Tell you what. Why don’t you go to the lab and I’ll sort through the rat’s nest?”

“No. You of all people should not have to.”

“But I want to. I don’t want to forget where I was a few months ago and turn into one of those egotistical, jerk detectives who steps on people and thinks she’s so hot just ‘cause she can tell how long a body’s been dead.”

Schmidt gives me a funny look. “Or else you just think you deserve to be punished for Lord only knows what.”

“Schmidt, please. I’m trying to be nice.”

“Okay. But don’t forget about your rehearsal this afternoon.”

“It’s already in my mental planner. Tell Debra I said hi.”

“Will do.”

I might have offered to do Rawlings’ grunt work, but I don’t go in without protection. Namely, I sanitize my hands and spray down his desk and keyboard with a miniature can of Lysol I borrow from Greenwood, who freely admits to having mild OCD. Then it’s time to get down and dirty. First stop on the list—oh, why am I not surprised? A form requesting a new vending machine in the detectives’ bureau, to be copied in triplicate and sent to the precinct’s budget department. Yeah, big guy, like the department has extra money sitting around specifically earmarked for your weekly Coke and sour cream and onion chip binges.

And it doesn’t end there. Apparently Rawlings, the same guy who claims to be so much more organized and responsible than me, is up to his eyebrows in unfinished tasks. None of his paperwork is in the proper folder, papers for five different cases are in ten different piles, and none of his paperwork has been signed or dated. Worse, none of his recent case reports are typed. And according to his note, guess who gets to take care of that little carpal-tunnel-inducing detail? Hint—anybody but him.

Yet on the bright side, I tell myself, this should be interesting. As Tunney’s unofficial partner, I bet Rawlings gets the dish on tons of interesting cases. Now it’s just a matter of getting

into Rawlings' computer so I can access Word and get it all done. I have to pop by Tunney's office to ask for the password.

"Count on you to have a bleeding heart," my supervisor says when he hears why I'm doing what I'm doing. But I hear a new tone in his voice, almost like fondness. "C'mon, I'll get you into his system." Back in Rawlings' cubicle, Tunney pounds the keys for a minute, and the welcome screen pops up. "Hey presto."

"Thanks, sir."

"Yeah, yeah, don't get used to it." But I saw that fleeting quarter-smile. Oh, yes, there is a God. Whether said God likes me or not, well...

I'm typing my fingers off an hour later on the next-to-last case report when a bell dings and I hear, "You've got mail."

I know I probably shouldn't. I used to spy on the staff at Mama and Daddy's theater, and that ended in tragedy. I gave up snooping years ago, unless it's sanctioned, like on a case. But this could be about a case, and...

"Stop it, Keller," I scold myself. "Curiosity killed the cop."

Ah, but satisfaction brought her back, says the voice that belongs to my impulsive side.

"Shut up," I tell Impulsive Voice. "You're the same idiot who told me to send Gil's phone to swim with the pennies, remember?"

And yet...

Oh, forget it!

I click the little box, and Rawlings' email list pops up. The highlighted message reads—

Hey, Slick—

What's taking so long? I need this project on my desk ASAP. I am thoroughly incensed that this scum is still waltzing around smelling like sweet cherries. Email or call TODAY and give me a definite date.

-Gold Star

I print the email and give it a closer look. What in the world? My head tells me it's just some cryptic message about a criminal the big brass is after Tunney and Rawlings to get their hands on, or else. But my intuition insists something's up, and whatever it is, it's not a plan for someone's surprise birthday party. I fold the email, slip it into my skirt pocket, and return to my cubicle, where I put it in the back of my own desk. I return to Rawlings' cubicle and forward the message to my account. Then I mark the email "unread" on Rawlings' computer and keep working.

Several minutes later, I'm done and back at my desk, and Schmidt's returned from the lab. He hands me a copy of the poison report. "I'll tell you, Debra Fortney is right where she needs to be," he says. "She works fast. Look at this. No wonder we were so stumped."

I look. "Aconite? Of course. It mimics cardiac arrest, it's odorless and tasteless...it's perfect. Well, not perfect for the victims, but..."

"I get it. Just one grain of it mixed imperceptibly into sugar, and boom! You're dead."

"Ooh." Just thinking about anybody ingesting aconite makes my stomach hurt. "But where would anybody get aconite in this town?"

"You'd be surprised. You ever read that short story "The Glove Cleaner"?"

"One of the few I actually enjoyed in high school English."

"Then you know how innocuous poison sellers and their goods can look. My guess is our man or woman's got a connection with a pharmacist or doctor here in town. Maybe even somebody in the science department at the college. You never know. I think I'll go run a search, see if any of our medically-inclined friends have a rap sheet. I'll let you know what I find. Meantime, just sit back and cool your jets. You've been going full throttle lately, and I can tell from your face you're feeling it. Maybe you should go down to the theater and practice there, just for a change of scenery."

I'm tempted, but decide against it. Going to the theater means seeing Gil, and after yesterday, I...

Forgive yourself. He will. I do.

I look up. "God? Why the interest in talking to me all of a sudden?"

Well, you weren't about to start the conversation, were you?

"Well, no, not usually. But can you blame me? I know I'm nothing but a big disappointment to you. To be honest, I'm afraid if I did talk to you—I mean, for real, and about me—you'd either scream at me and toss me in hell right there or laugh in my face. And I would deserve either reaction."

I can almost hear a chuckle. ***You might be surprised. So what do you say? Why don't you head on down to the theater?***

"But...well, okay, yeah, guess it couldn't hurt. I've disobeyed enough divine orders in my lifetime. Maybe this'll start a new trend."

I catch up to Gil after rehearsal, and we both say "we need to talk" at the same time. After a nervous laugh, Gil nods and says,

"Uh, why don't you come to my office?"

"I am so sorry about your cell phone," I say almost before either of us sit down. "That was the most immature...I don't think even an eighth-grader would've done it."

"Well, maybe an eighth-grader," Gil says.

"Come on, Gil. Now, of all times, you want to joke? Most people would consider something like this a deal breaker. I don't blame you if you never want to see me again."

"I don't."

Ouch! Well, at least he didn't drag out the pain. "Okay. I'll let Schmidt know, and somebody else will finish the case..."

"No! No, what I meant was, I don't...I still want to see you. I want you in my life. I can buy another cell phone. I can't buy another Maria Keller."

My chest is bubbling and fizzing like a Coke out of control. "Gil, that's...I...I don't know what to say. I'm, uh...I guess you could say I'm not that used to forgiveness."

Gil's eyes are serious. "But you could be. Maria, your whole problem is this. You are a good person. A wonderful person. But that isn't enough. You're also stubborn, willful, and disrespectful of anything to do with Christ, which means that you can't let Him inside your life."

Therefore, you make mistakes like this one, and they snowball. It's not just the cell phone. You were disrespectful to my parents, borderline vulgar..."

"Hey, hey, hey! Pull up the horse, cowboy. Okay. Stubborn, willful, and sinful I will give you. But to tell me that I'm disrespectful of Jesus? Okay, so I don't believe in him right now. But neither do I go around cursing him or worshipping the devil or...you don't know a darn thing about my spiritual life."

"That's because you don't have one."

"Ooh, aren't you snarky all of a sudden? For your information, Mr. Straitlaced, Scheduled, Legalistic, Wingtip-Shoe-Wearing, Southern-Gentleman Raised-in-the-High-Church Mama's Boy, God has been talking to me an awful lot lately. And I've been answering. But every time I get close, he throws something in my face, like this conversation, that reminds me of what you just said, which is that I am basically a piece of filthy scum."

Gil sighs. "I can buy that to a point, Maria. But I also know that you're very angry with God. And as my parents would say, that's why he isn't interested in you. He cannot accept children who are in a snit."

"Oh, I get it. So he's a lot like Luke and Jasmine. I love you, but if you're not a good girl, or if you feel the wrong way, don't even think of coming over here and asking me to show you."

"No! No, it's just...you have to realize that there are certain standards you have to follow, and..."

"What about the grace churches preach about all the time?"

"Yes, that's part of the blessing of salvation. But you have got to accept the seriousness of sin. God is merciful, but His mercy only goes so far."

"And what about you, Gil? How far does your mercy go?"

"Maria, don't drag me into this..."

"No, I have to. Because here's the deal. I do understand the seriousness of what I did. You think I didn't beat myself up for years over getting involved with Chandler and writing that stupid note? Do you think I wasn't punished for that? I spent a week in a psych ward, Gil. A psych

ward. I cried and begged those doctors to believe me. They wouldn't. But the question is, do you? Do you believe I am really worthy to be a Christian, or that I'm just too sinful?"

"Of course you're worthy, Maria. Everyone is, through Christ. But the standards God would expect...that the church would expect...what do you think my family would do if a woman I was serious about couldn't behave as was fitting before God?"

"Your family? Is that what this is about? Ha. And I used to be afraid of you thinking I talked too much about my bad childhood. I used to worry that people would think I was blaming everything I did wrong on being a foster kid. Well, clearly I got it reversed. You are so tied up in what your parents think, and a bunch of rules some exclusive little group at church probably came up with...you've all but convinced yourself I'm some kind of...it's disgusting! You are nothing but a cynical, snooty, self-righteous *wimp!*"

But it's the proverbial pot-and-kettle situation, because the next thing I do is run.

I end up at Novel Idea Books, curled up in an easy chair with three books next to me—a mystery, a "chick lit" novel, and believe it or not, a Bible. I haven't opened the last one, but I want to hold it. I wish I could open that Bible and read it, learn from it, highlight it, scribble in it, and let it soak up the tears I won't cry.

I close my eyes, remembering. Mama and Daddy loved church, and when they were alive, I did too. I mean sure, the sermons were boring. But I didn't mind them so much, because I was with my parents. Sometimes, I'd fall asleep, and Mama would let me put my head in her lap. She never yelled at me for it or anything.

A lot of the stories my parents read to me were Bible stories, and there were a few I got attached to. I especially liked the one about Queen Esther, who God made into a brave woman so she could save the Jews from evil Haman. Mama taught me booksoos of hymns in our music lessons, and I enjoyed singing and playing them. I used to pray on my own sometimes, or look at things like Mama's flowers and think how neat it was that God made them. And the times I got in trouble, Mama or Daddy would always make it clear that what I did was wrong, but they'd also

make it clear that they forgave me and loved me no matter what I did. Somehow, I got the stupid idea that that's what it was like to be a Christian, and that Jesus was a lot like my daddy.

“Stupid.” My nose is burning, and I breathe so it'll stop. “Stupid, stupid, stupid!”

My phone buzzes. I flip it open and find a text message from Gil. I didn't even know he could text. It says,

Maria, I am so sorry. You're right. I hurt you. Come back. Let's really talk. –Gil

I laugh. Only Gilbert Montgomery would write a correctly spelled, grammatically correct text message. I hit reply and type back,

Hi. You were right 2. I'll B there soon. –Gumshoe

I decide to buy the two fiction books, but when she's ringing me up, the clerk excuses herself for a minute. “Here,” she says. “I noticed you holding one, and I thought...well.”

I look down. It's a Bible—compact size, cherry red cover, Contemporary English Version, as opposed to the hardback King James I grabbed off the shelf. I start to give it back, but figure it'd be rude, considering the trouble she went through to get it for me. So I nod, thank her, pay, and head out.

I leave the Bible in the car, safe in the glove compartment. I'm not ready to face the implications of its purchase yet. But I do take time to write my name on the inside front cover with my musical note pen. There. That's done. Now it's time to face a very earthly problem—one Gil Montgomery. I run back to his office.

“Gil? Gil, I'm here...I got your message, I mean. I'm sorry. I was stupid, and I...”

“Shhh. I'm sorry, too.” He sighs. “What I'm going to do about my parents, I'm not sure. I'm not even sure I can do anything. But you were right about everything else you said, and God and I are gonna work on all that.”

“Glad to hear it. And it's okay about what you said, too. I'm not a very nice person, you know.”

“On the contrary, I think you're the nicest person I've met in a long time. And the bravest, most compassionate, most resilient...”

When did we start moving toward each other? And why is my entire vision filled up with jade? The whole room looks green. I blink. "Um...you think we could talk again? About...God? Us?"

"Sure, Gumshoe."

"I love that nickname."

"I noticed it in your text message."

"Not as romantic as a letter, but..."

He laughs. "Oh, my dear friend."

The room's still green. He's cupping my chin, raising his eyebrows, asking for permission. I'm nodding, our lips are moving...

"No." I pull away. "I can't."

"Why? Are you still scared, honey?"

He's never called me that. "No. No, not of kissing. You're...you're fantastic. But I...I'm still a non-Christian, and I know God doesn't want you to...I'm not gonna do that to you."

He nods. "You're beautiful, you know that?" He squeezes my hand. "I'll wait."

CHAPTER 17:

"We've got trouble, right here in River City..."

-The Music Man

AUGUST 1ST, CHERRY CREEK HOMICIDE DIVISION, 9:39 AM

I know it's early for iced tea, but the thermometer's on ninety-two, and the humidity is wrapped double around me like a wool scarf that's been soaked in lukewarm water and not wrung out, so the water drips down the owner's neck. The Stage Door murders are pretty hot, too. Over two months on this case already, and no perp. I knock back a shot of the tea. If I were a drinking woman, I'd want this Long Island style. But then again, the tea is freezing, my show tunes are going strong, and Gil sent me a sweet email. Best of all, Tunney left yesterday to head up some special training in Silverton, our "sister precinct." Sometimes, we do a "cop swap"—one of our people goes there, while someone from there comes here, to work on a certain case. I feel sorry for the Silverton cops, but happy for myself, too. In my experience, if Tunney's not there, Rawlings doesn't harass me as much, because he knows the others vocally disapprove. Plus, I think he's afraid Adams would turn him into a big, fluffy pancake.

And then the phone rings. "Kel...Keller?" Schmidt's voice is an elongated groan.

"Yeah, Schmidt, it's me. Are you okay? I mean, you're never late, and..." I only hope he's not in an overturned car somewhere.

"Listen, Keller, I can't make it in today. I have a headache and a stomachache I wouldn't wish on a serial killer."

"Oh, man, that's terrible. Do you know if it's something specific you ate?"

"Yeah, I think so. Dorothea got promoted to head nurse at the hospital, so we went out to dinner, and I ordered dessert. Cinnamon vanilla cheesecake, whipped cream and all. I guess this is nature's way of telling me, hey, Schmidt, lay off that stuff."

“Yeah, I once did the same thing with chocolate my third year in patrol. It was the week of my performance evaluation, I hadn’t eaten a darn thing in a week, I was so nervous, and next thing ya know, I’m going through a box of Sweet Indulgence brownies. Four of ‘em, one right after another.”

“Ugh! Keller, I love you like my kid sister, but ix-nay on the ocolate-chay!”

“Oh. Right. Sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“No, but listen. It looks like you’re gonna have to fly solo for the next day or two.

Greenwood and Adams are tied up with another case, as are Doyle and Farris, and I’d sooner bury myself alive than leave you alone with that rat, Pete Rawlings. Can you handle things at the Stage Door until I’m on my feet again?”

“I’m sure I can.” I’m not sure, but no way am I giving Schmidt’s stomach more reasons to tie itself in knots. “Don’t worry about me.”

“That’s like asking an egg to grow hair, but that doesn’t mean I don’t trust you. I know you can do this. Just draw on your notes and your memory, and remember, in one pocket, keep your badge and nothing but your badge.”

“Got it. If I have any questions I can’t find the answer to, I’ll ask Greenwood. You sure you’ll be okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll eat Dorothea’s chicken soup, watch stupid movies, and be back in a couple of days, maybe less.”

“Okay. You just focus on getting better.”

Schmidt chuckles. “Yes, ma’am.”

11:18 AM—

I’ve had it up to here with the Stage Door murders, the detectives’ bureau, and the police force in general. I’ve spent the morning trying to get out of the bureau so I can do some work at the theater before my voice lesson. But every time I tried, Rawlings would order me to do something. But thanks to Adams and Greenwood, I got some time to myself. I even pampered my

hands a little bit by giving them a manicure—Cherry Rose nail polish, and applied my favorite red lipstick. Now I'm in the middle of an intense voice lesson with my new coach, Becky Patillo.

"Congratulations," Becky says at the end. "You made it through most of our vocal workout, and you sound fabulous, as always. But there's one more thing we've got to do before we close up shop. I want a run-through of "Will He Like Me."

I flinch. Lately, that song has been bringing up all kinds of feelings I do not want to deal with. "Becky, I don't think I'm up to it today."

"What? This from my most dedicated, passionate, talented student? Never—that's like saying you can't do a workout because you had a scoop of Ben and Jerry's yesterday. A treat now and then doesn't ruin your figure, and a little rest doesn't ruin your voice, so—"

"No, Becky, it's not my voice. It's...I...there's..."

"Ah, I see. This isn't just a song. There is someone you love, isn't there? And you're not sure if he loves you back."

I sigh. "Yes. And I know it's not appropriate to bring my personal problems in here, but lately, we...I'm starting to love this man, and I think he could love me. But it's impossible. There are religious differences. There are personality differences. His parents hate my guts for no reason. And I..."

"I cannot imagine anyone in their right mind hating you. As for being impossible..." Becky plays a familiar introduction. "Let's get you cheered up, shall we? 'Impossible/for a plain yellow pumpkin to become a golden carriage/impossible/--'" *For a heathen detective and a prince to join in marriage*, Maria added in her head. *And the killer won't be crossing paths with our forces/such folderol and fiddle-dee-dee of course is...*

"Impossible/impossible/but the world is full of zanies and fools..."

"Who don't believe in sensible rules," I join in. I have to, because that line is true. I'm a fool if anybody ever saw one.

"And who won't believe what sensible people say..."

A spark lights in my chest. Christians are always talking about love and hope and miracles, right? Then maybe I have a chance. Belt it out, girl! 'And because these daft and dewy-eyed dopes keep building up impossible hopes/impossible things are happening every day!'"

"That's right. Now..." Becky winks. "Get to rehearsal before you're late."

12:30 PM—

I'm starving and exhausted, and rehearsal's just half over. Of course, I'm not complaining. It feels great to be in the hustle-bustle of dress rehearsals. But you can't tell your body what to feel. I'm in the staff kitchen with my lunch in my hand when Sarah Goodson's voice says,

"How dare you."

I roll my eyes and face her. "Girl's gotta eat."

"Not that, you flaky, uneducated moron. I mean, coming on to Gil. I thought I told you to stay away."

"And I thought I told you to put on your big-girl panties and deal with the fact that as long as I'm trying to solve this murder, you're stuck with me."

"Well, here's a news flash, Detective. When it comes to Gil, I don't have big-girl panties. I want to know exactly what your intentions are toward him, because I don't like what I'm seeing."

I point a finger. "And I don't like having my personal life scrutinized. I'm not the perp here, Sarah. But if it means that much to you, then yes, let's discuss this like the mature women we are. I'm going to get myself some tea, and then I'll come back so we can talk."

"Fine. Get me some coffee while you're at it."

I should tell her I am not the world's Starbucks barista, but decide against it. "Fine, I will. Be right back."

I head for the lounge down the hall, shaking my head. "One of these days, that woman is gonna push somebody, somewhere, too far." I pour myself some tea and reach for a second cup. Sarah usually takes sugar in her coffee, I've learned. Splenda, because she's watching her girlish

figure. I take a packet, slit it with my thumbnail, dump it in, and stir. I consider adding salt, but that's an immature reaction. Besides, ever since the cell phone disaster, I've been trying hard to watch my impulsive streak.

"Here you go," I tell Sarah when I return. "Hope you like Colombian. Now, sit back, relax, and let me tell you the truth."

Sarah glares at me. "Start talking, *Gumshoe*."

Her use of Gil's nickname for me stings, but I ignore that. "Okay. I will not deny for a minute that I find Gil attractive. He and I also have chemistry, and I wish we could be together. But...Sarah?"

I stop and take a good look at my rival. Her hand is at her throat, and her eyes are glazing over. I jump up so fast I knock my chair over. "Sarah!"

"I...I..." The other woman coughs several times, convulses slightly, and jerks her head up. "You—you're gonna get yours. I just didn't think..."

"Sarah, what are you talking about? Who told you that? Did it have anything to do with the murders?"

Sarah slumps over, and I fly to her side. "Sarah, talk to me, please! Sarah? Oh, no. Oh, crumb. Oh, my word. *Sarah!*"

I hear my heels clicking wildly against the tile, but don't register that I'm moving. "Help me! Somebody give me some help here—Sarah Goodson's unconscious!" Oh, where is the theater staff when I need 'em?

Somebody grabs my arm and slaps his other hand against my mouth. "Keller, shut up, now!" Rawlings shakes me before letting go. "What's going on in there, anyway, a nuclear war?"

"W-what are you doing here?" I'm not talking. I'm croaking.

"With Schmidt off nursing a tummy-ache, I figured somebody better make sure you were doing your work," Rawlings says like a gung-ho hall monitor. "Now, again, what just happened?"

I explain as fast as I can. "So, are you going to help me or not?" It'll be a cold day in Hades before I beg for his help.

“Oh, don’t worry, I am,” he says. But his tone does more than worry me. Oh, no, I’m way past that. I’m suddenly terrified.

2:13 PM—

“I don’t understand,” I whisper to Debra Fortney. She and I are at the hospital, along with the whole homicide squad, the uniformed cops, and a few Stage Door people, including Gil. They took Sarah away almost two hours ago, still unconscious. “I’ve seen much worse than this. But...”

“I know,” Debra says. “Just try to relax, okay?”

“I can’t. I don’t know why she passed out, and if it was because of that coffee...”

“We don’t know that,” Gil says. “And even if it was, none of this is your fault. From what you said, Sarah’s the one who needs a stern talking-to, and sooner rather than later. As for Pete Rawlings...” He cuts a look at the man himself, who’s leaning against a wall, slugging down a Coke and smirking. From his eyes, I can guess the Coke is laced with something much stronger.

“Yeah.” I shiver against the memories of what he called me that time, and the way he takes every opportunity to manhandle me. Gil notices and puts a protective arm around me.

“I’m going to file a complaint against him,” Gil says. “You know, early in our marriage—it was the year before Clayton was born, before Rawlings was a cop—he was on a bender and nearly ran Anne down. Only reason I didn’t press charges was that he was crying, saying something about his sister.”

“Hold the phone. Rawlings has a...who? Where is she?”

Gil shrugs. “I don’t know her name. But yes, she’s his younger sister, or was. Died as a teenager—heart defect.”

“Oh, holy crumb. Are you sure?”

“Yes. Captain Graham—he was the big cheese back then—he told me he’d known Pete Rawlings as a kid, and that he’d had to practically raise his sister while his single dad worked. Twist on the old story. The mom was a deadbeat. Ran off as soon as she knew her little girl was sick.”

I know I should feel sorry for the stupid jerk moron dirtbag, but I just can't do it. I sigh and let my head find Gil's shoulder. "I understand, but Gil, I so do not need this right now."

"Yeah." Gil sighs. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I tried to tell myself he was giving me a sob story, but Graham's case was persuasive. So I let him go." He hugs me. "I see now that I shouldn't have. Graham talked to Rawlings that time. Said from then on, it was the force or jail. But Rawlings lusts for power the way he used to for liquor, and..." I feel Gil's embrace tighten, but I feel safe inside it, not scared. "You'll be all right, darling. This is the last time that scum will ever hurt anyone, especially you." His voice vibrates with quiet authority.

I feel my head drop to his chest. "Thanks, Captain."

Gil laughs. "What?"

"Captain. I just thought, if I'm Maria, then you should be...and you're so much like him."

"Ah. Maria, I..."

But Gil gets interrupted when a scream tears through the hallway. Then another, and another. A doctor races into Sarah's room, and we all hear him trying to calm her down, but it doesn't work. Then,

"Where is she? Where is that harlot! Where is she? She tried to kill me!"

Gil rises. "Maria, stay here. I'll talk to her."

"Step aside, Montgomery." It's Rawlings, of course. "If she wants to talk to Keller, that's who she's talking to. Keller, get in that room, now."

Gil's nose to nose with Rawlings. "Now listen, you..."

"It's okay, everybody, just stay calm." Greenwood's willingness to take charge surprises me, but I'm not knocking it. He turns to me. "Keller, go on. I'm right behind you. Fortney, you better back us up—Sarah sounds hysterical. Rawlings, you too, and no shenanigans."

He's kidding, right? I would roll my eyes, but I'm too anxious. It's all I can do to walk in Sarah's room. She's sitting straight up in bed, eyes burning, bubblegum-pink-tipped finger pointed straight at my chest like that greasy-haired kid's gun. Man, I miss patrol right now.

I crack my knuckles. "Sarah, I..."

"Someone arrest that woman! She tried to kill me! Murderer!"

“What? Sarah, no, I...”

“Keller, sit down,” Rawlings orders. “Just tell us what happened in the theater kitchen, and do it fast.”

I explain the situation exactly as it happened. “Next thing I know, she’s out cold.”

“But this only happened after you served her coffee, correct?” Rawlings asks.

“Y-yes. She drank it, and...”

The truth flashes in front of me with such force I have to close my eyes. “No. No. You can’t think...no!”

“I can think what I want,” Rawlings says. “And I think what I’m hearing right now sounds very incriminating.”

“I didn’t ask your opinion, Rawlings. How can you even think about thinking that...”

“Of course I can.”

“One more comment like that, and I will...”

“What? You’ll kill me, too?”

“Of all the...I did not try to kill her, you moron!”

“You’re in no position to call me names, missy. Now, what was your relationship with Sarah like?”

I bite my lip. “I—it wasn’t so good. She constantly put me down, insinuated horrible things... she was mad because she thought I was after Gil.”

“Well, you always were too friendly with him.” Rawlings laughs.

“Shove it, Fatty Pants,” Debra snaps. “Maria, why would she think...”

“Because the evidence indicated the possibility.” I sum up the whole mess. “And so,” I finish, “I wanted to fend off Sarah’s mouth, so I said, let’s sit and discuss this over tea like mature adults. And you know the rest.”

Rawlings smirks. “Sounds like a motive to me.”

“What!”

The guys at the station are always on your case, as was your Gil, until recently. Now, add Sarah Goodson to that mix. The verbal abuse starts to get to you. You play nice because you

really want to, but it gets harder and harder. Meanwhile, your life starts going down the toilet. So one day, you come in and Sarah starts running her mouth again. You've had it. So you..."

"Hold it, Rawlings." Greenwood strides over and inserts himself between Rawlings and me. He whispers something, Rawlings whispers back, and they proceed to have a powwow. Meanwhile, I'm running my hands up and down the arms of the chair and practically chewing my lip off. How is this possible? Do they honestly think I tried to kill Sarah Goodson? How could they think that, after the months I've worked with them? I bite my lip harder, feeling skin break. The coppery taste and slimy texture of blood fills my mouth.

"Maria." Debra's next to me, patting my shoulder. "Calm down. They're gonna figure this out. There is no way in..." She trails off. "Just calm down, honey."

But I can't calm down. The only other time Debra ever called me "honey" was right after our academy graduation, when I cried on her shoulder about Luke. She's dead serious. And me—well, it looks like I'm just dead.

"Rawlings, c'mon, man," Greenwood says. "Are you sure this is the way to handle this?"

"Look, if I say she's a filthy murderer, that's what she is!"

"Hey, hey, hey!" Debra literally jumps in front of Rawlings, boots smacking against the floor. "You call her one more name, you sniveling, stool pigeon tub of lard, and I'll pound you so black and blue you won't be able to get off this floor for a week!"

"Back off, Fortney," Rawlings growls.

"I will not! You shut your trap or we'll just throw down right now!"

"Fortney." Greenwood's there again, his hands on Debra's shoulders. "Let us handle this, all right?" He turns to Rawlings. "Do you have any physical evidence to back this up? Because you know this won't fly without it."

"Well, how's this for flying?" Rawlings takes a few things out of his pocket—a bottle of Cherry Rose nail polish, a bag full of plain chocolate varieties, and a list of all four victims' names—in my handwriting.

I nearly choke on my own blood. "Rawlings, you..." I snatch the "evidence". "Where'd you get those? What have you been doing, breaking in my house?"

“Drop it, Keller. I said, drop it!”

I drop it. Rawlings’ eyes have never looked so frightening.

“Good girl.” Rawlings drags out “good” and thumps my shoulder.

I jump out of the chair. “You keep your hands off me!”

He grabs me and plunks me back into the chair. “I’ll put my hands where I want. Now, are these things yours or not?”

“Yes, but...”

“Fine.” He turns to Greenwood and Fortney. “There you have it, folks. A confession.”

“I didn’t confess to a darn thing!” I dart a look at Greenwood, hoping for support. I know I have Debra’s because it’s radiating all over the room, but she’s in forensics and couldn’t help me if she tried. Meanwhile, Sarah’s just lying in bed, smirking like the proverbial cat who ripped open the canary’s throat and left nothing but the feathers. Greenwood’s eyes are unreadable.

Something clicks behind me. I know what it is, but don’t let myself think it.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you...”

At that point, everything in me shuts down. Rawlings takes over, and I let him. I hear voices in the background—Debra screaming, Greenwood talking in measured tones—but I can’t respond to them. I see my shoes, but I can’t stop them from crossing the floor.

My eyes tell me we’re out in the hall. Gil’s still on our bench, but when he sees me, he jumps up and races over.

“Maria, what on earth...Rawlings, what is this? Let her go!”

“Sorry, Captain,” Rawlings says. “Looks like your pretty gumshoe girlfriend is actually a heartless murderer.” His nails are digging into my shoulder.

“What?” Gil’s in Rawlings’ face now. “Listen, you selfish, manipulative coward. You release that woman right now before I call your commissioner and...”

“Just try it.” Rawlings shoves me ahead of him, and I nearly fall over.

“Maria.” Gil grabs my collar, which is about all he can get to. He whispers right in my ear. “It’s gonna be okay, honey. I love you.” He kisses the edge of my mouth. I feel him, but don’t see him.

I’ll never see him again.

CHAPTER 18:

“Am I here for a day or forever, shut away from the world until who knows when...”

-Beauty and the Beast

2:46 PM—

I haven't spoken or moved in over an hour. To do either would be to acknowledge reality, and if I do that, I'll start screaming and never stop.

How could this happen? As much as I tell it to, my brain will not move past that thought. Was it all a crazy coincidence, or was it planned? Not that it matters. What does is the unbelievable irony of the whole thing. This morning, I was a detective with a lead role in a play and a possible love interest. And now, I'm...

No. I will not think it. I will not think “convicted felon,” because I am innocent. But then, so are so many other women in prison these days. They're innocent, and yet by the time the justice system gives up on them, they've lost their families. Their careers. Their futures. They end up earning twenty-five cents an hour to scrub floors, and at the end of that existence, some lose their lives. And since North Carolina employs capital punishment...

“Oh, no. Oh, my. Oh, crumb. Oh, heavens.”

Oh, God!

I have never admitted this to anyone, even my cousins, but the thought of my own death has terrified me like nothing else since Mama and Daddy died. I occasionally have nightmares that involve being locked in caskets, buried alive, or dying slowly and painfully of some flesh-eating disease. That's why I stay so healthy and don't smoke or drink. I don't wear black as a main color, and I look the other way if I so much as have to drive past the cemetery. Even during my time on the force, even now in homicide, I always got somebody else to go to the morgue for me. And when I do think of death, I hope for an honorable one. A shooting or something. Not

cancer. Not an accident. Not this. Not the death of a “crooked cop” in a state facility’s electric chair. Oh, God...oh, no...oh...

I dash to the cell’s toilet and retch three times in a row. My head is killing me, and my stomach hurts so much I can’t think about food, even though I’ve barely eaten all day. *Help...*

“Help me, please.”

Who did I whisper that to? Moreover, who’s gonna answer? Schmidt’s sick, I can’t bear to think of telling Monique and Meg, and Gil...Gil. Ohhhh...

I should sleep. It won’t change anything, but it’ll make reality go away, and maybe afterward, I’ll have my equilibrium back. I can’t act weak in front of Rawlings, that’s for sure. I have to be confident in what I know, which is that the Stage Door victims’ blood is not on my hands. I can do that.

Lyrics come to me, and I mouth them. “Whenever I feel afraid/I hold my head erect/and whistle a happy tune/so no one will suspect...”

Reality silences me. The word “suspect” makes me choke.

fall back onto the cot. Thank goodness there were no other arrestees to process today. But then again, that means the only other voice in here belongs to my thoughts. But when I tell it to shut up, that’s what it does.

5:30 PM—

“Keller?”

Greenwood is standing over me. I’m still here, staring at the ceiling so I won’t have to look at where I am. I’m sitting somewhere between a polygraph and the third interrogation in as many hours. What did I say? What did I not say? I can’t even remember.

“Keller, they...Rawlings, uh...he wants to see you again. He and the guy from profiling.”

I don’t know how I keep from groaning or worse, crying. How many times will I have to say it before Rawlings and his sadistic little friend get tired of hearing “I don’t know,” “I didn’t know,” and just plain “no?” Worse than that, in the last hour, I’ve discovered something horrible.

Aunt Flo just showed up. I'm getting full-body cramps and a migraine, but somehow, my little visitor is still a secret. Honestly, won't men ever learn to leave a menstruating woman alone? Thank goodness mine is always just spots.

"I know." I'm whispering because that's all I can do. "But I can't, Sam." I use Greenwood's first name as an appeal. "If I had killed them, I would've confessed right away. But I didn't. I don't know how else to say that."

"I know." Greenwood's eyes say it all. "This is the biggest load of—oh, excuse me. Tell you what. Use what you just told me to your advantage. Stay silent."

"What?"

"You heard me. Don't say anything. I'll get them out of the room. You pretend to have a breakdown. I'll smuggle you back in here and tell Rawlings to back off because I don't want it getting around that we browbeat a detective, and a female at that."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, let's go, Little Miss Broadway. You've got a command performance."

5:45 PM—

"Don't worry," Greenwood tells me. "You were great. Listen, Rawlings just left to get himself a burger. You wanna make a phone call?"

I still can't talk above a whisper. "I don't want to talk to anyone right now, but if I gave you my cousins' number, would you please call them for me?"

"Sure. What's the number?"

"555-4237. Just tell them I'm here, and what happened. And please, tell the truth."

"I will. Do you want me to have one come down here? Bring a wallet?"

"No. Whatever the bond is, they can't pay, and I don't want them to see me."

"Okay. Could you eat? It's almost six."

"Could you eat if you were me?"

"Good point. No. Cup of tea, then?"

“Yeah. Maybe a couple of saltines. My stomach feels like it’s been through a war.”

“You got it.”

I fall asleep almost immediately. What can I say? You can never have enough naps when you’re on the wrong side of the interrogation table. When I wake up, I find a cup of tea with a reinforced lid, a pack of saltines, and a small bag of M&Ms with a note attached—

-Room service. The chocolate’s for if you want it later. Hang in there. We know. –G & A.

Greenwood and Adams. Angels, both of them. My hand goes to my lapel. They took Mama’s angel pin. I don’t want it back, but I’d give anything to have a real angel with me now.

Ah, who am I kidding? After all that’s happened, I don’t deserve an angel. Not even one of those junior angels who haven’t earned their wings yet. I manage one saltine and a quarter cup of tea, and spend the next several hours fighting off cramps and headaches that have to be on a par with labor. I don’t dare ask for an aspirin. When the pain gets intense around nine PM, I open the M&Ms instead. Even in jail, chocolate is a woman’s best friend.

11:50 PM—

I can’t sleep anymore. I’ve been tossing and turning for hours. My entire body aches, and even though I can still tell it to do certain things—sit up, look at the clock, sip some tea—I can’t think. The other officers are gone, except Rawlings. Mercifully, he hasn’t been down here. He’s told the media that he has every confidence I am a murderer.

Sergeant Davenport came by. He and Rawlings argued over something—most likely me—and Sarge came downstairs to talk a minute. He asked if there was anything I wanted, so I made myself smile and said something about a good lawyer. But right now, I can think of a dozen things I want. I want to wake up tomorrow and find out this was all a bad dream. I want to be onstage again. I want to be able to sing. I want Luke and Jasmine, Monique and Meg, my own parents. I want the Schmidts and the Montgomerys.

I want God.

So I look up and give praying a shot. All that comes out, in an anguished whisper, is,

“Where are you?”

There’s no answer, so I keep going. “You know, I’ve done a pretty good job of being self-sufficient so far. When my parents died, I needed you, but I couldn’t find you, so I just walked through life thinking about raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens, brown paper packages tied up with strings...and whistling happy tunes while shivering in my shoes in front of social workers and foster parents who didn’t give a flip what happened to me. And the result of this deception was very strange to tell, for when I fooled the people, I think I fooled myself as well...but it was still a hard knock life, and as for tomorrow...that took its time. But did I ever expect you to swoop down like Daddy Warbucks and rescue me? No! I never asked you, never begged you, never...I asked for nothing, I could get by. Because there were many less lucky than I.”

“But the truth was, I needed you, God. I needed you so badly. Every time someone speculated about how my parents let me run wild, and how just you wait and see, soon I’d be old enough to be another teenage delinquent, I needed you. I needed you every time I was criticized for my creativity or the way I didn’t act like a girly-girl—every time people railed at me, tradition, tradition, Maria, tradition! Every time somebody decided I was a problem...” I sigh. “But instead, it just seems like, when things are too quiet up there, you say to yourself, what kind of mischief can I play on my friend Maria? And there I am, back where every time I think I’m alone, somebody’s eyes are watching, waiting for the next big show.”

“Well, God, I’m no idiot. I know I’ve sinned, even if I didn’t do what my family thought I did. You probably thought I deserved what happened with my family, and between me and Chandler—that I had it coming all along, and that if you did something about it, I wouldn’t dare say that you were wrong. And I guess I deserve to be arrested and put on trial for murder as far as you’re concerned. I guess I was a fool to believe that the impossible could really happen, just because some daft and dewy-eyed dope said so.”

I laugh then. “Oh, God, what did I just say? I’ll tell you what I just said. I tried to pray, and it came out as a bunch of snippets of show tunes! Pretty ding-dang-dong stupid of me, huh?”

No. I understood, and I liked it, because it came from you.

“Ack! Oh, my...is that...who’s there?”

Maria. Maria, honey, it’s me. You called out to me, and I’m here.

I shake my head. “Then I guess we’re both too late. You probably want to punish me for taking this long to talk to you...and you! Where were you...no, I’d better not ask that. It’ll just make your punishment worse, I guess.”

No, Maria. I want you to listen to me. I’m not here to punish or hurt you. Don’t be afraid. Just ask me what you were going to ask before.

I take a deep breath. “Okay. Where have you been? You say you’re here now...well, where were you twenty years ago? Where were you while I spent two years in foster care? And where were you when I was accused of trying to commit suicide? When I begged you to listen...when I begged you to get me out of that mental hospital...when I apologized for every sin I could think of...when I begged you to let the truth be revealed so I could finish my music degree... *where were you?*”

I don’t realize I’m crying until a tear drops off the end of my nose. My broken nose, I remember. I laugh, but that makes me cry harder. “God, can you answer that?”

I can. I’ve been right here with you.

“W-what?”

Maria, my child, I’ve been here. You just didn’t see me. When your parents died, I wept for you. For two years, I protected you from abuse and neglect from foster parents who would’ve been worse than the ones you had—but I held you and comforted you when those same foster parents turned you away. I even used people in your life to show you where I was.

“Like Mrs. Ravensworth,” I whisper. “Yeah. You know, I always wondered if just maybe you sent her.”

Yes, Mrs. Ravensworth was one. But there were others. Do you remember Luke and Jasmine? And before that, the music teachers who insisted you continue voice lessons? Monique and Meg? Schmidt and his family? Adams and Greenwood? Gil?

Okay, it's official. I feel really stupid. I give in to a sudden urge to kneel, even though my knees will pay in the morning. "I...I'm sorry. I forgot. I didn't realize you'd gone to all that trouble."

But I did. And I think you know what else I did for you, don't you?

"You mean the crucifixion and resurrection? Yeah, I...I know that part. But God, how could you do that? How could you be that...that merciful...and frankly, that nuts? I could understand you dying for someone like Sarah, but me? Never! I've just proved I deserve nothing but your anger...and that's on a good day!"

Yes, but if you know the story, you also know that embracing what I did for you means that I will never be angry with you. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

"But why? Why would you want me? I'll never be Sarah, and..."

Maria, once again, you are not listening. I don't want you to be Sarah. I want you to be you—a gold-throated cop with a gun, who decorates her shoes, has never been on time a day in her life, and who has more life and spirit in her than most people ever dream of. You know, I don't have favorites, but I have to say, it was a great pleasure creating you.

I laugh. "You must have been feeling experimental that day. I'm not much of a creation, I'm afraid. Yard sale material, maybe."

Oh, no. No, my love. You are in my Royal Creations collection. And anybody who ever told you different was just plain stupid to do so. I don't make junk, and I certainly don't die for it.

"Well, you can't lie, so you must be telling the truth, but I have to admit, I don't have a clue about being royalty."

Then let me show you.

I'm tearing up again. "I...I never thought I'd say it, but I want you to. But...I can't. I wouldn't be a good Christian."

Oh, Maria. You're blunt. Well, I can be, too. When are you gonna get it? I don't want you to be a good Christian, or work to earn my favor. You're not my slave. You're my

princess, and I want you to claim your inheritance. Rest in grace. Let me heal you. Let me teach you how to live. I love you. Let me show you that.

“You would do that? You would...I can’t believe it, but all right. I...my heart cannot be trusted, I give you fair warning...”

But I am greater than your heart, and I still love you.

I laugh. “Well, maybe the impossible can happen. So, how do I do this? Become a Christian, I mean.”

Oh, that’s the easy part. Just say you want to and you’re in.

“Okay.” I debate over whether to stay on my knees and decide not to. It seems more appropriate for God to have a full view of what he’s getting, so I face front. “Well, all right, God, here we go. It’s like I said, I feel like an idiot for blowing you off all this time. I’m not even sure why I did, except I thought you didn’t love me, which is actually a lame excuse, now that I think of it. But you know something? I’m good and sick of flying solo. So...so please, forgive me for...well, my sins, yeah, but more than that, for being your basic idiot. And if...oh, what was it Pastor Ken said that time...oh, right. If your Holy Spirit is interested, my heart is more than ready for you.” And with that, I close my eyes, look up, and tilt my chin as if about to sing a high C.

There are no fireworks, no flashes of light, and no heavenly choruses. I don’t feel anything, period. But He’s definitely here.

“Thank you so much.”

It was my pleasure, darling. Welcome home. We’ll talk later, but for now, you need some sleep.

“But I...” Ooh—on second thought, God’s right. I am exhausted. But instead of the heavy, hopeless fatigue from before, it’s the good kind, like the kind I get after a long day of rehearsals.

I fall asleep feeling an invisible hand on my forehead. And though I wonder if I’m making it up, I’m almost sure I hear a four-part choir singing to me—complete with a Texas-laced soprano and a deep, resonant baritone.

CHAPTER 19:

“Clap your hands, just because, where I am ain’t where I was...”

-Thoroughly Modern Millie

Ugh. I feel like I spent the night in a closet. My muscles ache so much they protest if I so much as move my little finger. Where in the name of Julie Andrews am I?

And then I remember. The first sensation that hits me is horrible, choking panic, but then I remember the last thing that happened last night. I take a few cleansing breaths. It’s okay. It’s gonna be okay. I just need to talk to God for a few minutes.

“Dear God, it’s me. I...well, I...it’s...well, I’m new at this, so I’m just gonna jump in and hope your grace covers me, okay? First of all, thanks for last night. I never thought I’d be a Christian, but now that I am, I don’t understand why I waited so long. I’m shocked, and relieved, and ecstatic, and...well, all these different things at once. It’s just a load off my mind to know I don’t have to live my life alone anymore, and that it’s okay not to be the strong, independent woman. Oh, not that I’m ever gonna be June Cleaver, but now I know that’s okay. And God? Thanks so much for loving me as I am, not as somebody else wants me to be. That means so much.”

“But that’s the thing, God. That thing about what somebody else wants me to be? Well, a lot of people here want me to be a murderer. Now, you know and I know, I didn’t knock anybody off. Never have, never will. And you and I also both know I’d be eternally grateful if you’d get me out of this mess. But I also know you’re big on tests. So if you want to test my faith by having me spend a little time in the federal pokey, or, heaven forbid, getting the death penalty in which case I guess it’d all be moot since I’d be in Heaven, then that’s okay. It’s just that, I’m not prepared for those things, so I’m asking you, if either one’s what you’ve got in mind, please make sure I’m ready. And please...give me courage. I’ve heard so many stories about prison abuse and stuff, and I can only imagine what they’d do to a supposed crooked cop. Please, if you’ve never helped me before, help me now.”

I'm not sure what to do next, so I start singing. The first song that comes to mind is a Christmas one, "Breath of Heaven." I skip the part about the baby and just sing the last two verses. By the end, I'm kneeling.

"Help me be strong/help me be/help me. Breath of heaven/hold me together..."

A cramp cuts me off. I look up. "Oh, and God? While you're at it, help me deal discreetly with this woman's thing. Send somebody with—supplies, and an aspirin. Make that five. Ooh..." I ride out the worst of the cramp and then sit on the cot with my eyes closed. Christian or not, I still don't want reminders of where I am.

Someone's key turns in the lock. "Keller..."

I flinch. "Greenwood, I told you yesterday..."

"No." He comes in and sits next to me. "It's not an interrogation. Adams is holding off Rawlings, so you're safe. And I got Monique on the phone last night. She'll be here as soon as she can, but she doesn't know about Meg, seeing as she cried all night and is just now getting some sleep."

"Poor Meg." I sock my fist into my other hand. "Greenwood, what am I gonna do?"

He squeezes my hand and lets go. "I don't know. They can set bail today, but with Rawlings in charge..."

"Yeah."

"I've been trying to call Tunney, but he's got his cell phone turned off. He usually does during a training session—says he doesn't want detectives thinking they can walk around with the things attached to their hips like a half-formed fetus."

"Of all the stupid...aargh! I can't...there has got to be...I have to fight this!"

No. You *don't*. I do.

Oh. Oops. "Sorry, God. I'm a rookie."

"Huh?"

"What? Oh—nothing, Greenwood. Listen, could you do me a monumental favor?"

"Yeah. Whatcha need?"

"I need you to go to the locked box where Rawlings is keeping my stuff and find my car keys. Then drive down to the Stage Door—my car's still there. You'll find a Bible in the glove compartment."

Greenwood blinks. "A Bible?"

"I know, I know. I was never Miss Church Girl. But God hasn't left me alone since this whole case started, and I finally let Him win, if you get my drift. I've got to read His book—figure out what, if anything, He wants me to do while I'm waiting, and if He wants me to accept that I'm gonna be living the rest of my life in a women's correctional facility." The thought gives me chills.

Greenwood grins. "Ah. Well, good for you. And here's a tip. I don't know much about God—not like Schmidt does. But I really don't see why he'd send you up the river, especially for something you didn't do."

"Thanks."

"Okay, so I'm off on a Bible mission. And hey, no offense here, but you look pretty sick. You okay?"

"Yeah—oh...ow!"

"Keller, what is it? If you've got appendicitis or something..."

"No. No, it's, uh..." My face is broiling. Talk about humbling. "Greenwood, do you have female relatives?"

"Of course; how'd you think I got here, the stork? Oh—oh! Okay, so Bible, tampons, Midol...and I think I'll grab the books out of your desk, too."

"Thanks. You're an angel."

"I try."

Greenwood is off after that, Adams in tow, I guess so Rawlings will think twice before interrogating him about his errands. Meanwhile, I start praying. I pray for the bail amount not to be too much. I pray for someone to get hold of Tunney, for Schmidt to get well, for God to comfort my cousins...everything I can think of.

A door slams. "Keller? Keller!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Rawlings! Some people are trying to pray down here!"

“Oh, man. We better do something, guys. She’s hallucinating.”

But then I realize something. It’s not Rawlings. Despite the cramps, I race to the cell’s “front door”. “Schmidt? Monique?”

And they’re there, beaming. Meg’s with them too, her mascara halfway to her chin, and Dorothea, and...

“Gil. Oh, my goodness. Gil.”

“Gumshoe!”

“Captain!”

Schmidt laughs. “Guess I better unlock this door. You can’t hug each other through iron.”

Within a nanosecond, we’re all laughing, crying, talking, hugging, and jumping up and down (well, except me. Cramps are cramps and headaches are headaches). I finally get a minute to explain my conversion, and then they really go nuts. When we all finally calm down, Schmidt takes charge.

“Keller, I am so sorry,” he says. “If I had known, I never would’ve...”

“But you didn’t. There’s no way you could’ve.”

“But if I’d been there, this never would’ve happened. You never even would’ve been questioned.”

“Yes I would, and you know it. Rawlings will do everything he can to destroy me.”

“Yeah. I know it’s not a good example for my littlest sister in Christ—“ he chuckles—“but I almost hate that guy.”

“Well, at least you said ‘almost.’”

We all laugh, and Dorothea steps forward. “We all heard about it last night on the news,” she says. “I practically had to tie up Brendan to keep him from running over here.”

“Yeah—Schmidt, how’s the stomach?” I ask.

“Much better, thank goodness. In fact, what happened to me just might help clear your name.”

“Really? Tell me!”

“Well, right after I called you, I kept getting worse and worse, so Dorothea took me to the ER to have her supervisor check me out—Doc Babcock. Anyway, he ran a bunch of tests and said it was poison that was giving me grief. Not aconite, but antifreeze. And not enough to kill—just enough to make me sick as all get out. Apparently, somebody wanted me out of the way just long enough to get to you. And since you spent the night in the pokey, there’s no way it could be you. Unless—you don’t have an evil twin, do you?”

“Funny. No, it’s just me. But you know something? Right now, I don’t even care who poisoned you—oh, I don’t mean it like that. I’m just happy you’re okay.”

“We know,” Gil says. “But none of us are going to be happy until you’re okay.”

“Amen.” That’s a joint agreement from Monique and Meg, who scoot closer and lock their arms around me like my personal bodyguards.

“So here’s what’s going to happen.” Dorothea’s wearing what I think of as her nurse’s face. “I am going to go upstairs with you and tell that...that devil’s spawn...to get out of our way. You are going to get cleaned up, change clothes, and eat something decent. Meanwhile, Brendan will talk to his fellow officers, including your old sergeant and Debra Fortney, and see what they can do about getting you some help through Internal Affairs, your commissioner, and Tunney, if they ever get hold of that grouchy Big Kahuna. The rest of the squad will be sent back to the theater to comb it for evidence. Brendan wants to personally take charge of that, but he’ll have someone drive you to the bail hearing. When you get back, your cousins, Gil, and I will all be here, and we’re gonna do some serious prayer.” She finally stops to take a breath. “Are we clear on all that, troops?”

Everybody laughs. “Ma’am, yes, ma’am!”

Dorothea returns right on the heels of Greenwood, armed with one of my outfits, some makeup, and breakfast from the local diner, whose staff said, ‘you tell Detective K that we don’t believe all this murder hoey.’ She watches the door leading to the ladies’ shower—and chases off Rawlings once—helps me put my face on, and sits with me for breakfast in the anteroom of the cells. We don’t talk much, but just having her there shrinks the stone in my stomach a little.

I'm reading my Bible a few hours later when Greenwood appears. "Keller? Bail hearing's in twenty minutes. We should go."

"Right." I start to stand up, but don't make it all the way. "Greenwood, I...I can't. I can't believe this is happening. I'm not sure I can do this."

"Yes, you can. You made it through worse, remember?"

"Yeah, well even foster care was a picnic compared to this."

Greenwood takes my hand, and I let him. "Look, I know this is tough. It's convoluted, cruel, and completely unfair. But you're a strong lady. You're gonna get through this. We're all here, we're helping, we're rooting for you...and don't forget about last night." He points upward. "What, you think God got you out of foster care and got you through that rape and false suicide accusation—yeah, I heard about that—just to dump you on Death Row? No way, baby."

"But what if He wants to punish me for waiting so long to become a Christian?"

"Ha. I doubt it. That's not the God Schmidt talks about. And Schmidt knows God like nobody I know."

It occurs to me that maybe Greenwood ought to invest some time in getting to know God himself, but I've got bigger problems on my mind right now. I shoot up a prayer and take a deep breath. "Okay. Now or never."

"A hundred fifty thousand dollars." Judge Lane bangs his gavel on his desk. "We're adjourned."

Oh, yeah, right. Like anybody I know has fifteen thousand dollars lying around. And now that bail's set, it won't be long before people start making noises about a trial. *Oh, God...* And the next thing I know, I'm crying again. Not wailing, but tears are tears. I yell at myself to toughen up, but Greenwood reads my body language and shakes his head.

"You're entitled," he says, helping me up. "You go on, you cry."

Judge Lane is giving me an unreadable look. Oh, great. He probably thinks I'm one of those conniving girl cons who thinks she can cry her way out of doing the time she deserves. But

I don't deserve this. I don't! Christian or not, letting God fight for me or not, no matter what I did or didn't do in the past, I DON'T!

Greenwood gives me a minute to pull myself together before escorting me back downstairs, and I'm back to square one. As promised, Gil, Schmidt, Dorothea, and my cousins are huddled up, waiting. They pull me into the huddle—it's getting awfully crowded in this cell—and we start praying. Dorothea even prays in tongues, which I didn't know she could do.

We stay at it for about an hour. When we're done, Gil steps forward, traces my face with a finger, and kisses my cheek. "I love you, Gumshoe."

Oh. Oh, my. He said the L word! Am I ready for that?

Yes. I can play matchmaker too, you know.

I kiss his cheek, leaving a red lipstick print. "I love you too, Gil Montgomery."

When they all leave, nothing's changed. I'm still in jail. I've still got multiple murder charges hanging over my head. I still might be on the fast track to Heaven via lethal injection, eventually.

But for the first time, I know it for sure. God does love me. He will take care of me and fight for me, because He did forgive me for what I did and take away the hurt from what I didn't do.

For the first time since 2:13 PM yesterday, I know I'm going to be okay.

CHAPTER 20:

“Impossible things are happening every day”

-Cinderella

Two days later, my life is still a wreck, but I’m hanging in there. My family and friends have been by as much as they can, and according to Meg, my enclave of supporters has even pledged to pray around the clock for me. In fact, I’ve heard that a lot of people in town are in on it, including the staff of Novel Idea Books, the staff of Sweet Indulgence Bakery, some of the staff at the local diner, and a bunch of people at my cousins’ and Gil’s churches.

“Be prepared,” Schmidt says when he delivers lunch one day. “You’re gonna be a celebrity when all this is over.”

“Oh, please, that’s the last thing I want. I just want my life back.” I bite into the sandwich. “Hmmm...Farris made this, right?”

“Yup. Says you look like a stick and need the protein. Plus, the man’s got an unhealthy obsession with peanut butter.”

“Our own personal Adrian Monk with a twist, huh?”

Schmidt belly laughs. “I am so telling him you said that.”

“Go ahead. So, how are things at the theater?”

Schmidt gives me a sympathetic smile. “Nothing yet. Sorry, partner.”

“That’s okay. I know y’all are trying.”

“You bet we are.” He frowns. “If you ask me, there’s a cop mixed up in this somewhere. I’m not sure if it’s Rawlings, but that sure would explain why the solution keeps getting away from us.”

“Hmmm.” I just shrug. I don’t want to think about Schmidt’s theory. The police force is supposed to be like your second family. I don’t want to think that one of my brothers or sisters in blue betrayed me for personal gain.

“Well, I should get back to work.” Schmidt eyes the cinnamon cookie in the corner of the tray. “Uh, were you gonna eat that?”

“Now who’s the one with the food obsession? Help yourself. I haven’t been much on sweets lately.”

“Yeah. I know it’s probably not the healthiest thing to do, but I’ve been comforting myself with food the past few days. Cinnamon jelly beans, cinnamon cookies, you name it. I guess I’ll never learn.”

“Hey, we all have flaws. Tell you what. If I ever get out of here, I’m buying you a deluxe bag of cinnamon Jelly Bellies.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

“Okay.” I chew for a minute, and an idea pops into my head. “Hey, Schmidt? About that cheesecake with the antifreeze in it...you’re sure it didn’t taste weird?”

He laughs. “Well, it did, but I thought it was because Dorothea made me order the Weight Watcher version. I love her, but sometimes her nurse’s instincts drive me bonkers.”

“Hmmm. And the waiter who brought it...he didn’t act funny? You didn’t see anybody skulking around nearby?”

“No, I...well, wait. Yeah. The waiter said dessert was paid for, courtesy of somebody who wanted to show her appreciation to a public servant.”

“Her, you said? Hmmm.”

Schmidt raises his eyebrows. “I know that gleam in your eye, Maria Keller. What are you thinking?”

“I’m not sure yet. I need some time alone to work through it. Of course, what else have I got these days?”

“You might be surprised, Keller.”

Sergeant Tunney. I choke.

“Oh, man...” Schmidt thumps me on the back a few times. “You okay? Here, drink some of this.” He hands me the milk. “There...you good? Okay. Uh, hi, Sarge.”

“Hey, Schmidt. I hate to break up the party, but I am not watching one of my detectives get sent to the state facility, so get your butt upstairs or to that theater and get back to work.”

“Yes, sir. See you around, Keller.”

“I’ll be right here.”

Once we’re alone, Tunney unlocks the door and sits next to me. “Okay, Keller. I know you’ve been through Hades the last couple days, so I’m gonna keep this short and sweet.” He looks me in the eye. “Did you do it?”

I look right back. “No, sir.”

“Okay. That’s all I wanted to know. You hang in there, kid. I’ve gotta go make some phone calls, send some heads rolling, get the media off the front stoop. Oh, and...” He reaches into his pocket. “Brought you these. Specialty brands from the Silverton Tearoom.”

“Ah, Sergeant...”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m not so bad for an egotistical jerk. Just let somebody know when you want hot water.”

“Evenin’, Keller,” Rawlings’ voice says, dripping with false sincerity, at about four that afternoon. “Come on—time for one of our little talks.”

“I don’t know what else I have to say to you.”

“Hey. Don’t you sass me, you...” He peppers the air with dirty names. “I’m calling the shots now. You’re lucky this is America. Otherwise, I’d beat and starve the truth out of you. Now, move it, or I might do it anyway.”

“Honestly, Rawlings,” I say once we’re opposite each other in Interrogation Room 6.

“Aren’t you tired of playing this game by now?”

“Depends. When were you gonna get tired of playing ‘let’s pretend I’m an upstanding cop so I can go on a killing spree?’”

“I’ll give you the same answer I’ve given you for the last three days. I don’t play games. I didn’t do this.”

“Yes, you did,” he hisses. “You hated Sarah Goodson for what she said to you. You wanted rid of her so you could get to Montgomery. But you knew you didn’t have the spine to outright kill her, so you made it all look like an accident. Just like with the others, except you killed them. What kind of twisted, conniving psychopath are you?”

Breathe deeply, Maria girl. Everything he just said is a lie. “Rawlings, just give up. You’re tearing me down because you know the truth. You know I’m innocent, and you can’t handle it.”

“Oh, yeah? Handle this!” And he slaps me in the mouth.

“That’s much better,” he cackles. “Now, you listen to me. It’s clear you wanna do this the hard way, so here’s the deal. I can’t touch you. But you play ball, or I start touching others.”

“And just what is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, who’s to say your cousins didn’t help you out? I can arrest them. I know your frou-frou cousin Meg wouldn’t last a second in here. I can get Montgomery in here. I can have his kids thrown in foster care. I could tear Schmidt’s family apart. After all, who wants a hubby and a daddy who’s an accomplice to murder?”

For the first time since the bail hearing, fear shakes my heart. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“I would, and I can do it. Just watch me.”

He will. I know it. I look up. *Jesus, help!*

“I’m gonna leave you alone to think. When I get back, I want either one last denial or a confession. Think long and hard about which one it’s gonna be.” He stomps out, and the door locks.

I jump out of the chair and onto my knees so fast pain shoots through them. “Oh, Jesus, help me. Please...you can’t let him hurt Monique and Meg, or Gil, or anybody else. I’ll confess if that’s what you want—just tell me. But...don’t let him go after them.”

All I hear is silence, so I keep praying. But I can only say one word. “Please. Just...please.” Gosh, I wish I had Dorothea’s tongues gift.

I understand you just fine, sweetie. I will never leave you or forsake you.

“I know. But what should I do?”

Wait. Just wait.

A minute later, Schmidt and Tunney enter. Tunney pulls me up off my knees. “I just heard about Rawlings smacking you. He’s in huge trouble.”

“Yeah, well, so am I.”

“Not yet you aren’t, Detective. I’m sitting in on the rest of this interrogation. Schmidt, you better stay behind the two-way mirror, though. We don’t want anybody thinking you’re a sympathy card.”

“Gotcha.”

I breathe deeply and explain what Rawlings said to Tunney. “Can he really do that?”

Tunney frowns. “As if I’d let him. He’ll try, though. I hate to say it, but confession might be your best bet. We could prove it false pretty quick if we had to, and…”

I shake my head. “Sergeant, please don’t.”

For the first time since I’ve known him, Tunney smiles at me. “I know. Sorry, kid. I’ll get my butt out of here.” And he does.

“God,” I say when I’m alone again, “look, let’s lay the cards down, here. I know who and what I am, okay? I am a stupid, flighty actress who got herself raped and nearly ended it all. I don’t deserve squat from you. And if you want, I’ll spend the rest of my life in prison. I’ll even take the death penalty. You can do what you want with me, but you tell Satan and his earthly goons—read, Rawlings—to leave my family and my friends alone! Do something to help them!”

I will. And I’ll help you, too. Remember what we talked about. You are not flighty or stupid. The sins of others are not your fault, and you are forgiven for what was. So no more talk of being a mistake, all right, sweetheart?

I have to smile. “All right. No promises, but I’ll give it my best shot. But what do I do now? If I could just warn my cousins and Gil—get to a phone, an email, a—“

Email!

“That’s it!” It takes a minute to realize I’m the one yelling. “Oh, that’s it…but wait a minute, I’m locked in an interrogation room. C’mon, Jesus, just a little more help?”

The door opens. “Help, huh? Ta-da!”

“Schmidt!” I race across the room and feel myself hug my partner. “Oh—oh, sorry, you’d think I of all people wouldn’t...but you have got to help me, you’re perfect! Listen, there’s an email in the back of my desk. Bottom right-hand drawer—I put it there because I’m left-handed and Rawlings wouldn’t...it’s off his computer, the day I was doing his grunt work, he...and I think it’s the clue to the whole case and what really happened and how I never killed anybody, but I don’t know who Star is, and...”

“Keller, *shut up!*”

A second later, Schmidt backs off. “Sorry, Keller, but...here, sit down. Breathe...again...one more time. You’ve got to calm down.”

“I’ve spent almost a week as a prison inmate and you want me to calm down?”

“I know. But it’s almost over. I can feel it.”

“Since when do you listen to feelings?”

He winks. “Well, I’ve got a really quirky, but smart partner who taught me how. Now, come on, Keller, talk to me, slowly. What’s this about an email?”

So I open my mouth and sing like never before. Once I do, Schmidt’s whole face changes. “I will be right back,” is all he says. He shoots out of there like a human bullet, but returns just as fast, armed with the email. “Special delivery for Maria Keller,” he says.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Oh, and...” He hands me something, and I gasp. My pin. “How did you...”

“What, you think Rawlings is the only one who can use a key?” Then, because my hands are shaking, Schmidt pins the jewelry on for me. “There ya go. Now, do a little more breathing, and when Rawlings gets back, stick it to him like he’s a voodoo doll.”

I crack up. “You know, for a Christian, you are one devious dude, Brendan Schmidt.”

“Thanks.” He gives me a gentle, two-second hug. “Good luck.”

I put the email in my pocket and pray one more time. On the heels of “amen,” Tunney enters, Rawlings right behind him, looking sullen, but somehow triumphant. He’s carrying a tape

recorder, which he plunks in front of me. “Okay, Keller. What’s your verdict?” He laughs. “Verdict, get it?”

I keep my eyes open, but I’m praying silently. “I get it, Rawlings. Start the tape.”

A smile snakes across his face. “I knew you’d see it my way.” He pushes “record” and “play.” “Anytime you’re ready.”

I take a breath. “My name is Maria Magdalena Keller, and after much thought, I have something to say to my colleagues at my police department, and the town of Cherry Creek, North Carolina.” There we go. Nice and formal. Rawlings looks so excited I think he’s gonna wet himself. Deep breath...stand up...take out the email...put it on the desk. “Um, Detective Rawlings? What is this?”

His smile disappears. “Where the—“

“Watch it, Rawlings,” Tunney growls. “Keller here’s a God Squad lady now.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Funny, Sarge. Keller, where’d you get that?”

“That’s what comes of making other people do your grunt work.”

“My emails are none of your business! You are supposed to be begging me for mercy, confessing to murdering three people and smearing them with nail polish and Hershey bar residue...”

“Wait a minute.” I want so badly to smile, but I hold myself back. “How’d you know it was a Hershey bar?”

“How could I not know? You don’t touch chocolate that’s not plain.”

“True. But a Hershey bar would leave the same residue as M&Ms, or a Three Musketeers, or a milk chocolate truffle...boy, one of those sound good about now...so how’d you know it was a Hershey bar?”

Rawlings’ face turns redder than it already was. “Why, you little...”

“And how did your friend know that the scum she mentioned smelled like ‘sweet cherries?’ Could it have something to do with the fact that said scum usually wears cherry red makeup?”

“Shut up, Keller. Don’t try to save your own neck. I’ll see you on Death Row in less than six months if I have to...”

“What? Lie? Cheat? Bully?”

Rawlings shakes his head and smiles. “You’re not really expecting anybody to buy this, are you? I know exactly what goes on in your head, Keller. I’m smarter than you, and I can find the holes in your lies and make sure they’re exposed.”

I sit back and allow myself that smile. “Is that so? You know what, Rawlings? You’re probably right. In terms of college degrees, you probably are smarter than me. But that’s your downfall. See, you were so worried about following the rules, looking good, being smart, and digging up dirt on me that you dug up a little too much dirt. If you’d been minding your own business instead of watching and eavesdropping on me all these months, you never would’ve known I was a heavy tea drinker. You never would’ve known my favorite color, or the chocolate I eat, or what my handwriting looks like, or why I don’t let strange guys touch me, or how mad I get when somebody hurts kids. But you do know all that, and now you’re stuck with it. So my question is...” I tap the email. “Who is Gold Star, otherwise known as Star516? And...” I drop my voice and speak slowly. “Which one of you murdered those people?”

Rawlings curses, multiple times in fact. “Boss, do you believe this?”

Tunney nods. “Actually, I do. So answer her. Who is this chick, ‘cause I know it’s a chick. What’d you do, pay off some hooker from the city to get revenge on Keller for you?”

Rawlings is sweating and spluttering. “I...you...that little...I didn’t murder anybody, stupid! That Sarah chick—she killed the youth director. She was all red from moving the body, but Keller was dumb enough to think she was just upset. And the Goodson chick had the youth director’s hair on her blouse. I was gonna turn her in, but she said if I didn’t, she’d help me get...” He stops. The look on his face is classic, “uh-oh, I just blew it”.

Tunney takes the tape recorder and sets it on top of the file cabinet in the corner. He crosses behind Rawlings, and I hear a now painfully familiar metallic click. “You have the right to remain silent...”

"Well, looks like that's everything." Tunney signs the final papers and hands me the box of stuff from my desk. "Congratulations, Keller. You're free to go, and it looks like you solved the case, too."

"Yeah." Schmidt shakes his head. "You were really somethin' else. The minute you said that about the email, I knew. You are one sharp cookie."

"That's 'smart cookie,'" I laugh. "And no, I'm not that smart. I got C's in English."

"So?" Tunney says. "Turns out Sarah Goodson was an Ivy League lady, and look where she's headed."

"Yeah," I say. "I feel kinda sorry for them, you know? Especially Rawlings. I mean, it's creepy, but I'm starting to see something. If things were different, that could've been me."

"But it wasn't," my partner says.

"Yes. It wasn't. Thank God and only God, it wasn't."

"Well, I'm not a religious guy myself," Tunney says, "but you're right, Keller. You were right about a lot of things, including this case, which is why I want you back in my division. Not right away, though. You take a month off. After that, you take half days for awhile, until you know you're ready to really hit the street. You just shook off a murder rap, woman. That kind of thing comes with all kinds of junk, and I want you to deal with it the right way so you can come back here ready to be the best detective possible."

I shake my head. Is this the same supervisor who used to lambast me for breathing? There sure is a God. I have to smile. "Thanks, Sarge. I mean, I'm not looking forward to being gone so long, but it means a lot that you care about me."

"Well, don't spread it around, or I'll have you back on filing duty." I can tell by his tone he doesn't mean it. Still, I nod anyway.

"Okay. But can I at least stick around long enough to get my desk back to how it was?"

"Hey, it's not my desk."

The door bursts open, and my cousins, Gil, and Gil's kids rush in, Gil in the lead. "Sergeant Tunney?" he says. "We're here to post bond, and not just ten percent. I pawned some nonessentials, Monique gathered the proceeds from her paintings, Meg sold all her Rosetta

Stone French programs, the church took up a massive collection, there were anonymous donors...”

“Good grief, man. You sound like Keller. What is your point?”

Gil breathes in. “Sergeant, I have here a check for \$150,227.72.” He pats the kids. “My kids contributed some piggy bank money. Anyway, it’s all here, so I insist—we all insist—that you forget whatever Rawlings says or thinks and let Maria go.”

“Yeah!” the kids chorus. The girls move closer and cling to me.

Tunney laughs. “I’m impressed. Nobody’s ever thought one of my inmates was worth that much. But we won’t be needing the money.” He explains the situation, and a celebration ensues, until my sergeant puts his fingers in his mouth and whistles. “Simmer down, now—it’s not a blasted coronation!”

“Then it’s true?” Sophie asks. “They know you really didn’t do it? You can go home?”

I take her on my lap. “Yes, it is true, darlin’. Thanks to you kids, Mr. Brendan, your dad...this whole town, really. And Jesus.”

“Wow!” Clayton says. “You love Jesus now, too?”

I nod. “Just like I love y’all—with all my heart.”

“Oh, this is turning into a mush-fest,” Tunney growls. “Why don’t you all get on out of here?”

We all laugh. “Yes, sir!”

A week later, Gil and I are having dinner at Mama Venezia’s Italian Restaurant. It’s our first official date. Candlelight, soft violins, and everything.

“So,” Gil says, “what have you decided to do with the hundred fifty grand? It’s yours now.”

I take a bite of manicotti. “Well, that’s what’s funny. I had a lot of plans—give some to the church, some to the department, maybe even give you some for the Stage Door. But God asked me...well, He...” I laugh. “He says He knows I think it’s weird, but He wants me to keep it. He keeps telling me that, uh—I still have pieces to find, whatever that means, and the money’s

gonna help.”

“Ah. Any idea what that means?”

“Are you kidding? I’m barely out of diapers spiritually speaking. But I’m working on it, and God’s promised to tell me when I’m ready.”

“Good for you. You’ve grown a lot in your spiritual journey, you know.”

“Yeah, I do. And I love being a Christian.”

“I knew you would.”

Silence takes over. I try to eat, but there’re too many thoughts bouncing around in my brain. They mix themselves into a bittersweet thought smoothie, rise a little, and end up in my eyes.

Gil looks up. “Maria? Oh...oh, sweetheart, don’t cry. What is it?”

I shake my head. “No, no, it’s...I...”

“Are you thinking about it?” Gil asks, because we both know what “it” is. “Oh, darling, I’m sorry. Today’s the anniversary. I shouldn’t have...”

“No, it’s not that at all,” I assure him. “I mean, yes, sometimes I do. And it’s hard. But I’m gonna get through that. What I can’t get through is—it’s over between us now. I solved the case for you, and now I have to let you go.”

“Why?”

I laugh. “Gilbert Montgomery, you sure do have a talent for ignoring the obvious. Yes, I am a Christian now, but that didn’t change anything. I’m still the same woman—well, not spiritually, but as far as personality, and what I like and don’t like, and all that—that’s never gonna change. I’m never gonna change. And I know what you’re gonna say. You don’t want me to. But your parents—your world—they do. And I will never fit into your world. Not like Anne did. You know that.”

Gil takes my hand and leads me out of the dining room onto the back terrace. Once we’re there, he hugs me.

“Gumshoe,” he almost whispers. “My sweet, wonderful Maria. You don’t understand.”

“Then enlighten me.”

“Okay. I almost lost you. And it took the thought of never seeing you again, at least without iron bars, to realize how much I love you and how good you are for me and my kids. Now, I realize we’ve got some obstacles to deal with, like my parents. But what they think does not change my love for you. I want to get to know you better and see where we end up. Because if I let you go, I’m going to end up locked up—in the loony bin. So what do you say?”

I laugh. “Gilbert Montgomery, are you asking me to...get serious? As in, ‘oh, I heard they got pinned/I was hopin’ they would/now they’re livin’ at last/goin’ steady for good?’”

“Hey, *Bye, Bye, Birdie*,” Gil laughs. “And yes, I am. But since I don’t have a pin...”

“Hmmm?”

He moves closer. The terrace turns jade. And we finish the kiss we started at the theater.

Afterward, we kiss again.

FOUR-PART FIASCO

CHAPTER 1:

“Travel a new highway that’s never been tried before...”

-West Side Story

“How was school today?”

I look up from my latest batch of case notes and give my partner, Brendan Schmidt, a dry grin. The “how was school” line has been our standard joke since last September, when I picked up where I left off on the drama degree I never finished. The truth is, I’ve debated over going back to school practically since I dropped out. I’ve tried to convince myself I should be happy being a cop because after all, that makes more of a difference for others than playacting ever will. But ever since I got accused of murder last year, my whole life’s changed. I met Jesus, who I think is the coolest person on the planet—or off the planet if you want to get technical. I found Gil Montgomery, a true gentleman with the three most fantastic kids in the world. And thanks to a nudge or two from my cousins, Schmidt, and his wife, plus the \$150,000 used to bail me out of jail that I got to keep, I’m back in academia, and this time I’m not giving up.

“Okay, so how was it yesterday?” Schmidt corrects himself. “Are your profs nurturing your mind or turning it into spaghetti?”

“Nurturing—oh, crumb! Hang on.” I turn and rush into my cubicle, smacking myself in the forehead as I go. I forgot to water my African violets again, and it looks like the poor things breathed their last sometime around eight-fifteen AM. Oh, well. I grab a spare pair of gloves from my desk, pull them on, and carefully dump the corpse into my trash can.

“May it rest in peace,” fellow detective Oliver Farris intones before cracking up.

I shoot a mocking glare at him, yank off the gloves, throw them out, and make a point of directing my words at Schmidt.

“They’re nurturing it,” I tell him. “My brain, I mean. I never really liked school as a kid, but now that I can focus just on music and theater, it’s a lot easier. For once, I’m acing things and teachers are smiling at me, not looking at me like I’m a nut.”

"But you are a nut," Schmidt says.

"Watch it, buddy, or I'll tell Dorothea you sneaked a Little Debbie cake at lunch yesterday."

"Okay, but then I'll have to tell Gil what you really think about his secret Elvis obsession. Let's see, I believe your exact words were, 'if I wanted to watch something wiggle itself to death, I'd buy a bulk case of cherry Jell-O.'"

"Shut up."

"You shut up."

"No, you shut up."

"Why don't you both shut up?" our supervisor, Sergeant Tunney, wants to know.

"Schmidt, I need copies of those handouts if you're gonna have that presentation ready by tomorrow, and Keller, you're supposed to be at the gym, although I can't believe I have to tell you, of all people, to go exercise."

"If only it were that easy," I say when Tunney leaves, hoping my partner doesn't think I'm whining and fretting about the situation.

Schmidt doesn't look like he thinks that. In fact, he smiles at me. "I know. I know this isn't easy for you, but face facts, partner. You do need to ease your way into this. Who knows when you're gonna need it?"

"That's the point. I've been lucky. Or these days, I should say God's watched out for me. I have never had to get up close and personal with a perp and use self-defense."

"But there's always a first time."

"You're right, of course. Honestly, you are such a big brother."

"Uh-huh, and don't you forget it. You'll be fine. Word around the bureau is you're doing great in the class."

"Word's right," I admit. "And after all, it is just women, we're all together, and we're not actually making contact. It's not so bad."

Schmidt laughs. "Always the optimist. Death itself doesn't stand a chance against you. See you later." He folds his hands briefly in a silent "praying for you" gesture, reaches into his

pocket, and hands me a packet of M&Ms. “For good luck,” he says, “and as payment for those cinnamon jellybeans you sneaked into my desk last week. I’ll be happy when Dorothea’s department at the hospital is done with all these nutrition lectures.”

I laugh. “Hey, you look good. Dorothea’s just trying to get you to maintain healthy weight, that’s all. And besides, if you had my metabolism, you’d get teased for being skinny, everybody would hate you, and you’d have to order extra food just to feel a little bit full. Be glad you’ve got the normal problem.”

“True. Now...” Schmidt gives me a Dad Look. “You are stalling, Miss Keller. Change out of those high heels and get across the street. C’mon, get going.”

So I do, but only because I know if I don’t, not only will the whole division be on my back, the class’ teacher will chew me out. Debra Fortney, my best girlfriend on the force, started it when she realized what a minority female cops were in Cherry Creek, and how some of us had been cheated out of proper self-defense training just because we’re girls. See, people like Tunney, bless his boneheaded old-school heart, think we should just rely on the big strong manly men to save us. Of course, I never told Debra that I always managed to have coughs, migraines, or any number of other illnesses on self-defense training days. But now that she’s personally invited me to the class, I’m stuck. Every other day, I have to go in there, punch, kick, and jump my way through forty-five tortuous minutes, and fight off memories of being pinned to Chandler Halliday’s bed and...

“Hey, Maria!” Debra’s the only one who ever drops the last-name rule with me. “Wow, you’re early. C’mon in, we’re almost ready to start.”

As usual, Debra’s enthusiasm makes me smile. “Thanks, Deb. Let me just put my bag down...hey, ladies,” I call over my shoulder to the other four cops from the upper divisions in the room—two narcotics gals, one from property crimes, and one who works with Debra as a forensics specialist, but also often gets called in to be an expert voice in sex crimes. I think she suspects something about my secrets. In fact, I think they all do, but Debra’s the only one who knows and she wouldn’t crack even at gunpoint.

All too soon, Debra's mix of catchy oldies, country, and disco is pumping through the main studio of the police gym, and we're all throwing punches and kicks at imaginary opponents. As usual, it doesn't take long before I'm mostly into it. My favorite imaginary opponent is my former coworker, Pete Rawlings. Yeah, would've felt great to land an uppercut on that piece of slime and watch his extra-cheesy chili fries come flying out of his mouth in all their already-been-chewed glory. Vomit is the perfect substance to associate him with.

Except suddenly, I'm remembering another vomit-related incident, back at Texas A&M. To get rid of it, I double-time my moves and change the image in my head to Sarah Goodson. Yeah, she's a good one to go after. All that sweetness, all those smiles and fake tears, those prissy, perfectly manicured nails...but that makes me think about how Chandler dug his nails into...

"C'mon, gals, stronger, stronger...gimme four more...three more, two more...don't you dare quit..." Debra bounces over to me. "C'mon, Maria, what are you, a cop or a sculpture? Shake your groove thing, lady!"

I triple up my moves to make up for lost seconds. Like I always say, if people who're depressed would just get up and move, they'd not have half the problem. But that doesn't stop my thoughts. After all, I thought I had my groove back there for awhile, but being thrown in the clink for a crime I didn't commit—much less four murders in a capital punishment state—killed that idea dead, as we'd say in Texas. Schmidt and the others think I'm "over it," and as much as it can be, that's true. You never really get over something like that, anymore than you do say, losing your real parents or getting raped or being accused of suicide, courtesy of the cop dad who still thinks your passion for theater was stupid...

Why am I thinking like this? Must be a satanic attack like Dorothea Schmidt, my spiritual mama, talks about. We just had a talk about that at our last one-on-one Bible study. Yeah, that's gotta be it. Well, that I can fix. I aim a kick at an invisible demon, scream the Bible passage about the armor of God in my mind, and dare Satan to come over here again. He wants a piece of this? He can just go ahead and make my day!

My lungs are burning, my throat is dry, and my CCPD sweatshirt is soaked. But when Debra stops the CD, I know the class has helped me again, if not as much as I wanted.

“Good job, ladies! Thanks for coming out. See you in a couple of days, and we’re gonna keep working hard, because soon, we’re gonna up the ante. That’s right, actual self-defense combinations and some face-offs with a few volunteer brothers in blue!”

Oh, holy crumb! It’s all I can do to keep from spitting my bottled water all over the place. I know Debra noticed, because she catches my eye and mouths “stick around a minute,” but I shake my head and dash off. I’ve got to shower, change into regular clothes, and get back to work before my real classes start. In record time, I’m clean, dressed, and back at my desk, listening to Schmidt go over the files of our last three cases. They’re all cut-and-dried stuff thanks to victims or witnesses who knew the perps, but I focus like they’re each an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*.

“What classes do you have today?” Schmidt asks at one point.

“Hmmm, today’s Wednesday, so that would be VMS—Voice and Movement for the Stage—MSC—Music Study and Composition—and...ugh...choir rehearsal.”

“What’s with the ‘ugh?’ I thought you loved choir.”

“No, I do. It’s just that Dr. Hastings was right,” I say, referring to my advisor, who is also one of my professors and the coolest lady I have ever met, Dorothea excepted. “I mean, when she said there was a vendetta in the choir, I thought yeah, right. What, tenors and basses still slugging it out over who’re the ‘real men?’” I laugh, but just for a minute. “Trouble is, she was serious.”

“How serious?” Schmidt’s wearing his cop face.

“Hey, drop the Sergeant Friday act,” I laugh. “Nothing illegal’s going down. It’s just that...” But then my phone rings, and I’m tied up for the next few hours, until I hear a honk from outside. The sight of a bright blue Honda Civic tells me it’s my best friend from Silverton, Rose Shippensberg. She’s about my age, and we have so much in common, it’s creepy. Like me, she’s an orphan. Like me, she’s pursuing a drama degree, although she wants to use hers to teach elementary-age kids. And like me, Rose is finishing her degree because college didn’t go well for

her the first time around. In both cases, a boyfriend was involved, but mine raped me and split, while hers talked her into an insanely expensive wedding, got them up to their eyebrows in debt, and filed for divorce a hot two years later. If not for financial aid and the tutoring business she runs out of her house, Rose wouldn't be in school. And if not for God, I wouldn't have 92% of the good things I have now in my life. But we don't talk about that. We just carpool, trading off every week, and enjoy each other's company.

I check the clock on my computer. Crumb, Rose is about five minutes early. "Um, Schmidt, can you..."

"Sure, I'll tie up any loose ends. You go on to class, and I don't want to hear about you playing poker at the sorority house."

"He's a hoot," Rose says later when I tell her what Schmidt said. "So, heard on the news you nabbed the guy who killed his grandma. Congrats, girlfriend."

"Thanks. It wasn't a big thing."

"But it is. You're doing something with serious kingdom value, cleaning house on evil stuff like murder."

"Yeah, I guess so." I know I don't sound enthusiastic, but Rose's comment kinda rubs me wrong. She's a Christian, but she's been one a lot longer than me. She would know all about "kingdom value," but is she right? I can only hope so...

"Maria? Earth to Maria—hey, MARIA! Anybody home?"

"Oh. Sorry, Rose. I was daydreaming, and I've gotten so used to hearing 'Keller,' sometimes I forget my first name. What'd you say?"

"I said, you'd think with a cop in the choir, people would shape up." She sighs. "I don't even want to go to rehearsal tonight. Did you hear what happened to Irene Quinlin?"

"No, what?" Irene Quinlin, an alto who's also known as IQ because of her initials and impressive 4.5 GPA, sits right across from me in our regular formation.

"Well," Rose says, "you know that alto solo in 'The Lord is My Shepherd?'"

"Yeah."

“Well, Irene wants it. She’d be perfect, too. You know she’s got the best voice of any of the altos. And Amy was helping her practice for the auditions,” Rose says, referring to one of the mezzo-sopranos. “But then the sopranos started telling Amy to quit helping her, or else, and the altos told Irene she better stay away from Amy, or things were gonna get ugly. But Irene wants that solo so much. I’d even say she needs it.”

“You’d be right,” I agree. Irene is one of those people who barely says a word to anybody else. I don’t know if she really has a confidence problem or if she’s just naturally quiet, but I’ve always had a feeling she’s hiding something under a bushel, as the old Sunday school song says. Plus, I’m a soprano myself, but it bothers me that altos hardly ever get the showy parts.

“So of course, Irene didn’t back out,” Rose continues. “And when she didn’t, well...I can’t prove anything, but I’m really worried, because there’s a rumor going around that some of the altos were gonna stab Irene in the back. They were planning to mess with her academic reputation—tell one of her professors she was using SparkNotes to write a term paper. And you know junior year is usually the hardest on any student.”

“Oh, crumb. They didn’t get away with it, did they?”

Rose fiddles with her big hoop earrings. “I think so. Irene and a couple other altos are in this super-tough English class together, and they did have a big paper due. I was walking by the choir room Monday, and I heard Irene’s voice. She was in there with Dr. Porter, and he was warning her that if he found out the SparkNotes story was true, she could forget about coming back in this college’s choir, because no decent, self-respecting, true Christ follower would even think of cheating.”

“Dr. Porter? Third from the top in the music department? How in the name of Julie Andrews did he hear about this?”

“How should I know? But you know one of the sopranos had to be involved. They’ll do anything to see altos get nailed.”

“Amen, sister,” I say. “But so will the altos, if someone does something to ‘betray’ them.” I bite my lip. “Honestly, what part of ‘Christian school’ don’t these people understand?”

“A lot, obviously. I mean, okay, cheating is not cool and if Irene really had done it, Porter would’ve had the right to be mad. But if you ask me, either way, what he said was way too harsh,” Rose says. “In fact, Maria, here’s a tip. I know you just commute, but I live in Silverton, so I see some of these profs outside of school. Some of them believe that being a Christian means never making a mistake, and that if you do, then your salvation should practically be revoked.”

“Ouch. I wish you hadn’t told me that. I already know two people who’d love those profs,” I say.

“Oh, you mean Gil’s parents. They still hate your guts?”

“Yeah, and my brain, and my heart, and the very sound of my breath. If I didn’t love Gil so much, I’d have hit the lonesome road a year ago. He’s keeping us pretty much apart for now because he figures I’ve been hurt enough, but he’s been telling me he wants to keep trying. He’s invited me out for a poetry reading and dessert on Friday—he’s picking me up from class—and they’ll be there. Gil’s gonna leave the kids with Schmidt and Dorothea, so I’ll be stuck having to talk to Laurence, Paige, or both sometime that night.”

Rose squeezes my hand. “I don’t blame you for being worried, but aren’t you the one who always says Maria Keller never turns down a challenge? Yeah, so don’t let Laurence and Paige be your first. Here’s what I’d do. I’d figure out which one is more likely to open up to you, find a weak spot, and attack.”

I laugh. “That sounds like I should be dive-bombing them.”

“Well, who says you can’t?” Rose imitates an Air Force pilot. ‘Kindness bombs away!’”

The college’s clock tower, as well as the gentle-eyed statue of Jesus Himself, comes into view when we top the last hill. I squeeze Rose’s hand back. “Thanks. That might work. Plus, you just made rehearsal seem a lot easier to handle.”

“All right, singers, listen up,” Dr. Laughlin, our choir director, announces from her podium. “We’ve only got two weeks left until the Autumn Opener concert, and since it is our opener, the entire campus will expect to see us at our best. Pay close attention as I give out the music order, and let me hear nothing but scores rustling in notebooks. First, ‘Jubilate Deo’, second, ‘Didn’t My

Lord Deliver Daniel,' third, 'Sinnuh Man,' and fourth, 'Go Down, Moses.' We will then take a break and finish up the evening with 'Ziegnerleben,' 'Broadway Medley,' 'Tres Cantos Nativos,' and 'Shenandoah Blues.'"

Next to me, Rose's hand goes up. "Dr. Laughlin, what about 'The Lord is my Shepherd?'"

Dr. Laughlin frowns and shakes her head. "I have removed that piece from our repertoire in order to create a better balance between sacred and secular pieces, though it does grieve me to do so."

Right, Dr. L. I'm a detective, and I'm also a Texas gal, and I can hear what you're not saying. Any piece that makes people wanna take out their mental and emotional guns for a shootout ain't worth it. I catch Irene Qunlin's eye and send her a sympathetic look. She smiles back and buries her head in her notebook. Meanwhile, a handful of altos and almost all the sopranos indulge in satisfied smirks. The babies.

"All right, we've wasted enough time," Dr. Laughlin says. "Please stand for warm-ups. Mr. Black, F sharp, please." She nods to the accompanist, who obeys. "Okay, and...begin counting as Mr. Black plays—one and two and, and so on. We'll go to thirty. Drop out only if you lose all air."

Oh, man, this really takes me back. I've been in this choir for months now, but I've never gotten over how being with the rest of the group makes me feel. All of a sudden, I'm back in the Thousand Stars, having voice lessons with Mama. I'm in elementary school, in the middle of my foster care days, when the music teacher offered to give me voice and piano instruction for free because she knew my so-called parents sure weren't gonna pay a cent. Middle school, when, after a concert full of badly rendered glee club numbers, our director pulled Luke and Jasmine aside and told them, confidentially he thought (but I was anxiously listening) that he knew I had a professional career ahead of me. High school—four musicals, countless concerts, and being elected choir president.

But...I look at Irene's face again. There were other moments, too. I never wanted to fit the "conceited diva" profile, so I went out of my way not to. I begged my high school musical director to put me in the chorus line so nobody would think I was getting a big head, although he

never listened. I purposely didn't show up for solo auditions. I coached the worst singer in the whole choir until she could stay on key. And yet...and yet the director and his teacher's pet goons always shook their heads at me, or even yelled at me, saying I was wasting my gift. One classmate said it was my only gift, that I wasn't good at anything else, after all. They never understood that using such a "gift" was what started things like...okay, girl, quit thinking. Just sing.

I'm going strong when my pocket vibrates. I catch Dr. Laughlin's eye and blow on my index finger like I'm blowing away gun smoke, our secret signal for, "I need to go to work." She nods, smiles, and gestures "keep singing", so I sing until I get out the door. Thank God—literally—for a college that understands I can only be a civilian part-time.

"Hey, Sergeant, anything good happening over there?" I ask later, in my car. "Good" is a cop's code word for "bad". Like they say, for us, crooks and druggies equal job security.

"Negative. What's going down right now is in Silverton."

So let me get this straight. My supervisor pulled me out of class—because, being for credit, choir rehearsal counts as class—so I could handle something the Silverton cops should be worried about? "Uh, excuse me, sir, but I believe that's out of my jurisdiction."

"Usually, yes, but we've got a situation here. Armed robbery, and the victim is a prof at your college. You know anybody named Webb?"

"Negative. Why would he want to talk to me?"

"It's a she. Somebody from the religion and philosophy department. Anyhow, she knows who you are, thanks to the news, and she begged the Silverton uniforms to get in touch with you. You ask me, a woman who's been shot in the shoulder oughta be less picky about the cop she raps with, but what do I know, I've just been on the force thirty-two years."

"Uh, yes, sir," I say, because that's all I can say when Tunney gets into one of his grumpy old bear moods, as Clayton, Gil's oldest, calls them. "I'm on my way."

"10-4. And Keller? No funny business. Get in, find out what the chick wants, get out, and drive home. Be careful out there."

I should feel pretty good. A victim has specifically asked to talk to me, which equals trust, and that's what I want from civilians. I don't know why she wants to talk to me, which is interesting. I love a good mystery. And more and more often, Tunney is sounding like he gives a flip whether I live or die.

So why do I feel like I'm about to throw up?

CHAPTER 2:

“It’s the rumor, the legend, the mystery...”

-Anastasia

Grace Webb reminds me of why I gave up theater to become a cop. Her brownish-blond hair is a tangled, reedy-looking mess, smushed against her pillow. Her green eyes are dull and pain-smudged. What little I can see of her body is covered in bruises, and with all those tubes, wires, and needles poking out of her, she looks like something from a bad sci-fi flick. I spot a Bible on her nightstand, one that looks like it’s been through a blender. Yup, whoever did this, he’s going down. Nobody, but nobody, does this to another human being while I’m around, especially if said human is a fellow Christian. Of course, I am a rookie when it comes to God, but...

“Well, Detective, are you going to come in or stand in the doorway all night?”

At least she can laugh. From all I’ve heard about recovery from this kind of thing, it means she’ll get better faster. “Sorry, ma’am. Yeah, I’m Detective Maria Keller, Cherry Creek Home—“

“I know who you are. I know exactly who you are, which is why I called you here. Sit down, please.”

So I do, and take out my battered red notebook. Will my Bible ever look like it? Okay, focus, girl. “Of course, Ms. Webb. Now, let me get some basics. First thing’s gonna be the five W’s and an H. Tell me anything and everything you remember about the robbery. Number one, what time did it happen?”

“Around five. I had just come home from teaching my last class, which shows you how bold criminals are these days, to rob people in broad daylight. Of course, we are approaching the time change, so that might not be an accurate assessment. But I don’t want to talk about height, weight, gender, how many times the idiot hit me, or what was taken. I want to talk about motive.”

I bite my lip. This is the first time I’ve ever done preliminary questioning without Schmidt nearby. Would he let her go here yet, or would he insist she stay on track?

Wrong question, Maria. What would you do?

I look up. *That doesn't matter, God. I'm still considered a rookie. If I do something wrong...*

Then you do something wrong. You'll survive. But while you won't always have Schmidt with you, you'll always have me, and when I ask you something, I want an answer. So what would you do?

Okay, looks like God's gonna win this round. I turn back to Ms. Webb. "Okay," I say, "so tell me about motive. Why do you think the perp did this?"

"It's not a matter of 'think.' I know why. I walked in, put my keys and purse away, and went into the kitchen to make myself some coffee. While I was taking it into the den, that—that hoodlum—jumped out from where he or she had been shut up in the entertainment center. The perp, as you call the idiot, proceeded to beat me, but I fought back, which is when the robber pulled the gun and shot. And the last thing that was said—the only thing, in fact—was, 'there, you—well, several curse words—'maybe that'll teach you to keep your head in your Bible and leave the music department alone.'"

I write down the quote. "Intriguing. Why would the perp say that? And by the way, do you have any clue if we're dealing with a man or a woman?"

"A man, I'm almost sure. Of course, whoever it was, they were dressed all in black, including a ski mask, but I doubt a woman's voice would be that deep, unless it was just muffled."

"Hmmm. Now, back to my first question. Why would he say that, in particular? Have you been hanging around the music department lately? Have you made any enemies?"

"Apparently, I have, though I didn't know until it was too late. You see..." She sighs, flinches, and points to the nightstand. "If it's not too much trouble, could you get me some more water? I don't want a nurse in here eavesdropping."

"Sure, I don't mind."

"All right. It's a long story, but here we go," Ms. Webb says. "I'm aware that you're a nontraditional student at Christ and His Saints, and that you're in choir. Then you know about the vendetta."

“Unfortunately.”

“Have you been told what started it?”

“No, but I sure wish I knew. Could you tell me?”

“Not only could I, but I will.” She takes another sip. “This thing has been poisoning our college since 1972.”

Ouch. Thirty-seven years. Who lets a feud go on that long these days? “What happened in 1972?”

“That was the year the guard changed in the Christ and His Saints music department. The chairman retired, and when the new one arrived, he wanted to change things.”

“What kind of things?”

“Small ones, but they had a way of adding up,” Ms. Webb says. “Of course, this was all a long time before I came to Silverton, but I heard. Back then, the choir had a sacred-music-only rule, and the new chairman—Dr. Delacroix was his name—wanted to introduce clean secular numbers. He wanted to lower the GPA for people who wanted to participate in the special things like Chamber Singers and Show Choir. It used to be a 3.8, and he convinced the higher-ups to lower it to 3.5. Far more reasonable if you ask me, but then, no one did. So of course, you had some disgruntled students and staff around, but nothing worth getting too upset over, until what happened with Louisa Carstairs.”

“Who’s Louisa Carstairs?” I ask, writing down the name and underlining it.

“I’m getting to that. Be patient.”

I laugh. “Sorry, Ms. Webb. Patience is one fruit of the Spirit Jesus is having a hard time growing in me.”

She laughs back. “It’s Dr. Webb, but call me Grace, and that’s fine. Jesus understands. By the way, I heard how you found Him, and no matter what anyone else at the university says, I congratulate you for it and have every confidence your faith is genuine.”

I bite my lip. “W-why wouldn’t it be?” And why does Grace’s question scare me a little?

Grace gives me a sad half-smile. “Because you converted in a jail cell. Prison often causes a bout of temporary religious conviction. Or worse, you could’ve just claimed faith for the fire insurance.”

The only fire burning right now is the one in my heart. “Let me assure you,” I say through clenched teeth, “anyone who says that is a dirty liar. I’ll repent later, but I always call my spades, spades.”

“Admirable,” Grace says, “if not tactful. But then, I don’t suppose you can often afford to mince words.”

“A perp is a perp is a perp,” I confirm.

“Hmmm. Well, it’s funny we should be talking about your own faith journey, because it segues nicely into my story about Louisa Carstairs, who was a Christ and His Saints student back in ’72. She was from Asheville, and in her high school years, she got involved with a wild crowd. Drugs, drinking, I’m sure you can guess. Apparently, she was carrying around a lot of anger, thanks to some personal issues I never got the scoop on. She ended up getting arrested for drug possession, resisting arrest, and assaulting an officer—poor man got stuck with a twisted ankle, and his face was clawed to bits.”

“Ouch! So...so this Louisa...how did she...”

“End up in college? Ah, that is a story of grace, pardon the pun,” the religion professor says. “Her family had always been strict with her, and they refused to post her bail. Her friends abandoned her. There was a female officer who tried to take care of Louisa—make sure she ate, that sort of thing. But it turned out Louisa was a closet bulimic and vomited up everything they gave her. After about two days, she was understandably miserable. She didn’t think she was worth anything to anyone at that point.”

The story’s hitting some major nerves. “Uh-huh, been there, done that, got the T-shirt.”

Grace laughs. “I love your sense of humor, Detective.”

“Maria, please.”

“Maria. That’s a beautiful name, by the way. Just like Our Lady—I was raised Catholic, did you know that?”

“No. I don’t know much about Catholicism. Heck, I don’t know much about my own religion now that I’ve got it. Maybe we oughta talk sometime. But back to Louisa. Did she convert in jail?”

“Yes. The officer—I forget her name and I suppose it no longer matters—was a Christian. She finally came in the cell and told Louisa what was what in a tough love way. Louisa ended up sobbing in her arms and accepting the Lord. A few days later, she was bailed out, thanks to a collection from the officer’s church, and sent to a treatment center to get her life on track. By her junior year in school, she was doing well, and she was provisionally accepted to Christ and His Saints, on the condition that she keep her nose clean and find respectable extracurricular activities to participate in.”

“Makes sense,” I say. “But why do I get the feeling things went way wrong?”

“Because they did. Louisa entered the university as an English major, but she loved to sing, so she joined the choir. Dr. Delacroix let her in, and most of the campus went completely ape. Plus, Louisa got a lot of flak from other students—being called “jailbird” and all that. She was an alto, and gradually, some of them accepted her, which meant the other altos eventually did too, in a kind of solidarity show. Louisa also eventually started dating an upstanding young man in the bass section...”

“And all of a sudden, it was a two-way split, altos and basses vs. sopranos and tenors,” I finish. “Man, sounds like Singer Smackdown or something.”

“That’s pretty accurate,” Grace agrees. “Anyway, pretty soon, the whole situation was out of control. The current choir director and Delacroix were ready to snatch each other bald, the accompanist was involved...it was nuts. Well, Louisa made it into the Show Choir, despite howling protests. But on the way to their first performance, there was an accident. The bus driver, Dr. Delacroix, and four choir members—two altos, a tenor, and a soprano—were killed. Louisa made it out with just a concussion and a broken leg, but she was put through Hades because she survived. The altos and basses stood behind her, but the sopranos and tenors made her miserable right up to graduation day. Worse, no one will stop this insanity because a lot of the

faculty members are in on it. That is, they believe that if Delacroix, with his “radical” views, hadn’t come to Christ and His Saints, none of it would’ve happened.”

“Man.” I finish writing and flex my hand. “One thing, though. You fit in here, how?”

“Because,” Grace says, “a few other religion professors and I have been trying for years to stop the vendetta. It’s never clear how much influence we have, but we must try, because with the subject we teach, we’re seen as pillars—ones who have God on speed dial, if you will. Well, I recently found out about what happened with Irene Quinlin—the SparkNotes fiasco. She’s a religion major taking choir as an elective, and she burst into my office crying. Well, I put my foot down, called a meeting with the head of the music department, tried to make him see reason, and...you know the rest.”

“I sure do. Holy crumb, these are some sick tickets we’re dealing with, to quote Truvy Jones.”

“Indeed. And that’s an apropos quote, considering that you are the epitome of a steel magnolia, Maria Keller. But listen up, now. I’ve got an assignment for you.”

“How many pages, and how wide do you want the margins?”

“Funny, but this isn’t the time for jokes. Maria, I want you and your partner to find out who did this to me, that’s true. But I also need you to do what you did for Gil Montgomery. I need you to use your cop skills in the choir.”

“Why?”

Grace shudders. “A fellow religion professor, Tom Brighton, came by before you did. He found this on his desk this morning.” Grace reaches into the nightstand and hands me a yellow sticky note. On it is scrawled,

THE BLOOD OF JESUS CAN’T WASH THIS SCHOOL CLEAN, BUT I WILL. THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH!

“Well, whoever this perp is, he’s not your average dirt bag,” Tunney says when I arrive back at the station later that night. I’m exhausted, my whole body aches, and my mind is in

NASCAR mode. I just handed over the sticky note, and the guys are staring at it like it's the Hope Diamond.

"See, this is why I have never gotten involved in religion," my boss continues. "There's always some psycho freak who thinks everything but ye olde King James is of the devil, convinced that God told him to rub out people as a form of vigilante justice. Keller, you ask me, you and Schmidt are crazy."

"We've heard it before, sir," Schmidt says. "Now the question is, how do we handle this? Do you really want to send Keller into that choir in her official capacity?"

"Well, our good friend Grace does have a point," Tunney says. "Nobody knows choristers like Keller. And if this little catfight in the choir has already gotten so far out of proportion, the Silverton police are gonna need, shall we say, a secret weapon."

Sam Greenwood bristles. "I see your point, sir," he says, "but with all due respect, I don't like your words."

Tunney looks like Greenwood just threw cold water in his face. "That may be, but Keller's a big girl. If she doesn't like what I just said, let her tell me. Keller, any objections?"

Now, if that's not an impossible question, my name's not—well, Keller. I look up for a second and choose my words carefully. "No, I don't have any. But at the same time, I am no one's chess piece, even if I am a choir queen."

Tunney actually smiles. "Score one for you, kid. Okay, so here's the way this will work. I'm going to put my head together with the Silverton police, and we're gonna work out a cop swap. Keller, since you're already a student at that college, I want you focused on your homework with half your brain and the case with the other half. Your home base is the Silverton station until further notice. Schmidt, you go with her. In a case like this, I don't want her out there alone just yet. Meanwhile, Silverton will give us a couple of their cops as a trade-off. But Keller, I want you to go in a day ahead of Schmidt so you can get a sense of things, figure out exactly what you may be dealing with. You've been with us for a year now, and I want more of the case in your hands."

"You got it," I say. "How soon do you want me over there?"

"I'll get in touch with Detective Sergeant Hirsch right now. More than likely, he'll need a day to get everything set up, so he'll expect you to report in forty-eight hours."

"Then I'll be there. Thanks."

"So, your second undercover case," Schmidt says when he walks me to the door a few minutes later. "Congratulations. Was it me, or were you getting bored with that cut-and-dried stuff?"

"It was you. Not much in this job bores me, Schmidt. You know that. And you know if this didn't involve singing, I wouldn't be going back undercover. Hey, why do you think I keep getting involved in this music stuff, anyway?"

Schmidt shrugs. "I guess you'll have to figure it out, Miss Gumshoe. But maybe God's trying to tell you something."

"What, you mean like, He's trying to give me a special purpose? Right, Schmidt. Not gonna happen. That kind of thing is only for good Christians like you."

"Keller, quit tearing yourself down. You're a very good Christian, but you shouldn't even be using that phrase. Being one of God's children is not about being 'good,' in any context. It's about accepting His love and letting that drive you to do what He wants you to—love, not rules."

I shrug. "Whatever. I think God will be happy if I just put effort into this thing. Earn some gold stars."

"No, He won't, and neither will you."

I don't know how to answer that, so I elbow him. "You missed your calling, Schmidt. You ought to have been a preacher."

"Bite your tongue, you nut," Schmidt says. "And by the way, Dorothea said to tell you, don't forget about your first cooking lesson Thursday morning, right after Bible study."

"Yeah. I wouldn't learn for anybody but Gil, you know. Plus, it'll rack up brownie points with the Parents from the Black Lagoon." Whom I have to face in less than three days.

Oh, joy. I'd rather do an autopsy.

“Maria? Maria, honey...” Gil puts his hand over my knuckles. “Stop. You’re going to be fine.”

“If I had a dollar for every time I heard that and it turned out to be a lie, I could buy Radio City Music Hall.”

“This time it’s true. And you may get to Radio City one day, which is why I don’t want you cracking your knuckles so much. I don’t want anything to ruin those beautiful hands. They look so much better tickling the eighty-eights than they do all clenched up like that.” He picks up my left hand and kisses it.

“Thanks, Captain,” I tell Gil. “And I’ll try not to be so nervous. But your folks aren’t exactly my best buddies, you know. I mean sure, I’m not what they’re used to, and part of it was my fault, with the phone and all...but...”

“I know. I know. But just try again, for me.”

“Hey, I made seven-layer Mexican dip for you. I can do this.”

“Good. Come on, there they are. Mom, Dad! We’re over here!”

I cross the parking lot with the theme music from *The Green Mile* competing with the lyrics from “The Lord is my Shepherd” in my head. Fortunately, the biblical lyrics win, and I’m able to sit down at our coffee shop table and say,

“Mr. and Mrs. Montgomery. So good to see you again.” My smooth, twang-less voice would do Henry Higgins proud.

Montgomery Sr. grunts. Mrs. Montgomery nods. “Good to see you back on the straight and narrow.”

“Mom,” Gil warns. “Now, both of you stop it. You promised you’d be nice.”

“We’re not first-graders, son.” Montgomery Sr. says “son” like a challenge. It makes me want to paint on an extra layer of lipstick, strip off my blouse, and belly-dance.

Love your enemies, remember?

Yeah, God, I do. Thanks for the tip. I turn toward Mrs. Montgomery, figuring she’s a safer bet. “Mrs. Montgomery, I love your dress.” Because I do. She looks great in purple. There, that was easy.

Mrs. Montgomery's face doesn't change, but her voice is civil. "Thank you, Maria. You look fine yourself. Is that the outfit you were wearing when we first met?"

I look down. "Yes, it is. I'm flattered you remembered."

"Hmmm. Not appropriate for church, but it will do for this evening."

Looks like I just got a strike. Well, maybe I can bunt. "Yeah, but not much longer. It's getting cold out. I have a wonderful green winter dress I'm looking forward to wearing."

"Ah. Well just remember, fine feathers do not make a fine bird."

"No, ma'am." Strike two.

Fortunately for me, the first guest poet chooses that moment to stride onstage, and soon, I'm totally focused on his words. I've never been a poetry expert, as my fifth-grade teacher felt obligated to tell me, but I do love to read it, and I know a good poem when I hear one. This poet is certainly good. Most of his poems are about "that nature stuff," as I used to think of it in fifth grade—beautiful Appalachian mountains, walking through swamps at night, picking out a Halloween pumpkin with a little kid and feeling all mixed up when the kid gets hurt and the author can do nothing but stare at the blood and the dirt. Hey buddy, ever heard of a Band-Aid? Yeah, didn't think so. Although to give you credit, that poem about the orchids in your wife's hair was pretty good. I love orchids, and sunflowers, and snapdragons. I catch Gil smiling at me when the poem makes me smile, like he's just uncovered a secret. Well, he did. Maybe if things keep going like they have been between us, I'll reward him with another little one. Who says a tough cop can't flirt?

The other poet speaks my language with her work. She's writing about real life with real words instead of making big deals out of nothing. One of her poems even talks about God, and how much she needs Him to make sense of a life she says "feels like a window someone thought they should break." She turns her palms up and yells "Jesus", just once, at the end.

Gil, the Montgomerys, and I are sipping coffee and tea, and eating dessert, afterward when Gil asks me how I liked the readings.

"It was all fantastic," I tell him. "I'm creative, so I like it when I can see other people be creative, too."

"If you call some of this creativity," Montgomery Sr. says. "That woman, yelling our Lord's name out for the whole town to hear, thinking that it constituted a prayer. Humph!"

"Dad," Gil says, "prayer comes in many forms. The Spirit intercedes for us with groanings we cannot express, remember?"

"That poem happened to be my favorite," I back him up. "But," I continue in the interest of being nice, "I understand if it's not y'all's thing, exactly. There're art forms I don't care for myself."

"Like still life paintings, I suppose," Montgomery Sr. says.

"Well, yeah. I mean, think about it. If you go out and you paint, say, a picture of your grandkids on a porch swing or something, you'll have that memory, and the grandkids, too. But a still life? Those paintings are gorgeous when you're finished and all, but if they don't sell, what do you have to show for it? A bowl of rotten fruit."

Gil smiles at me, but I don't get a chance to smile back because I hear this funny burbling sound. I look up and realize something. Mrs. Montgomery laughed, and her eyes are sparkling, not full of sarcasm. Gil's mom approves of something I said!

If I was expecting Mrs. Montgomery to do a complete turnaround at that point, I should've known I wasn't going to get it. She's quiet the rest of the evening, acting like she's fascinated with her raspberry cheesecake. But when Gil and I head out, she says,

"Good night, Maria. I hope your next case goes well."

"Ah...thanks. Night, Mrs. Montgomery."

Gil gives me a victory sign over his parents' heads. "Maria, stay here and I'll bring the car around. It's starting to rain."

"Okay," I agree. I expect Montgomery Sr. to make the same offer to his wife, but instead, he waits until she has her back turned and taps my elbow.

"You stay out of trouble this time, young lady," he says. "You focus on getting that long-delayed degree of yours."

"I intend to."

"I expect so. You'd be foolish to throw away the second chance I'm giving you. My son does not need a lazy, uneducated, former jailbird."

“Sir, I am not...”

“You are who I say you are until you prove otherwise. Good night.”

CHAPTER 3:

"I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair and send him on his way..."

-South Pacific

"Keller? Keller, anybody home? Hey! We gonna finish this game or what?"

"Oh! Sorry, yeah." I look down at the Uno cards on the table in the Silverton detectives' bureau lounge to see what the color is. It's yellow, so I can play, and I slap down a card as fast as possible. I don't realize I slapped down a Reverse until my new colleague, Joan Lockhart, raises her eyebrows at me.

"Sorry," I tell her again. "I'm just not with it tonight."

"Like I can't tell," Lockhart says. "You're not worried about the case, are you? You'll get it. You've only been here a week. Slow down already."

"I can't. Tunney called again today, looking for an update, and I know the guys are worried about me. I can't let them down. I won't."

"You're not." The other five detectives at the table—Schmidt, Chris Anderson, Jesse McClintock, Barbara Rinaldi, and Perry LeBlanc—all nod and smile. I have to smile back. This group has turned out great, and despite LeBlanc's teasing about losing my position as the only chick in the division, I don't miss that at all. In fact, it's nice to have another woman on site to talk to, especially when the men in my life are being downright weird. Or rather, when their families are being so weird you doubt the man you love could have ever been the fruit of their union.

"KELLER!" Now all five of the others are yelling at me, and I jump so hard I drop a card. Good thing it's just a three, not a draw two or a wild card. "I'm sorry," I say again when they all give me Looks. "Something's eating at me, and no, it's not work."

"Well then, you better start talking, because I want to kick some butt, and sooner rather than later," McClintock says, only half-teasing.

"No. I am not gonna be one of those stereotypical chick cops who acts tough, but the first time her boyfriend..."

“Shut up,” Rinaldi snaps. “You are the furthest thing from that. What do you think we are, a bunch of Rawlingses?” She backs off. “Oh. My bad.”

“No, my bad,” I correct her. “You’re right. I have never been treated better than I have here, even when I was in patrol with Davenport, and he’s a real cop’s cop. Okay, if you have to know...” And I spill out the story of the poetry reading and Gil’s jerk-of-an-old-man.

“Slime bucket,” Anderson mutters. “I’d like to show him lazy, uneducated jailbird.”

“Same here,” McClintock says. “I wish I had the stuffed shirt here right now. I’d give him some of the old one-two, and he’d think twice about running his mouth.”

“Well, before we start giving anybody the old one-two,” Schmidt says, “Keller, I have to ask. Have you told Gil how you feel? I mean, really told him? Because it seems to me that if you did, he’d give his folks a piece of his mind about how they’re treating you.”

I bite my lip. “It’s complicated. See, God comes first, and He wants me to love Gil’s parents and be civil with ‘em. If I come complaining now, I let Gil down. Plus, I disappoint God, and I don’t want that. I love God so much, and I want to prove it.”

“Who says you have to?” asks Schmidt, in that cool, logical, and slightly defensive tone I despise.

“The Bible. Jesus was very clear on it. ‘If you love me, you will obey my commandments.’ There is nothing in that verse that says, ‘unless you’re Maria Keller and your boyfriend’s parents want your head on a platter.’”

“But...” Lockhart puts her hand up like she’s stopping traffic. “Didn’t you say when you converted, God told you that you didn’t have to do anything to please him?”

“Yeah, I did, but I think He meant, I didn’t have to earn my salvation, and He wasn’t gonna take it away if I didn’t do all the right things. But that doesn’t mean I have an excuse not to do them. And if that means putting up with the senior Montgomerys’ junk, then I can do it. I’ve spent most of my life wading through other people’s messes.”

“We noticed,” LeBlanc says. “And quite frankly lady, if you turn your heart toward me just right, I can tell you don’t smell so good.”

“Oh, will y’all please leave my personal life alone for right now?” I ask. “I’ve got enough trouble with that from Schmidt.”

“Good thing, too,” Anderson says, winking at my partner. He puts down his last card.

“Okay, everybody, show ‘em.”

The rules are that whoever gets to five hundred points first loses. I’m trailing Anderson by a narrow margin and would’ve liked to see if I could win, but Detective Sergeant Hirsch arrives to tell us we should all get back to work. When I return to my cubicle, I notice an email from Gil, but decide to read it later. That can be my reward if I find out anything in a couple of hours, when I’m supposed to be at choir rehearsal. Meanwhile, I’ll go over the memo Hirsch sent me about department policy again, just so I don’t screw anything up. Hirsch is a lot more lax about little stuff than Tunney, so I think I’ll be okay, but it doesn’t pay to take chances.

My phone rings. “Hello. You will get an update after I get back from class tonight, first thing. Tell Tunney that, quit worrying, and go back to what you were doing, already,” I laugh at a person I assume is one of the guys.

I assume wrong.

“I know what you’re doing,” a garbled voice says. “Get off this case and out of Silverton, or you’ll be sorry!” *Click.*

I grab my notebook, flip to a clean page, and write down what I just heard. I can’t help noticing my hands are shaking. Something about that “you’ll be sorry” part gets to me because I’ve already been there. I ended up sorry on the Stage Door case, and...no, girl, do not go there. Not the same thing. Still, I shoot up a prayer and start quoting Psalm 91 under my breath, hoping the combination will slow my heart rate down. In a few minutes, I’m feeling calmer, so I dial Hirsch’s extension and ask him to come see me. When he arrives, I explain the situation. “I know it’s probably nothing...some kid or something, but...”

“No. In a case like this, and with your history, it is definitely not “nothing,” my supervisor says. “I’ll see what can be done about tracing the call. Did it sound like a man’s voice or a woman’s?”

“Don’t know.” I sound like Grace. “My guess is a man, but whoever called, they were prepared. I couldn’t tell.”

“Okay. Well, you go on to your classes and don’t worry about anything. We need you, we’ll page you, and vice versa.”

“Maria.” My Theater as Therapy professor, Dr. Hastings, puts my paper on my desk and moves on down the aisle. I start to slip it into my tote bag.

“Aren’t you even gonna look?” Rose asks from next to me.

She’s right. I should look. Theater as Therapy is, after all, an elective. I’m taking it because of how much theater helped me heal after Mama and Daddy died. I don’t know how, but I want to help other people, especially kids, find that same kind of healing someday. Still, a paper is a paper, and after years of being told my writing was “not academic enough,” among other descriptions that translated meant just plain bad, I...

“Okay, I’ll look.” Rose snatches the paper off my desk.

“Hey! Give me that...Rose Shippensberg, quit acting like a third-grader...” But she’s already flipped back the cover page. She reads something and smiles. “Ah. You didn’t do too badly.”

“What? A C?”

“Guess again.”

“C+.”

“No...”

“Okay, okay. Hastings gave me a B-. She probably gave me a break since I’m her advisee and all.”

“Oh, you idiot. Okay, you’re out of guesses. Here...no, you have to look. Go on...”

“All right, if it’ll make you hap—crumb! Oh, my...” I can’t believe what I’m staring at. The grade’s an A+.

“What?” Dr. Hastings had to have made a mistake. I flip through the pages, but all eight are clean, even the reference page, which is a miracle because I never get all those citations

right. At least, they're clean in the sense of correction marks. Dr. Hastings has underlined and put plenty of check marks, her way of saying, "I really like what you said." But...oh, crumb. I knew it wasn't true. Dr. Hastings has written "see me in my office ASAP" on the bottom of the last page. Does she think I plagiarized or something?

As if I summoned her, Dr. Hastings walks by and puts her hand on my shoulder. "If you were in trouble, I'd have told you," she says with a wink. "Now, would you like some?" She holds out a plate. She always brings fruit to class when she gives back papers, because she says we should enjoy the fruits of our labor.

"Thanks." I take two orange slices. "But what did you..." But she's already striding to the front.

"Brown-noser," Leanne hisses from a few desks down. She's an alto from choir. I don't even look up. Yeah, like I'm gonna let some snotty senior who flaunts her Christian Dior purse and Juicy Couture clothes at the rest of us like she's a middle school fashion maven, ruin my night.

But Leanne's comment makes me remember that disturbing phone call. I start taking notes, but let my eyes scan the room without moving my head. Half of the sixteen people in here are choristers—me, Rose, Leanne, three tenors, and two basses. I eliminate us three girls as suspects because I'm not the perp, Rose wouldn't do it, and Leanne might be an immature snob, but she doesn't have that deep-down meanness a criminal would.

I take in the five guys, trying to picture each of them on the other end of that phone. I can't, so I decide to take Tunney's advice and tune in to the half of my brain that's focused on my degree. By Christmas, it'll be a reality, not just words on the top of an audit sheet. And then...what will I do then?

My practical side knows. I'll stay right where I am, protecting Cherry Creek's citizens. I'll accept that I've finished the drama-based part of my life, grow up, knuckle down, and get serious, as Luke used to put it. That's the way it should be. It's the way God wants it. Theater can be a nasty world, as Mama and Daddy found out too late. God wouldn't want me involved in that mess.

It is not "mess," and you know it, young lady.

Back in my non-Christian days, I'd have said, yeah, right, what did God know. Luke was the one who called it "that theater mess," until Jasmine made him shut up, and even then, he made noises about it under his breath. But now...

Now nothing. Better pay attention in class, something Luke said would cure me of "that 'I freeze up on tests' syndrome". I roll my eyes. Luke might be right, but I wish he'd quit invading my thoughts. I pretend my eyes are coated with superglue and focus on Dr. Hastings. As usual, her teaching style captivates me, and the rest of class is over in what seems like two minutes.

"Have a good rehearsal, Maria," Dr. Hastings says on my way out. "And that meeting...when is a good time for you?"

"I, uh—" I crack my knuckles. "Well, like you said, as soon as possible. How about Wednesday?"

"Yes, that's fine. And please, don't worry, all right?"

I nod, but I know I'm lying. Oh, yeah, that's a great thing for a cop to do, and one more thing I'll have to apologize to God for. After rehearsal, that is.

Rehearsal, in fact, is so intense tonight that whatever spiritual issues I came in with have to be put on hold. The sopranos just can't seem to get some of the highest notes in "Broadway Medley" right, so Dr. Laughlin is drilling us on them like an army sergeant on a sugar high. Worse than that, some of the lower notes in "Sinnuh Man" are giving me no end of trouble. By the time Dr. Laughlin lets us take five at 7:30, my throat is feeling ticklish, and my chest muscles are throbbing. It's the good kind of pain, but still...

"Hey, Maria," a quiet tenor voice breaks in. "You look like you could use this." The voice belongs to tall, glasses-wearing, freckle-faced Patrick Marcello. I smile. The poor kid has a crush on me, which I guess is partly because I look young and he doesn't know that I'm actually almost a decade older than he is. I've let it go so far because Patrick is horribly shy and I'd rather take a bullet than hurt his feelings. I accept the cherry Life-Saver he offers me, but then motion for him to sit down.

"Thanks, Patrick," I say. "In fact, thanks for treating me so well since I came here. It's not every day a guy holds open doors for me or brings me M&Ms. But you're, um..."

He's turning redder by the second. "Aw, thanks, Maria. I..." He looks away when someone clears his throat. "Oh! Yeah...there's someone I want you to meet. Hey, Tim, come on over."

Oh, great. Am I going to have to explain to all twenty tenors and fifteen basses that I am definitely not available? I bite back the urge to launch into a "Dear John" speech just in time to see a muscular guy with wavy brown hair and a scar down his jawline come toward me. I blink. I've seen that face before.

"Hi there," the voice that belongs to the face says. "Remember me?"

"Um...should I?"

He guffaws. "Tell 'er, Patrick."

"Sure," Patrick says. "Maria, this is Tim Everson. He just transferred into the choir from Mr. Baker's..."

"Hold up. Tim Everson, you said?" I ask. "Tim Everson as in..." A distinct memory is making me nod. "Tim Everson."

"Long time no see, Officer K."

"You know her?" asks Patrick.

"Know her!" Tim's laughing like crazy. "Marcello, I know her better than I ever wanted to, man."

"Uh...are you saying you two..."

Now Tim and I are both losing it. "N-no," I squeeze out. "See, my third year in patrol, Tim here was one of my arrestees."

By now, half the soprano section is listening. "Get out of here," one of the girls says, while another one adds, "With a bass, it figures."

Tim glares at Sassy Soprano #2 and turns back to Patrick and me. "Yeah," he continues. "I was only seventeen then. Thought I was so tough. Drinking, smoking, gambling. So one night, I sneak out to the bar on the outskirts of Cherry Creek—hey, Officer K, they still call that joint McDougal's?"

"New owner," I tell him. "It's The Golden Boot now."

“Yeah. Anyhow,” Tim continues, “I’m half-plastered, pretty much lost everything but my underwear, and this tiny redheaded cop busts in the door with her gun up. She lands a solid punch to the jukebox, which kills the music and the chatter, and when some smart guy starts in on her being a chick, she grabs his beer stein and dumps the whole thing right over his head. Yup, and her partner, guy two heads taller than her and muscles out to here, staring like he doesn’t think she had it in her. Anyhow, Officer K here, she proceeds to rattle off a speech about disturbing the peace, blood alcohol levels, and an illegal gambling establishment, and she wants to know, whose bright idea was it to bring the cards and chips—‘and I don’t mean the ones that go with the guacamole dip,’ she says.”

Rose laughs. “Wow, Maria, why haven’t I heard this story?”

“Shhh.” Now I’m the one blushing. “Let him talk.”

“Thanks,” Tim says. “Anyhow, she slaps cuffs on me, even though I’m cussing her out and actually manage to punch her in the jaw. She glares at me, spits out, ‘that’s my singing mechanism you just messed with,’ and shoves me in her cruiser. I sit in there for ten minutes waiting for Officer K and her partner to finish the job, and all I can think is, ‘life’s really screwed up. One minute, you’re top dog, the next, some girl with a badge is laying into you like your mama after she found out you egged the neighbor’s house.’”

I laugh. “Yeah, that’s kinda the way I remember that night,” I tell Tim. “If I remember correctly, your time in prison was up a couple years ago?”

“Yeah. Never saw you again until now, of course. But don’t you remember what you said when you brought me in?”

I shrug. “The truth is, Tim, you were just big and tough enough to scare me a little. I was so relieved to have taken you down, all I remember saying is, ‘I’ll get you a phone call in ten minutes.’”

“No,” Tim says. “You escorted me into the joint, made some joke about being all out of ocean view cells, and then sat down next to me. And you said, ‘look, Everson, let me tell you something about gambling. It’s an addiction. And addictions only pop up after people have so much hurt inside that all they can think to do is drown it. So you think about what it is that’s

hurting you, and when you get out of prison, you find a constructive way to fight it. You're a kid. You've got too much going for you to let your junk win.' And I thought about what you said. Thought about a lot of other stuff, too, like the church I blew off. So I just wanted to say, I cleaned up my act. Jesus and me, we're real tight. And Officer K, it might not have gone down like that if you hadn't been there."

"Tim..." Why is there a stupid lump in my stupid throat? "Thanks. But you turning things around didn't have one thing to do with me. That was your choice. I just said what I had to. You were seventeen. Seventeen-year-olds don't belong in jail."

"Yeah, some do. But like I said, whether you admit it or not, you're the little lady who took this big tough guy down and helped him go straight. I prayed for you every day, you know it?"

"No, I didn't," I say around the stubborn lump. "But it must've worked. I'm a God Squad lady myself, as my supervisor says."

"Yeah, I heard on the news you were a big-time detective now. God's sure looking out for you. So what else? Your name is still Officer K, right, or is the last letter different? Got a man? Kids?"

"Actually, my name's Maria now that you're not an inmate, and no, I'm still single. But I do have a boyfriend who happens to have three kids—his wife died of cancer. I'm nuts about all four of 'em."

"And they'd be crazy not to be just as nuts about you," Rose says, putting a loyal arm on my shoulder. She laughs. "You dumped a beer stein over some barfly's head?"

You know that saying about what to do if you can't beat 'em? Right. So I join them, relishing the cherry Life-Saver, drinking ice water, and sharing some cop stories as briefly as I can. I've got them all howling over the story of how I captured a greasy-haired frat boy at Sweet Indulgence Bakery when Dr. Laughlin breaks up the party with,

"Okay, singers, let's get back to work. Chairs back in formation, let's go, let's go..."

"Now that," I intone to Rose, "is scarier than any cop."

"Amen, sister," Tim says.

“Good job, people...now, ‘Tres Cantos Nativos,’ get your scores up! One, two, three...wait.” Dr. Laughlin’s baton stops in midair. “Where’s Patrick?”

I look over at the tenor section. She’s right. He’s gone. Oh, crumb, I hope he didn’t get offended when I mentioned Gil. I should’ve taken care of this when...anyway, no matter.

“I bet I know where he is and what he’s doing,” a freshman bass named Jerry says. He proceeds to wiggle his eyebrows, which the other basses find hysterical. Like Rosie Alvarez said in *Bye, Bye, Birdie*, it just goes to prove that men are all the same from puberty to senility. Although some of ‘em turn out pretty good, like my daddy, may he rest in peace, and Schmidt, and Gil...Lord, I’ve been missing Gil lately, I silently tell my divine friend. Don’t let me forget to call him, okay?

“Ah,” Dr. Laughlin kinda groans. “Well at any rate, his tardiness is going to cost him five participation points. “Now, one, two, three, four...”

So we start on the piece, but a few measures in, Patrick still doesn’t appear. Halfway through, his chair’s still empty. My “cop senses” start sending up signal flares. Something is not right, as Miss Clavell from the *Madeline* books Sophie and Desi love, says. No, something is quite wrong. But I can’t leave rehearsal. Dr. Laughlin has made it clear that, outside of breaks, nobody leaves unless they are about to throw up or severely bleeding, or in my case, unless someone else is bleeding. So, one eye on Patrick’s chair, I keep singing, but I pray, too. *Please let him be all right. He’s a twenty-year-old young man. Let him just have skipped out or something. Please don’t let him be...*

The second Dr. Laughlin dismisses us I fly out the door so fast I nearly knock two people over. The further I move from the choir room, the louder Death’s voice gets. Some people say they can smell death. Me, I hear it. Not audibly, but I still do. It’s a terrible moaning, groaning, clicking, rustling inner noise that...

The moaning turns into a silent shriek. Death is here, on the music building’s front steps, and it’s taken Patrick Marcello, leaving a pasty body behind.

Right now, I’d give anything to be worrying about Gil’s legalistic, bigoted father.

CHAPTER 4:

“I just cut my hand and in a snap, something out of Edgar Allan Poe had happened...”

-Little Shop of Horrors

“Maria! Maria, what happened?”

“Is he dead? Is it a murder?”

“Oh, no!”

“Oh, wow!”

“Is there a weapon? Here, let me...”

“Get back!” I realize I’m yelling, but as Schmidt told me from day one in homicide, if you’re gonna be a detective, you cannot worry about stepping on people’s toes, physically or otherwise. What you say goes, and if civilians pout, you do not care. Yet, to tell the truth, it’s a good thing we’ve been kinda distant with each other since we came to Silverton. We don’t want the other guys and gals thinking we’re Siamese twins, and as I told Schmidt, I want to prove I can do this without my mentor by my side if I have to. So I don’t feel bad when I tone down my voice and say,

“Everybody, I need you to back off right now, please. Otherwise, the evidence will be compromised. Now, move.”

They move, and I call for backup. In a few minutes, Lockhart, Anderson, Schmidt, and a cop named Finsdale are all there with Sergeant Hirsch in the lead. He walks straight to me.

“So, it finally happened,” he says. “The Hatfields finally killed their first McCoy.”

“Yeah. Patrick Marcello, tenor. He’s...uh, he was...a junior. Only twenty.”

Hirsch cusses under his breath. “What’ve you got?”

“Just what I hate,” I say, “a smart perp. Look at this. See how Patrick’s sprawled on the steps? Well, usually, when people sprawl like that, they end up on their backs, stomachs, or sides, especially if say, somebody shoved them or they fell. Patrick here’s facing front with his legs out. The perp is screaming ‘homicide’ right in our ears.”

“And get a load of this.” Anderson moves closer and points to something on Patrick’s body. I follow his lead, giving thanks for the bright outside lights beaming truth into the center of this ugly crime. The next second, I see something ugly enough to make me recoil. Patrick Marcello’s neck is covered, and I do mean covered, with blackish-purple bruises and furious red streaks. His neck is at a weird angle, too.

“Strangulation,” breathes Schmidt. He runs a hand through his hair. “Keller’s right. These blasted perps get smarter every day. Quiet, quick, no blood.”

“No, but we’ve got hard proof,” Lockhart says. I hear her pull on her gloves, and she picks something up from the concrete. When she brings it to the center of our little huddle, we all nod. It’s a small length of sturdy rope, about six inches long. Just enough to do this job. My lungs close up and I cough just thinking about it.

Schmidt takes the rope. “We’ll get this down to the crime lab for print analysis right away. Anything else?”

The others shake their heads, but a suspicious smear has caught my attention. “Wait. It’s his right hand.”

“What about it?” Finsdale asks, but then nods at the sticky stain with the distinctive coppery smell. “Man. His hand’s cut all to pieces. Looks like the left one got hit, too.”

“We’ve got some scuff marks over here,” Anderson adds. “Marcello’s shoes, and the perp’s. Definite struggle.”

I make my way over and study the scuff marks, imagining how it happened. The perp came from behind, probably, just like with Grace Webb, and when Patrick fought back, they both ended up on the ground. At least, that’s what it looks like from the disturbed gravel. Thank goodness whoever’s in charge of landscaping decided to put down gravel instead of plain old asphalt. I squat down and see smaller bloodstains on the ground. I compare those to Patrick’s hands and nod to myself. The cuts probably came from the sharp little rocks, not a knife or any other manmade weapon. So somehow, the perp would’ve had to force Patrick upward during the fight, strangle the poor kid, and split, but at least he got cocky and left us a piece of physical

evidence. I shoot up a prayer of thanks for that and move back so I won't be in the picture when the others start taking photos.

Ten-thirty PM is coming up fast when Sergeant Hirsch tells us it's safe to have the body removed. "I'll call the guys at the morgue," he assures us. "You guys are dismissed. Go get some sleep."

"C'mon, Keller," Schmidt says. "I'll drive you home. Your friend's probably a little shaky."

"Yeah, thanks," I agree.

"Were you the last person to see Patrick Marcello tonight?" Schmidt asks on the way.

"Yeah. I mean, the whole choir saw him, but I was the last one he had a real conversation with." I give my partner the condensed version of what happened with Tim.

"Ah. And you didn't see anybody follow Patrick out?"

"No. I just figured he had stepped out for air or something. I kept thinking I should leave rehearsal and check, but I knew Dr. Laughlin would have me in the middle of a table with parsley garnishes on my wrists if...oh, not that she's a sadist, but you know choir directors, they think they're..."

"Keller, for once, could you answer a question without giving me the personal commentary?"

Whoa. Now, I don't mind criticism, but that comment was very un-Schmidt-like. "Hey, who licked the color off your M&M?"

"Nobody," Schmidt says. "I would just prefer not to be talked at while I'm driving."

And I would prefer not to be lied to, but I don't say it. I keep lots of things to myself, and Schmidt has that right, too. I smile and nod. "Gotcha. Fine. I'll shut up."

And I do, but I also study Schmidt when he doesn't know that's what I'm doing. From the way he's got his jaw clenched and keeps running a hand through his hair, I can tell he's definitely got a problem. And when we get caught at the fourth red light in a row and he almost cusses, I know whatever said problem is, it's serious. But then he turns, gives me a sheepish grin, and says,

“Sorry, Keller. And listen, sorry about earlier, too. I shouldn’t have crabbed at you. This just hasn’t been my best day.”

Ah. So he’s got what I secretly refer to as male PMS, although if I said it, he’d kill me with his bare hands. “We’re all entitled to at least one bad day a week. I forgive you.”

“Thanks. Listen, meet me at the morgue first thing tomorrow, okay? I want to get a preliminary look at the body before the coroner starts the autopsy.”

“Autopsy?”

“Yeah, you know, autopsy. One of those things that lets us know exactly how someone got killed. Which bones were broken, how hard the perp squeezed, that sort of thing,” Schmidt says. He gives me a strange look.

“Oh. Oh, right.” I try not to crack my knuckles. Since I met Jesus, my fear of death has calmed down some. Now that I know for sure where I’m going and that it’s gonna be wonderful, there’s less to be scared of. But I still don’t know what death feels like. Plus, sometimes I wonder if Jesus will somehow forget I got saved, or if He’ll disqualify me based on something I did or didn’t do. But cops aren’t supposed to be scared of anything, much less morgues.

“Keller?” Schmidt sounds a little irritated. “Where’d you go?”

“I’m here,” I rush to reassure him. “I mean...I’m sorry. My mind just went blank when you mentioned the uh, autopsy report. You know, brain freeze. Looks like I should lay off the ice cream.” I laugh.

Schmidt pins me with a look that’s two steps from a glare. “Okay, you wanna tell me what that was?”

“What?”

Schmidt imitates my laugh. “That.”

I shrug. “Reflex.”

“Liar. Keller, come on. I thought we were done with these cheerful little cover-ups of yours. And I don’t have to tell you what God thinks of them.”

“No, you don’t. Nor do you need to use God as some kind of twisted threat or defense mechanism or whatever you wanna call it.”

"I'm not...Keller, tell me the truth, right now. Are you still having trouble because of what almost happened to you?"

Normally, that would be a fair question, and normally, Schmidt would've asked it in a somewhat friendly tone, but he's all but snapping at me, so I glare right back at him. "I'll tell you the truth when you tell me the truth. What is your problem tonight, Schmidt? What have I done that is so wrong?"

For the second time tonight, Schmidt seems to realize he's taking something out on me. He turns away and shakes his head. "You're right. Keller, I am so sorry. You haven't done anything, you hear me? Not one single solitary thing. It's just that..."

"What? Do you not want to be here right now?"

"No. No, that's not it. Well, it kind of is. You are so much better than Tunney gives you credit for, even now. We both know you need me, but you don't *need* me. I wish he'd trust you. More to the point, I wish you would trust you."

"Oh, Schmidt, don't go all Dr. Phil on me. What does that mean?"

"I'm not gonna tell you. That would be feeding you the answers. Anyway..." He pushes a hand through his hair. "As for the rest of it, I...it's nothing to do with you, but I'm not ready to talk about it. Can you accept that?"

I bite my lip and think about it. "Okay, as long as you answer two questions for me. Is it your health, or are you and Dorothea having problems?"

"Negative on both counts."

"Okay, then I'll close the file on this one and let you deal. Just remember, let me help you the way you always want to help me. And please...don't act like you're mad at me without a good reason anymore, okay?"

Schmidt nods and offers his hand. "Deal." He breaks our handshake to grab his ringing cell phone. "Detective Schmidt...excuse me? Who is this? Well then, why didn't you call her number? Listen, buddy, I don't know who you think you're messing with here, but let me assure you, you will be arrested and charged with..." Schmidt practically throws the phone aside. "He

hung up.”

“Who?”

“I think it’s our Muffled-Voice Wonder. He wanted me to tell you to get your butt off this case before more people died, because if they did die, it would be your fault for being a stubborn, disobedient child of Satan—exact words. He wanted you to know that even if you didn’t kill them, their blood would be on your hands and you would burn in hell.”

“Holy crumb. Did he say anything about hurting you?”

“No.”

“It figures. What, do I have a sign around my neck that says, ‘will be scapegoat for food?’”

Schmidt laughs. “Hardly. I think the deal is, you’re young, vibrant, scary smart, and now you’ve got faith on your side. That’s a lethal combination for people like that idiot on the phone—people who really do work for the devil whether they know it or not. You’re dangerous, lady.”

“You say that like it’s a good thing.”

“It is.”

I shrug. “Okay.” He pulls into my driveway, and I sigh. “I’m beat. I’ll be at the morgue tomorrow, all right?”

“Thanks, partner. You’re a chum.”

“Right back at ya.” And is that the problem? Have I been too much of a chum? I shake off the thought. Schmidt would never treat me like that. He’s too nice, and he takes his faith too seriously, to treat anybody wrong. Speaking of which, I promised God no more cynicism and suspicion. I shake my head. Maria Keller strikes out again in the old faith game. No surprise there.

The next day, I head to work early to make up for my bad attitude last night. “Hey, guys, anything on the Marcello case?” I ask Rinaldi and Anderson when I walk in. Rinaldi shakes her head and looks at her shoes, so Anderson answers for her.

“That’s kind of an affirmative and negative, Keller. That rope we found at the scene doesn’t have prints, and the only blood on that gravel was the Marcello kid’s. But we do know

something about the Grace Webb robbery. Crime lab fingerprinted the gun, and the prints match one of the known suspects in our database.”

“What? Oh...oh, wow, that’s great!”

“You said it, baby. Give me five,” Anderson says, but backs off when I frown. “Yeah, right, gotcha. Authorized personnel only.”

“Thanks. Did Schmidt get here yet? He needs to know about the Webb development.”

“Better yet, he was sent to bring in Mr. Shotgun for questioning. As a matter of fact...”

The door slams. “Yup, there’s our boy now.”

A hot three seconds later, Schmidt’s in the lounge. After over a year of being partners, we’ve learned to talk with eye messages, and his eyes are saying, “I need you right now.” I nod and turn toward the door, but then I notice who the suspect is. My heart crashes to the floor.

It’s Tim Everson.

CHAPTER 5:

“Who’s that guy? Where can I get one?”

-Grease II

“No partiality, remember. It’s the worst thing you can do.”

I have to force myself not to roll my eyes. “I know that, Schmidt. And I also know Tim Everson might have been telling me a bunch of lies about turning his life around. I’ll get to the truth no matter what. Just let me do it my way.”

“No problem,” my partner says. He points to me, then himself. “Good cop, bad cop.”

I go in first. Immediately, Tim jumps up. “Officer K—I mean, Maria—I mean...”

“Her name is Detective Keller, son,” Schmidt says. “Address her correctly and then say your piece.”

Tim gulps and locks eyes with me. “Detective Keller, I didn’t rob Dr. Webb or hurt her.”

I sit down. “I want to believe that. If there’s one rule I uphold, it’s the one that says you’re innocent until proven guilty. However, you’re one of Dr. Webb’s neighbors, and the fingerprints on the gun used to shoot her in the shoulder are yours. Can you explain that?”

Tim is sweating. “Look, I carry a gun, okay? I have a concealed weapons permit.”

“A-ha.” Schmidt’s tone matches the bad cop role. “And why is an upstanding Christian man like yourself carrying a gun?”

“Same reason you do, Jack. Self-protection. In case you haven’t noticed, there’s a murderer loose and it ain’t me, even though Patrick Marcello was a tenor. We were friends, for Pete’s sake.”

“Watch your mouth, son. I carry a weapon because it’s in my job description. Now, why do you? You’re gonna have to do a little better than ‘protection’ to convince me.”

“Maybe that’s none of your business.”

“And maybe you’d like to spend the night in jail.”

“For something I didn’t do? You know what, Jack...”

"The name is Schmidt."

"Okay, you know what, Schmidt? You want my opinion, the whole police force is screwed up, here and in your rinky-dink town. Why, I bet—if I still did it, which I do not—that if you hadn't been sick that time, you'd have been right there with that Rawlings punk, selling out your own partner."

Schmidt comes halfway out of the chair. "One more word and you're booked, buddy."

"Uh, Tim?" I'm rushing to do damage control. "You'll have to excuse Schmidt here. He can be a little overzealous, you know." I aim a smile in Schmidt's direction so he'll know I'm acting. "Just talk to me, okay? You can trust me."

Tim softens considerably. "I know I can. You got me to leave prison behind that time, and I'm not going back. Ever."

"I don't blame you, but to keep your freedom, you have to talk to me. Why do you carry a gun? Can you show me your permit? And why did that gun end up in Grace Webb's house?"

Tim looks at me, Schmidt, the ceiling, and the floor, and then repeats the cycle. "Okay," he says. "I'll talk, but just to you. That dude leaves us alone."

What is it with people wanting to be all secretive with me these days? Honestly, it's getting old. Plus, a tiny part of me is afraid that if I give in, Tim just might confess to the crime. It's an awful thought, but like it or not my cop duty comes first. *Jesus, what should I do?*

The answer is clear and so sharp that pain slices from my chest down into my stomach. Seeing Tim across from me brings back memories of Rawlings trying to force a confession to four murders. He was the only investigator there at the time. I remember thinking I'd give anything to have Schmidt—the good cop—in the room, even if he never said a word.

"Okay, Tim. We'll talk alone. But just for a few minutes, okay?"

"That's all I need."

"You better hope so," Schmidt says before striding toward the door. He stops by my chair, flashes a quick thumbs-up, and leaves.

"Coast is clear," I tell Tim.

He nods. "Can I please call you Maria?"

“Well, since it’s just us.”

“Okay. Is this what it felt like for you? I know about it. You doing time, I mean. Is this what it was like? This...this feeling in your stomach like you could throw up all your insides? Feeling like you’re trapped in someone else’s body?”

“Yeah.” I bite my lip. “That’s exactly how it was.”

“Then help me. I don’t know how that gun got in Dr. Webb’s house. I went there, but my gun was in my truck the whole time, I swear it.”

“Then why were you there?”

Tim taps his fingers on the table. “I’m taking one of her classes, New Testament. If you go in the registrar’s office at Christ and His Saints, you’ll see it’s true. It’s required, you know, ‘cause every student’s gotta take one religion course. Anyhow, I’m having a lot of trouble—D average and everything. I’m working to put myself through school, so I can’t go see Dr. Webb on her office hours for help. But she knew my apartment complex is nearby, so she said I could come to her house and she’d help me figure out this paper we gotta do. The school doesn’t like profs being alone with students of the opposite sex—heck, we can’t even say that word—but we figured since it was her turf, and she’s a lot older, like sixty or whatever, it’d be okay. But I end up running late, and when I call to try and explain, Dr. W doesn’t answer her phone. Door’s unlocked, and when I get there, she...she’s on the floor, bleeding like anything. I know I shoulda called 911, but I never...and plus, I’m scared of blood. Terrified of it. I just...ran.”

“Hmmm. And that gun never left your vehicle?”

“No, sir! I mean, ma’am. I mean...”

“Never mind,” I laugh. “Okay, here’s the deal. You’re looking me straight in the face, and people who do that usually aren’t lying. Your story sounds like it might check out. But that still doesn’t explain why your fingerprints were on the gun. Unless...” I have a brainstorm. “Tim, did you think to look at your gun sometime in the few days between the robbery and now?”

“No. Like I said, I’d only use it to defend myself, and I ain’t had cause since...” He breaks off. “None of anybody’s business.”

For the second time since this case started, I'm stuck. Should I push or leave it alone? Does Tim need to tell me his secret to clear his name? Jesus, help me, please.

Did your colleagues need to know that Chandler raped you so you could be cleared of murder charges?

The inner voice sounds like my own conscience, but it's just authoritative enough for me to tell who's really talking. I bite my lip and nod, even as a voice that sounds exactly like Schmidt's urges me to push. "Okay," I say. "So it's not. Back to the original question. You haven't looked at your gun at all in the last few days?"

"No, ma'am."

"Hmmm. Any reason to think anyone could've broken into your truck? Have you left it unlocked lately?"

"I..." Tim's nails are doing that drumming thing again. "Not usually. Not in Silverton. That's just dumb, know what I'm saying? Not that it's a huge city, but dumb all the same. But..." He straightens, and his face visibly relaxes. "Yeah. Yeah, that's gotta be it! It's just gotta be!"

I'm seeing Tim for the twenty-something kid he is, and my heart cracks looking at him. I know how he feels. I know how that desperate hope can get hold of a person and how hard they hold on. Well, I'm gonna help him hold on. "Calm down, Tim. What's 'gotta be it?'"

"After I peeled out of Dr. W's driveway that day," Tim says. "I ran in my apartment, didn't even think. We have to park on the street. And...well, some of those moron tenors have been saying stuff about getting back at me..."

"For what?" My pen is dancing the cha-cha on the pages of my notebook.

"For...are you gonna think it's stupid if I say, 'for breathing?'"

"No, because I've had a few people who thought that way about me in my life," I say. "But tell me more." *Tell me more, tell me more, like does he have a car...* The show tune invades my brain at the same time that the headache I've been ignoring since last night chops it in half. I signal "excuse me" to Tim, poke my head out of the interrogation room door, and tell Schmidt "come here" with my eyes.

"Yeah?" he asks.

“Could you take over for me? I need to get something for this headache, stat.”

Schmidt frowns. “We’re cops, not doctors. How long’s this thing been bothering you?”

I ignore the question. “I’ll be right back, okay?” I update him on how far I’ve gotten. “My instincts say innocent, but you’ve gotta confirm it. He might be reluctant to talk about what’s going down in the choir, for obvious reasons...”

“So bad cop it like there’s no tomorrow.” Schmidt grins. “No problem, partner. You go pop a pill or whatever and get back when you can. Don’t take too long, but don’t rush either.”

The lounge is empty. I don’t have time for a cup of tea, so I settle for a glass of tap water. Meanwhile, my brain is spitting out facts like gumballs, and I’m scrambling to find connections. I smile, remembering Schmidt’s doctor line. *The vendetta bone’s connected to the prof bone...the prof bone’s connected to the gun bone...* The first pill goes down, but for whatever reason, the second one bounces back up. I cough, roll my eyes, take another sip of the water...

My cell phone rings. I don’t want to answer, but the caller ID makes me change my mind.

“Gil?”

“Hey, Maria.” Somehow, he infuses those two words with months of growing love. “How’s my best girl?”

“I have a headache.”

“Really?” His concern is almost palpable. “You’ve gotten those a lot in the last year.”

“I know. Just work. No biggie.”

Gil chuckles. “Maybe not to you, but please take care of yourself, okay?”

“Aye-aye, Captain.”

He outright laughs. “Okay. Listen, I’ll call back. I just know you’re not usually busy at this hour, and...”

“Yeah. But I had an interrogation to cover at the last minute. Yes, please call.”

“I will. I miss you so much, Gumshoe.”

“I miss you, too. And I miss the kids. Hug them for me, okay?”

“I will. But Maria? Do come and see us soon. The kids are asking about you.”

“Tell you what. Call me back and we’ll make plans.”

"I will. Love you."

"You, too."

Gil's voice acts like a caffeine shot, but even with more energy, I have to make myself go back in the interrogation room. Schmidt's holding his own, but he looks glad to see me. I slip into the chair next to him and focus on our suspect. He keeps drumming his nails on the table—is this how Schmidt feels when I crack my knuckles?—as he talks. Apparently, some of the tenors, particularly one whose name is Dana, have been giving Tim a hard time because he "pals around with Marcello too much," and because he's "in good with Dr. Webb, and she needs to mind her own business."

"But then," Tim says, "this Dana dude's been a bully since he was in preschool, probably. You can guess why."

"Sure can," Schmidt says. He pushes his chair back. "Okay, son. You're free to go, but don't leave town until we check this out."

"Yes, sir." Tim's out of there faster than I can say my own name.

"What kind of a mama names her son Dana?" I ask when we're alone.

Schmidt's making a note in the case file. "Beats me. If this case gets anymore complicated, I'm gonna need a book on quantum physics to figure it out. Are all choristers this...this..."

"Crazy? Yeah, pretty much. Comes from all those late-night rehearsals and sadistic directors. They think they're—what's that word? Mini-gods?"

Schmidt laughs. "Actually, it's demigods, but that works." He runs a hand through his hair. "And you're probably right. Demigod directors are part of what got us into this. If not for them, we wouldn't have a choir feud, and we wouldn't have just hit a dead end with Everson."

"Yeah. I'm sorry."

"Sorry? You should be happy. He's most likely innocent."

Do I hear bitterness? I replay the comment and shrug it off. No use looking for what's not there. "I'm sorry for your sake, okay?" I turn and start toward my cubicle. "I'm gonna go enter my notes."

Once I'm inside the cubicle, I shake my head and fondle the marigold I bought for my desk when I first came to the Silverton PD. Tunney forbids me to have plants because of my black thumb, which is legendary among the Cherry Creek cops. I keep fondling. "But you're hanging in there, aren't you? Shows what they know, which is zip." I laugh. "Look at me. Talking to a plant. Next thing you know, it'll be talking back, telling me to feed it..." I call up the program I need and wait for it to load. And wait...and wait...crumb, what's wrong with this thing? You'd think a bigger department could spring for decent machines...oh, well, might as well do something productive in the meantime. I open my top desk drawer and sprinkle some food into the marigold's pot while I hum "Suddenly Seymour." Hey, that gives me an idea...

I'm putting the finishing touches on my little project when Sergeant Hirsch shows up. "Hey, Keller, how's it going?"

"It's going. Hmmm...there! Come over here—you'll appreciate this." I wave my supervisor over, thanking God yet again that He saw fit to give me a boss I click well with. "I'm gonna figure out a way to wire this so it sounds like it's coming from the plant." I click a button on my computer, and a high, screeching voice says, 'feed me, Keller, feed me!'

"Ha! Clever. It oughta scare the pants off the rest of 'em, that's for sure. But I meant, how's the murder case going?"

"Ah, right. Here's an updated file. The Everson kid was a dead end. Which wouldn't be so bad if Schmidt didn't think I was happy about it...oh, holy crumb. Sir, please don't mention I said that."

"I won't. And Keller? It is okay to be happy that someone is innocent. Despite the fact that not many people are in our line of work, deep down, it's what all cops want. And if Schmidt's having a tough time with that, it's his problem, not yours." Hirsch sighs. "To be honest, I have no idea what is eating that man. I've met him before—he never struck me as so...so edgy. And you'd think with your history, he'd understand why innocence has become more desirable for you."

I sigh, too. "I understand, sir, but number one, no one here should let what happened last year influence them. And two, I have enough on my mind."

"Of course you do, which is..." Hirsch sighs again. "Keller, let's walk and talk, okay?"

So I follow my current supervisor out of the bureau, down a flight of stairs, and into the main lobby, where he leads me straight up to a picture window. “Whew,” he says.

“Claustrophobia gets me every time. Better now.”

“Right,” I say. “So, that thing you wanted to talk to me about...”

“Yes. Well, Tunney called—again—but that part I know you can handle. I’m worried about...” He sighs again. That habit is quickly getting on my nerves.

“Oh, no,” I say. “Not the Muffled-Voice Wonder.”

“Is that what you call our telephone boy?” Hirsch laughs. “Appropriate, but no, although no one has managed to trace those calls, which is giving me no end of grief. Actually, you had a call from a Dr. Hastings before you came in, and...”

I whirl around to face Hirsch, but before I can say anything, Rinaldi races in. “Kel...Kel...” she pants.

“Hold on, Rinaldi.” I put my hand on her shoulder so she’ll stop. “Look at me. Okay, now take a breath. Good. Now, what’s up?”

“This. I...I was...I went to check my mailbox, and mine is right below yours, and I saw...this.” She holds up what’s got her so upset.

“What in the—“ I was expecting a ticking bomb or a poisonous snake, but instead, Rinaldi is holding... “Oh, good grief. A Bible? A *Bible*?” I take the poor book, dust it off, and stick it under my arm. Two seconds later, I remember I might have needed my gloves. Crumb. Well, Hirsch saw the whole thing, so I’m in the clear, I think. A quick glance at him tells me I’m right.

“I guess your Muffled-Voice Wonder really wants to throw the book at you,” he says.

I laugh. “Ya think? Of all the...” I turn the Bible over, inspecting for damage. Even in my non-Christian days, I thought there was something wrong with people who’d trash Bibles. Now, I think it’s just plain sick. I look up and pray out loud before I realize Hirsch and Rinaldi are listening. “Jesus, you saw what just went down—or through, rather. I was never Miss English Guru. Anyway, you saw that. This is getting dead serious, and I know you know what dead serious looks like. Give me whatever wisdom, discernment, and nerve I need to find out who did this. Amen.”

“Amen.” Rinaldi crosses herself.

“Amen,” Hirsch echoes. He turns to the other woman. “Rinaldi, did you see anybody strange come in here? Notice anything weird when the mail was delivered?”

Rinaldi is staring at her shoes, her face so red I wonder if she’s got a fever, sweat beading on her brow. I smile and touch her shoulder. I can’t help it. The poor girl looks miserable.

“I...I don’t know,” she squeezes out. “I wasn’t there. I don’t know.” She sounds like a kid admitting she doesn’t understand a complicated math problem at all. She raises apologetic eyes toward me. “I clocked in, and Anderson needed me to...so I’ve been in my cubicle all day. I needed a stretch break, so I...and then I saw it. I don’t know.”

“That’s okay,” I tell her. “At least you found the Bible,” I add, because Rinaldi looks like if somebody said the slightest negative thing to her right now, she’d cry. I feel my heart clench. Rinaldi may be shy and have self-esteem so low I have to look up to see the bottom, but she desperately wants to be a good cop. Sure, I was bolder, but she’s in pretty much the same place I was eight years ago. No. If I admit it, Rinaldi’s where I was last year, when the guys thought I was just a big joke. Jesus, help me help her.

“Don’t worry, Rinaldi.” Hirsch is talking now. “We’ll find out where the Bible came from. Keller, you see anything unusual?”

I want to give the Bible to Rinaldi so she can answer that, but I know Hirsch will figure me out if I do, so I put on my gloves and take it myself. . In Acts, right above the heading for the story of Saul’s conversion, is printed in block letters—

MARIA KELLER, STOP PERSECUTING HIS TRUE SAINTS! GOD WILL JUDGE YOU FOR THIS SIN, AND SO WILL I!

“Man,” Hirsch says from over my shoulder. He starts to tap my elbow, but withdraws. “You okay, kid?”

“Sure.” I snap the Bible shut. “Will you get me a camera so I can take a picture?”

“Of course. I’ll bring an evidence bag, too.”

“But couldn’t you just, you know, use the photo and get me some White-Out?” The thought of those ugly words on God’s instruction manual makes my head throb.

Hirsch gives me an understanding, but serious look. “Sorry, Keller, we need the real thing, too. But I’m with you on this one. We’ll remove the page and fix things up when we’re done. We can’t trace the handwriting, but we’ll see what can be done.”

“Sounds great.”

I spend the rest of the day working, praying, and trying to determine my next move. All too soon, it’s time to go to class. Schmidt drops by just before Rose comes to pick me up. His news is that Tim Everson’s story checked out, and we’re back to square one.

“Crumb,” I say, though I don’t wholeheartedly mean it. “Well, let me assure you, partner, I’m gonna be keeping the detective side of my brain sharp tonight. After what happened with that Bible, I would love nothing more than to get my hands on this idiot.”

Schmidt grins. “I love it when you get fired up. Your pupils disappear.”

“That’s not all I wanna make disappear. See you tomorrow. Call me if you need to.”

Rose and I don’t talk much about the Bible disaster. Instead, she turns up the Christian station on the radio and we alternate between chitchat and rocking out to bands like Point of Grace and Barlow Girl.

“You know what’s missing from Christian music?” I ask after awhile. “The show tune sound. I mean, I like this stuff, but it doesn’t do as much for me as Broadway and oldies, which makes me feel like a fake.”

“Hey,” Rose says. “Nobody said you have to listen to Christian stuff exclusively. As long as it’s clean, you’re good.”

“Still...” I bite my lip, thinking. “It would be great if somebody could inject a little Broadway into the CCM industry. All this rock and hip-hop starts to sound alike after awhile, and I hate to tell these gals, but they can’t really sing correctly.”

“I noticed,” Rose agrees. “They do get kinda nasal. So, what would you do?”

“You mean, what kind of songs would I come up with?” I ask. “I don’t know. I do a little songwriting now and then, but I haven’t done anything serious since high school. That was my senior project, you know—learning songwriting and putting together a portfolio. Let’s see...” I think for a minute. “Well, some of the songs from Broadway shows could have Christian themes if

somebody did a remake. Like "I Resolve," for one. You could make that into a song about a Christian who's fallen for Satan's dirty tricks one too many times and resolves to let God make her stronger."

Rose is nodding. "I like. I like very much. What else?"

I'm still tossing out song ideas after we've parked the car and headed toward our first class. I can't believe I'm telling Rose any of them, though. I've never even told my cousins. Of course, I still have my old senior project portfolio, and they know about that, but...

We turn the corner to go into the music building. Rose shrieks and throws her hands up to her face. A second later, I see why.

The body of Tim Everson, neck bruised and broken, clothes bloody, is facedown on the sidewalk.

Rose races to the body and tries to turn it over. "Maria, help me...we should do CPR, we should..."

"No, Rose," I say. My voice is calm, but authoritative. "Let me. Don't touch him." I grab my gloves, kneel down, and start looking, listening, and feeling for signs of life. No breath, no pulse, no nothing. I reach for my pager.

Rose has started to cry. "Maria. Maria, no. No."

I hug her, gloves and all. "I'm afraid so, honey. You can stay with me until the others get here. It's gonna be okay." I start punching numbers. "It's gonna be okay," I say again. This time, the statement is for me.

Rose continues to sob. I shake my head at Heaven. Jesus forgive me, I pray, but whoever this guy is, I am gonna get him if it is the last thing I do.

CHAPTER 6:

“Papa, how I need you, Papa, how I miss you...”

-Yentl

“Thanks for inviting me, Gil. You have no idea how much I needed this,” I say a few afternoons later. I take another breadstick and dip it into the cup of marinara sauce on my left. “I feel like I haven’t gotten a good breath in days.”

“Well, we can fix that,” Gil says. “Nothing like pizza and a calorie-burning bike ride to clear your head.”

I laugh. “Gil, you can’t be serious. Are you already nagging these kids about calories? Sophie and Desi aren’t even old enough to know what calories are.”

“We do so,” Sophie pipes up. “They make you fat, like a big balloon!” She’s not frowning, and she doesn’t sound mad, but something in her tone is off, so I smile.

“Well, I am sorry if I insulted you,” I tell her. “Here, let’s move your cup back so it doesn’t spill.”

“I won’t spill.” That comes with a definite pout.

“Sophie,” Gil warns.

“Hey, it’s okay,” I say. “I was fiercely independent at that age, too. Plus, Sophie and Des are in kindergarten, so they are big girls now.”

“We sure are,” Sophie says, as if she’s daring me to say different. I bite my lip. I know the kid’s got a temper, but I’ve always shrugged it off because, well, I’ve got one, too. The only difference is that I’m an adult, so I’ve learned to control mine. Well, most of the time. I’d like to get my hands on this choir member murdering piece of slime and slam his head into a wall—multiple times. I bow my head and pray for Tim Everson’s family, and for my own peace of mind.

“Hey,” Gil says. “What’s with the face?”

“Tim Everson,” I say in a low voice so the kids won’t hear. They know I’m working on a new case, but they don’t know the details. “It doesn’t seem fair, what happened. No, that’s wrong. It’s not a matter of “seeming”. It is unfair. It stinks a big one, as Clayton says.”

Gil puts his hand on mine. “You’re right, Gumshoe. But remember what you told me on the phone. He’s in Heaven, and no one will hurt or condemn him again. Hang onto that. Let God help you.”

“I’m trying,” I say. “I don’t know how much harder I can try. I mean, the Heaven part is a comfort and all, but...”

Gil nods. “Just keep praying, Gumshoe. God will give you the faith if you ask.”

I decide now’s not the time to mention that I have prayed, nonstop, or that Gil’s advice sounds like a pat answer, or that I feel like he’s minimizing how I feel. I turn to Clayton.

“So, how’s third grade treating you, sport?”

He shrugs because his mouth is stuffed with half a breadstick. I have to laugh. He’s already had three. When he swallows, he shrugs again. “It’s okay. I like art and science. But reading stinks a big one.”

“Really? I thought you liked to read.”

“I do, just not the stupid stuff they make us read at school. I mean, the Ramona books? Come on! Ramona’s a brat.”

Gil clears his throat. “Now, Clayton, you know sometimes you’re going to have to read things you don’t want to. Not liking a book is no excuse for failing an Accelerated Reader test on it. And while we’re on the subject, your math could use some work, too. You need to buckle down and stop doodling and daydreaming in class.”

“But...”

“No, no buts. I don’t want to see anymore C’s on math papers, are we clear?”

Clayton nods, but behind his dad’s back, he gives me a look that says, “do you believe this”? I shrug and give him a look that says, “hey, don’t drag me into it because there’s nothing I can do”. He sighs and makes a sucking sound with the straw in his Coke. I go back to my food, too, because that’s the only way I can keep from speaking up. I know Clayton ought to get good

grades, but I empathize with the kid. When I got shoved into public school, I wasn't good at reading, either, and it was mostly because all the books were pre-assigned. Almost none of them had girls as lead characters, and those that did were books like *A Little Princess* (which I later found out, to some chagrin, was Meg's favorite). Plus, in almost every book, a character died, and even if said character was an animal, I got sick of it.

Math wasn't much better. I liked it, but most of the time I'd be working on problems and suddenly catch myself daydreaming, so I'd put the wrong answers down, get a worksheet back, and think, 'did I write that?' I used to get comments on my report cards that said stuff like, 'Maria is a bright student and a genuine pleasure to teach. However, she is often inattentive and displays hostility toward the material taught. She also seems selective about when to participate; when called on, she often shakes her head or hides behind a textbook.' Once, shortly after I got one of these less-than-glowing reports, we were assigned another book where a character died. This time, it was somebody's mom. So I wrote my teacher a letter in which I vented about how much the book stank, how much I hated English, and how stupid I thought she was for continually assigning things like that book, because if I was the only one who hated it, my classmates were either airheads or chickens. She read said letter and said,

"Maria, I want you to go to the principal's office right now."

"Why, so he can tell me I was disrespectful?" I asked. "Well, maybe I was, but I don't really care right now."

"Maria, get out of my classroom. You need to think about your actions." To which I said,

"And you need to get plastic surgery, Ax-Face!"

That teacher did have an ax-face, and the whole class knew it, so they lost it laughing. The boy who sat in front of me actually wet his pants, and one girl fell on the floor. Caught up in the moment, I thanked the audience and took a bow. Naturally, that was the end of my time in that school, and the foster home that went with it.

I don't want to tell Clayton that story, but he looks so bummed, I give in to impulse and do it to cheer him up. When I'm done, he laughs and gasps out,

"What'd your teacher do?"

“Stood there spluttering for about five minutes, said ‘march, missy,’ practically dragged me out the door, and slammed it. So I went down to the principal’s office, where the secretary asked what I did this time. The principal lectured me for about an hour, but when he tried to make me promise never to say things like that to my teacher again, I said I couldn’t, so he sent me home.” I omit the fact that when he heard about it, my foster dad had a fit and made good use of his belt. But I got the best of him, too. I was wearing jeans that day because we’d had PE, and even though Mr. Garrison would spank his two biological boys with their pants down, he made it a rule never to do that to a girl.

I shake my head. “To say the least, Clayton, school wasn’t my friend.”

Clayton grins. “That’s okay. You’re still smart.”

“Thanks,” I say, even as I look up and catch Gil frowning at me. Uh-oh. “What is it?” I ask him, steeling myself for a lecture.

“Nothing,” he says. “It’s just that...well, discipline is never funny, and...”

“But I wasn’t trying to...” I get cut off when the food arrives. A few seconds later, as if trying to divert attention, Clayton asks,

“Miss Maria, are you gonna come back to the Stage Door? Me and Des and Sophie liked it when you were in the play last year. You’re really good.”

I crack my knuckles and nibble the crust of my pizza. “I’m not sure. I don’t want people there to think your dad’s playing favorites, and that’s what might happen if he gave me good parts.”

“But you should have good parts ‘cause you’re the best one,” Desi says.

“I can’t argue there,” Gil says. “Seriously, Maria, I know you’ve been covered up, what with the case and school, but you’ll have your degree by Christmas. I’ve been meaning to mention it, but looks like Clay beat me to the punch. Would you consider coming back? I’ve cleaned house on some attitude problems, and I guarantee no one would resent you. Actually, many staff members have told me how much they miss you.”

Crack, crack. Nibble, nibble. “Gil, I would love that, but right now, I...I can’t think it through and give you my best answer. With this hoopla in the choir, I...”

“Yes, I understand. Which is why I’m praying you find out who’s doing this very soon.”

“Miss Maria?” Desi’s tugging on my sleeve.

“Yeah, honey?”

Her lip trembles a little. “Why are there so many bad people? Why do they try to hurt each other like that?”

I hug her, tight. “Oh, Desi. Honey, I sure wish I knew. I guess it’s because they don’t have what you and I do. Some of these people who end up in jail and stuff—they never had families who loved them, or good schools to go to, or friends. Some of those people have a lot of hurt inside, and instead of reaching out for help, they get mad and hurt others. And sad as it is, sweetheart, some people do bad things because they think it’s fun.”

Desi thinks about this. “They don’t love Jesus either, huh?”

Now, why did a five-year-old think of that before I did? I am such a lousy Christian! “No. No, I guess not.”

“Those bad guys are just poopy-heads,” Sophie says. Except she doesn’t say “poopy.” I nearly choke at what she does say, and Gil shoots upright in his chair like somebody shocked him.

“Sophia Natalia, where on earth did you hear a word like that?”

Sophie looks embarrassed, but the fire doesn’t go out of her. “Well, they are. And if they ever shoot Miss Maria and make her die like Mommy…”

Desi’s lip trembles more, tears slide from her eyes, and she latches onto me like caramel to a cavity filling. I stroke her hair and murmur in her ear. “Shhh. Shhh, honey. I’m okay. That’s not gonna happen. Shhh…”

“Crybaby,” Sophie says.

“Sophia!” And then Gil reaches across the table and smacks Sophie’s hand.

“Ow!”

“Well,” Gil says, “you deserved that. Now, I suggest you apologize to Miss Maria, and to the rest of us. Then you will be quiet for the rest of the meal. And for the next two evenings, you will not be joining us for our bedtime story.”

I don't absorb what Sophie says or does after that. All I can think of is what Gil said. Wasn't that a little harsh? Not that I'm totally against discipline, because I'm not. I'm a cop, for Pete's sake, and a former theater major, so I have had discipline out the wazoo. But Gil has, in effect, denied his daughter time with him. By telling her to stay silent, he has basically denied her time with me. And because he's extended her punishment to tomorrow, it also sounds like he's denying her forgiveness. And that smack on the hand...excuse me, but cop or not, disciplined or not, I don't believe in hitting kids in any way for any reason. But I don't dare say anything, because Gil looks like he'd punish me with one of his icy glares if I did.

The restaurant has started to feel confining, so I'm relieved when we finish eating and Gil drives us up to the biking trail. He, Clayton, and I have bicycles, and Gil and I each have a twin in a seat on the back of our bike. I have Sophie, and I don't think it's coincidence. I look straight ahead, but pray for an opportunity to talk to her.

I'll take care of her, honey. You just relax and enjoy what I made for you.

I shake my head. *I know, Father. And it's beautiful. Those leaves...you know I love fall leaves, don't you? And the marigold on my desk at work—you know how much I want it to live. But Sophie's hurt. That whole family is hurting. My school is in a huge mess. My partner acts like I'm a stranger half the time. I...*

Maria, Maria. You are worried about so many things.

I recognize the paraphrase of part of a Bible story. I bite my lip because I can't crack my knuckles. *I know, God. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I make so many mistakes.*

Maria, of course you make mistakes. You're human. But I know that, and I adore you anyway.

I sigh. *Yeah, I know. But now that I've been a Christian for awhile, I have to admit sometimes I think you're pretty crazy.*

That's okay. My disciples said the same thing sometimes.

I laugh and decide I'm gonna make a conscious effort to relax. I keep pedaling, but slow down a few notches. A few deep breaths fill my lungs with the slightly-burned-leaf, touch-of-rain,

almost nutty smell that is early fall in Cherry Creek. And no matter how different we are, the man I love is right in front of me. I catch up to him, and he grins. "Having fun?"

"Always. Thanks for this, and for lunch. I hadn't had pizza in a long time."

"No," Gil says. He turns his head a little. "How are you feeling, honey?"

"Fine, why?"

"No more headaches?"

I shrug. "Well, I still get them off and on, but it's no big deal."

Gil frowns. "I know it doesn't seem like one, but Maria, small things like that often become very big."

I slow almost to a stop and look at him. "Are you thinking about Anne?" I know his wife's leukemia started out as a regular old fever.

"No. There was nothing she could do about her illness. But there are a lot of things you can do. You can take care of yourself. You can tell Tunney and Hirsch that just because you're their "ace in the hole," it doesn't mean you have to work these murders 24-7. You can go to bed at decent hours, eat right, and take time for yourself."

"Gil, I appreciate what you're saying, but you do not have to worry about me."

"Yes, I do. Maria, you're exhausted. I can hear it in your voice. Cold and flu season just kicked off—have you even gotten your shot?"

"What am I, your pet German shepherd?" I laugh. "No, I haven't made an appointment yet, but..."

"Then do it. You know this town gives cops discounts."

"Gil, I don't have a spare minute to make sure my socks match right now, let alone take three hours out of my day to wait in line at the clinic, fill out forms, and go through the rest of the day with a sore arm."

"And do you have a week to lie on the couch nursing the flu, which, by the way, comes on so fast you can't prepare for it and could potentially kill you?"

“Oh, come on, Gil. I’m twenty-nine. The flu kills old people, mostly.”

Gil is one step from glaring at me. He spins the right pedal on his bike. “Well, when that illness starts to pick victims, I hope it remembers your age.”

“Gil, I am not saying—look. I have taken care of myself for twenty-nine years and I’ve done okay. So why don’t you let me keep doing it?”

“Right. Like I’m going to let you become the target of another criminal? End up back in prison, heaven forbid? You know, if you’d been more careful, that never would have happened.”

I slam on the brakes. “Gilbert Montgomery,” I hiss at him, “you take that back right now!”

“Maria, I...” he starts to argue, but then backtracks. “You’re right. That was unfair. What happened with Sarah and Rawlings wasn’t your fault. I guess I just got a little carried away.”

“Ya think?”

“I’m sorry. Forgive me?”

“If you’ll forgive me. Look, I’ll call the doctor tomorrow, okay?”

“That sounds good. Now...” He looks over his shoulder. “Clayton, come up here, son!” Once Clayton is there, he winks. “Kids, what do you say we race Miss Maria to the end of the trail?”

The kids agree immediately, and I frown. “Four against one, Gil? Two, counting Sophie? Hardly fair odds, you know.”

“What? You’re not scared, are you?”

“I think she is,” Clayton giggles. “We’re not bad guys, so she can’t boss us around.” He makes clucking noises.

“Oh, so that’s the way you’re gonna play this, is it?” I ask him. “All right, then.” I turn to my little passenger. “C’mon, Sophie, let’s give them something to talk about.”

Sophie shrugs. “Fine.”

Hmmm. The normal Sophie would be practically jumping up and down, but she’s acting as if I’m the enemy all of a sudden. Does Gil know how much he might have hurt her? Well, maybe not, but I can try to fix the situation in a minute. But right now...

“Okay,” I tell Gil after making sure Sophie is secure in the back. “You say go.”

“Okay. One...two...three...” And he’s off.

“Cheater!” I shoot off after father, daughter, and son. “You don’t know who you’re messing with here!”

Gil reaches the finish line first, but grins at me when he does. “How’d you learn to do that? I mean, I knew you could jump rope, and you told me about your pitching arm, but...”

“Well, I was never the best biker,” I tell him. “That daydreaming thing again. I was too short for basketball and too light for football. But I was definitely a tomboy. Luke was always teaching me stuff like how to shoot a gun or drive a nail or bait a hook. Before I got my license, he showed me the basics of fixing a car. Jasmine nearly had a stroke when she saw all the grease on my clothes.” The memory sobers me. “That was one of the few times I remember that I didn’t feel as if I were on quicksand where he was concerned.”

Gil frowns. “What do you mean, ‘quicksand?’”

“Oh, you know.” I try to play it light. “One minute I’m the man’s best buddy, and the next, I’ve done or said something he doesn’t like and he’s giving me that police captain glare of his. Even if I didn’t do anything wrong...I remember, he’d even get upset if I had to call and tell him to wait in the truck because my voice lesson ran over. Sometimes...” I breathe in. “Sometimes I think he wanted to make me quit music and theater altogether, but...” I shrug. “Once, he actually said it. He said, ‘we can’t let her go on like this, Jazz. She won’t have a decent future prancing around on that stage. I’m calling her voice teacher in the morning and withdrawing her from that drama class at school.’” That memory nearly makes me choke. “I...I couldn’t do anything. I was just...frozen. Even if I had said something, Luke would’ve known I was eavesdropping. But Jasmine had none of it. She was good and mad. She said, ‘don’t you dare, Lucas Elijah Brown. That is out-and-out cruel and you know it. Maria has not done anything wrong, and even if she had, that would be a totally inappropriate form of discipline. She has a gift, and you’re not taking it from her. Now, I don’t want to hear another word about it!’”

Gil nods. “Go, Jasmine.”

“Well, she wasn’t always that bold,” I say. “That wasn’t the first time Luke insinuated that what I loved was worthless. When he got mad at me that was a weapon he used. He didn’t

threaten to make me quit, but he'd say...things. And it hurt. Hurt like you-know-what. I'd try to hide it, but Jasmine knew when I was upset. She'd comfort me, but she'd always make excuses, saying he didn't mean it and just wanted what was best." I shake my head and bite my lip. "When it was really bad, I cried myself to sleep."

"Maria." Gil reaches for me, but I shake my head. "I'm going for a walk, all right? I need God."

He smiles and nods. "Okay. I'll pray for you from here."

So I turn and walk the other way. "God, why did I tell him that? What am I looking for, sympathy? I am so freakin' pathetic."

No, you aren't, darling.

"But I am. Why do I tell him this stuff? He's got his own problems. He and the kids still miss Anne like crazy. Don't think I don't know. You know, maybe I should just walk away. These precious people do not need me. They need somebody...right. Somebody who wears dresses, and crochets doilies, and makes meatloaf, and knows Hebrew and Greek, and..."

No. Now, you listen, Maria Magdalena Keller. They need you. They need you terribly. And if you walk away, I will find a way to get you back to them. If you don't think I will, you stand back and watch me.

I snort. "They need me, huh? Okay, prove it."

I keep walking, all the way up to a tree whose leaves are brilliant yellow. A familiar shape is crouched underneath. I squat down beside it. "Hey, Sophie."

She glares. "What do you want?"

I nod. "You've had a rough day, haven't you, honey?"

She shrugs. "Everybody's always mad at me. Daddy, and Grandma and Grandpa. Maybe you too."

I crack my knuckles. It makes me feel uncomfortable to hear Sophie say what I've felt for most of my life, but couldn't explain without sounding like an idiot. I shake my head. "I'm not mad at you."

She gives me a "yeah, right" look. "Not even for saying that bad word?"

“No. I wish you hadn’t said it, because it is an ugly word. But I’m upset for you, because by saying it, you hurt yourself.”

“What?”

“Okay, look. You used that word to describe criminals, and yes, they do make us mad, or sad, or hurt. But I’m afraid that you might get mad at someone else down the road, and use it with them. Or that you might use it on yourself. See, words like that mean, ‘I want to hurt myself and other people, and I don’t care.’ That’s why they shouldn’t be words you use for any reason. You’re too smart, and your heart is too good, for that.”

Sophie frowns. “You’re not telling true. I’m not smart. I can’t write my name as good as the others at school, or get everything right on my seat work. And I’m not good. If I was good, Daddy and Grandma and Grandpa wouldn’t punish me all the time. Grandpa even says I’m not good.”

I don’t know if Sophie wants me to do what I do next, but her words make me forget that. I scoop her up into my lap and look her in the eye. “No, Sophie,” I say. “You are good, sweetheart. You just do the wrong thing sometimes, like we all do. And sometimes you have to face the consequences for that. But that doesn’t mean you aren’t good.”

“But I don’t do bad stuff on purpose,” she says. “Sometimes I don’t even know why. Sometimes, Grandpa...you know when you went to jail ‘cause everybody thought you’d killed those people?”

“Yes.” Dear Lord, help me control my own “bad girl” urges. I do not like where this is going. “Sophie, sweetie...tell me the truth, now. Did your grandpa threaten you with jail?”

Sophie frowns. “Uh-huh. He said I was gonna go there someday ‘cause I was being bad, just like you. He called you names. I don’t know what they all meant, but he did.” She looks down. “Grandpa’s the one who said that bad word.”

Oh, why am I not surprised? I’m so mad right now, I could pull a Sophie, throw myself down on the ground, and just scream. I want to throw something, hit something...anything. I even want to cuss. I clench my whole body and quote a few Scriptures under my breath, then switch to

prayer. “Help. Oh, Jesus, help me. Jesus...” I crack my knuckles several times. “Dear Lord, help me. Stat, SOS, whatever. Just help!”

“Miss Maria?” Sophie looks confused, and I realize my voice has gotten louder, and I’m rocking back and forth a little. I force myself to stop and take a breath. Peace comes with that breath, and I’m able to refocus. When I do, I notice something.

“Sophie, look. See the leaves?”

“Yeah. The yellow ones are my favorites.”

“I guessed that. Well, I want to tell you something.” I lean down like I’m going to tell her a secret. “God knows that. He knows all your favorite things, and He made those leaves just for you.”

“He did?”

“Yes, because He loves you. And you know something? He loves you even when you do things you shouldn’t. He’ll never get mad at you, or punish you. Now, you’ll have to obey the consequences your daddy or grandparents set, but God understands they make you sad. So what you do is, you tell Him you understand you did something wrong. You ask God to forgive you. And He will. If you watch and listen, you’ll understand Him telling you, ‘Sophie, I don’t like what you did, but I forgive you. And I love you forever, no matter what you do.’” I hug her. “And one more thing, darlin.’ I forgive you and love you, too.”

Sophie nods, but doesn’t smile back. Oh, well. I wouldn’t feel like smiling if I were in her shoes either. I’ve done what I can and now it’s up to God. Although, I tell Him, if there were some way to... I trail off. Please, God, just keep this family safe. Help me heal them.

I will, but you have to heal first.

Now that I do not get at all. Didn’t my heart heal when I finally quit running from Jesus? Shouldn’t I be okay now? Really, truly, one-hundred percent okay?

Gil’s hand on my arm startles me. He backs off, smiles, and draws me toward him so I’m standing in front of him with my head on his chest. “Being a Christian won’t make all the pain go away,” he tells me. “If God wanted that, He’d take us home the minute we got saved.”

“Mmmm,” I answer. “So...so you think He’ll ever fix my life?”

"I think He already is," Gil says. "But some of it, through His strength, is up to you."

"Oh, great. Another task to get done."

Gil laughs. "Not exactly."

"Then what..."

But he just laughs and walks off. I look up at Heaven and shake my head. "Jesus, you know I love you and want to do well as a Christian. But if you're expecting me to understand you, forget it."

CHAPTER 7:

“Some policemen and detectives dream of show business...”

-Curtains

I hate to say it, but I can see why Dana Piggott, the suspect Tim Everson led us to before his death, has problems. The name alone would be enough to send anybody with half a brain to therapy for life. Honestly, looking at Dana now, on the other side of the interrogation table, I'm not sure whether to arrest him or his crazy mama. But even if he'd had a perfectly normal name, the total lack of hygiene would blow any chance he had at a decent life. I have to pull out all my acting skills not to gag on his odor, which is a strange mixture of stale coffee, fish, pickles, sweat, and something else I will not name.

“Look, lady, I don't know anything about Everson's gun,” Dana barks at me. “I bet he conveniently forgot to tell you I haven't even been in that stupid choir for six weeks.”

“It doesn't matter if you were in the choir or out of it,” I say. “The fact is, you spent most of your spare time making Tim miserable because he chose to break the so-called rules of your stupid feud. That equals ‘motive.’ So if I were you, I would start explaining why that motive does not necessarily mean you killed him, or Patrick Marcello.”

“Huh. Like a tenor would kill one of his own.”

“For cryin' out loud, Piggott,” I scoff. “That's right. You are a tenor, not a soldier in the heat of war.”

Dana snort-laughs, cusses, and rolls his eyes. “You've been wearing blue too long. This choir thing—it is a war, lady. If those old fogeys down at school would leave us alone, quit makin' us sing hymns all the time, quit makin' us act perfect or else...” He trails off. “But those soprano and tenor scumbags, they've always been on the wrong side. You wanna know why somebody killed your precious Everson?”

“Watch it, mister,” I snap, bad-copping it for all I'm worth. “He's not my precious anything, but he was a good kid who'd made mistakes and was trying to turn his life around, until some

dirthead disguised as a Christ-follower took it. And when I find out who that is, you had better believe I will lay down my religion and pound their skulls into the college's flagstone walkway. So yeah, unless you want to go with 'em, talk to me, bud."

Dana looks away. Schmidt uses the opportunity to slide a note across to me. I grin when I read it—*nice work, partner. You're starting to scare me!*

"Because he used to be a gambler," Dana says. "Yeah, that's right. Mr. Christian had an addiction to the cards and the chips and the wheel."

"Yes, I know," I say. "So you're saying our perp rubbed Tim Everson out because..."

"He wasn't one of your Jesus freaks," Dana says, cussing sprinkled in for good measure. "Anybody who doesn't act their way, the school wants rid of. And..." He leans across the table, and I smell diaper breath. "I'd watch myself if I were you, Maria Keller. The only reason they let you in is 'cause of how the news spun your story. As far as the school's concerned, you're a filthy convict. And that's straight from the dean's mouth."

I lean in, too, and spear Dana with eyes that I pray look like frozen onyx. "Is that a threat?"

He backs off. "Hey, no way, lady. I'm just telling you what I heard."

"And where exactly did you hear it?"

"The dean, I just said. What, you're deaf?"

"No." I have to put my hands flat on the table so I won't crack my knuckles. "And what were you doing in the dean's office?"

"Oh, yeah, like they'd let me in there," Dana says. "I heard it through the school grapevine, if you wanna know."

Strains of the Motown hit float through my brain. "Okay, well..." I bite my lip. "I can't accept a rumor as testimony, so..." Get it together, Keller, before you lose your bad cop edge! "One more question, son," I say, trying out one of Schmidt's methods and ignoring the fact that it sounds funny coming from me. "If you didn't switch the gun, who did?"

“Like I know. You ask me...” Dana leans close again. First thing after this interrogation, I am going to the ladies’ locker room and taking a long shower. “You ask me,” he repeats, “you should quit looking at the choir and look at who’s running it.”

“You mean faculty and staff?”

“Duh,” Dana says, only when he says it, it sounds like “der”. “Man, how’d you get out of cop school?”

“The academy,” I correct him. “It’s called the academy, and I graduated third in a class of fifty-nine.”

“Well, whoopee-doo for you. Listen, can I get outta here? I got a paper to write, or Mr. Baker’s gonna make me one of your homicide victims.”

“I’m surprised he knows such a big word,” Schmidt says when we’re alone. “Good work, though. You’re really getting over your fear of being the bad cop.”

“I was never afraid. Uncomfortable, yes, but...”

“Same thing. Although...” He frowns. “You were about to lose it for a second there at the end. What have I always told you about letting them see you sweat?”

“I know, I know. Don’t do it. And I didn’t mean to. But when he said that about my faith...”

“Look.” Schmidt runs both hands through his hair and his frown deepens. “You know you’re saved, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

“You know that other people have no control over whether or not God accepts you?”

“Yes.” Don’t I?

“Then quit worrying about what those snobs think. That’s all they are, Keller—cynical academic snobs who think they’re better than everyone else just because they know everything possible about some obscure field.”

“I know that, but...”

“No, no buts. You know what your problem is, Keller? You care way too much. You’re so anxious that everybody like you, you forget why you’re on a case. Professors intimidate you, men

scare you..."

"Not all of them. Not anymore."

"Okay, so that's exaggerating, but not by much. Keller, just do yourself a favor. Start telling yourself these four words—I...do...not...care. Because if you can't, I worry about how much longer you can hold onto this job."

He couldn't have shocked me more if he'd punched me. "What's that supposed to mean? You know something I don't?"

"Of course not." He softens slightly. "I'd never..." He runs a hand through his hair again. "Look, just go do whatever you need to do here and get to the college. You've got some more snooping to do."

"Yes, sir." And off I go, like the obedient rookie I've always been.

Man, that stinks worse than Dana Piggott.

"Hey, Keller." Barbara Rinaldi's voice makes me want to scream, but when she shows up at my cubicle a few minutes later, I make myself smile. I'm not gonna treat her like Schmidt's suddenly treating me.

"Hey, Rinaldi. C'mon in—you want some chocolate?" I hold out my glass jar, which I just stocked with plain M&Ms yesterday.

"Thanks." She takes a handful and pops a red. "I know you're busy, but I've got a tip for you." "That sounds better than any chocolate. Dish it, sister."

"I was hovering around when you were talking to that Dana kid, but then it looked like you and Schmidt were having a talk, so I left." She sighs. "I wish Anderson and I were as close as you two."

"We're not so close these days," I say, trying to pretend I don't care. Isn't that what Schmidt wants? "So about that tip..."

"Right. Well, my little sister graduated from Christ and His Saints last year, so naturally, I called her when the case got going. And at first, I thought it didn't mean anything, but she keeps mentioning this professor, Lock-something..."

"Dr. Laughlin?"

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“She’s my choir director. What, you think she...”

Rinaldi shrugs. “Maybe. Nina, that’s my sister—she was a music education major. She can’t sing like you can, but she was an alto. She never told the family because she didn’t want us to worry, but last time she called...” Rinaldi gulps. “Nina says Laughlin fixed her grade. Graded her down when she shouldn’t have, I mean. There was this one time, sophomore year, Nina came home for a week ‘cause she had walking pneumonia. Laughlin had a cow, chewed her out, and gave her a failing grade for the concert she was supposed to be in that week. All this after Nina had called and emailed to say she was sick, and after she’d read Laughlin’s attendance policy that claimed students with serious illnesses would be given ‘clemency.’” Rinaldi draws quotes in the air and laughs.

“Wow.” I’m writing like crazy. “Rinaldi, did Nina ever mention somebody named Louisa Carstairs?”

“What, the girl who started the feud? Yeah, everybody knows about her. That’s why Laughlin is so tough on the altos and basses. Plus, Nina said one time, Laughlin yelled at her for wearing lipstick to class. She’s one of those fundy idiots who think girls who don’t wear granny dresses are going to hell.”

“Lipstick?” I shake my head. “I wear lipstick to class all the time and she doesn’t yell at me.”

“You’re a soprano.”

“True.” I nod. “I’ll keep my eyes open. Thanks, Rinaldi. You may have just given me a lead.”

She beams. “You’re welcome. Well, I gotta get back to my own work.” She starts to leave and turns back. “Keller?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you...” She’s redder than a fresh tomato. “Do you think I’ll ever be half the detective you are?”

I have to smile. Poor kid has no idea what abilities are hiding under her shy exterior, and worse, she thinks I'm somebody to look up to. Well, I won't burst that bubble. "I think you're a great one already. The catch is, you have to be yourself with it. Quit trying to be me." I gesture toward her hair, an almost perfect imitation of my half-up, half-down look, and her dark red heels.

"Oh. But see, Anderson says if I acted more like you, I'd do better. He says I better learn to speak up or turn in my badge."

"Hmmm." I know Anderson's probably right, but I also know that's a little harsh on someone with Rinaldi's personality, especially when that someone can't be more than...

"Rinaldi, how old are you, honey?"

"Twenty-two. I've been on the force since I was eighteen. My grades were too low for any college. I want to be good at this—good at something. My old sergeant pulled strings. I can't let him down."

"You won't. Hon, you're still a kid. You've got plenty of time to figure out where you fit on this force. And I know Anderson's just looking out for you, but he needs to back off." I bite my lip. "Of course, I'm preaching to the choir. Schmidt still treats me like I graduated yesterday. Sometimes I just don't get men."

"Me either." We laugh.

"You and Rinaldi having fun?" Schmidt wants to know before I leave.

"We were talking about work," I tell him. "What are you all of a sudden, jealous?"

"No, concerned. I know you've got a weak spot for little-guy types. Don't let her distract you."

"Oh, come on. When have I ever let anything distract me?"

"Never, but..."

"Okay, then. I'm going to class—checking out Laughlin."

"Okay, yeah."

Like I said, I don't get men.

I'm so busy thinking about Dr. Laughlin that I forget about Dr. Hastings until I walk into Theater as Therapy, my first class that night. She beats a path straight to my desk.

"Maria, I'm glad you got here a bit early. I've been trying to get in touch with you..."

"Yes, ma'am. I know I had to cancel our meeting, but with the Marcello murder, and now..."

She puts up her hand. "Don't worry. I understand. But I do need to speak to you, desperately. Please come straight to my office after class. I know you only have about twenty minutes, but I'll make sure you have a note to give to Dr. Showalter." She laughs. "But you're doing so well in that class, I doubt he'd miss you this once."

I have to smile back. Voice and Movement for the Stage, alias VMS, is my favorite class next to this one. "Thank you, Dr. Hastings."

"You're welcome, and I mean it. So..." She kinda frowns. "May I ask him to excuse you?"

"It's that important, ma'am?"

"Yes. And Maria, please...I know you're from Texas, but drop the 'ma'am.' It is beginning to drive me insane."

"No. I mean, yeah, I'll drop it. And yeah, go ahead and talk to Dr. S if you want." I decide now is not the time to mention the icy glare he'll give me next time he sees me, or the fact that he'll say, 'Miss Keller, welcome back. Now, what possible reason could you have for not gracing us with your presence at the last class meeting, hmmm?'

Dr. Hastings reads my mind. "I will take full responsibility," she says. "By the way, here's your grade sheet from last week's roundtable discussion."

She gave me another A. I have no idea what to do with that information, anymore than I know what to do about this super-important, desperate, urgent-enough-to-thumb-my-nose-at-another-prof meeting of hers. But as I know I will, an hour and fifteen minutes later, I find out.

"Sit down, Maria." Dr. Hastings motions toward the guest chair in her office, a huge thing that looks like a hollowed-out wicker basket. Next time Monique, Meg, and I go shopping, I'm buying one of these. I sit, making sure to elevate my back against one of the cushions. I can't

afford to go chasing a suspect down an alley somewhere and have to stop and groan, 'oh, my achin' back!'

"I want to show you something." She crosses to her file cabinet, opens the K-Z drawer, and takes out a folder from the front. "Keller, Maria Magdalena." She removes a piece of paper from it and hands it to me. I blink at the neat columns, as well as the A's and A+'s in each of them. It looks like...but...

"No. No way. No way in the world."

Dr. Hastings laughs. "But it is. That is your grade sheet for my class. And..." She hands me another paper. "That is your current transcript. You'll notice more of the same."

She's right, but I still don't believe it. "Dr. Hastings, I...you...you must be..."

"What? Crazy? Giving you a break because you're nontraditional, a cop, and my advisee? No, *ma'am*," she says. "You are an excellent student. You have more passion for theater than I've seen in over five years." Her voice drops to the gentle tone Dorothea often uses with me. "You truly love the stage. That takes someone special."

"I, uh..." What in the world am I supposed to say to that? To tell the truth, nothing. I'm not used to being told I'm excellent at anything, or special. A mistake, yes. A good cop, sure. A nice kid, yeah, sometimes. But not this. I crack my knuckles. "Dr. Hastings, I appreciate the compliments and all, but I have to say you've shocked me. I'd feel better if we got to the bottom line. Why did you call me in here?"

"Ah, of course. Forgive me." Dr. Hastings shuffles some more papers, turns to her computer, and calls up her email. "Maria, in a very short time, you will have your theater degree, and you need to find the proper use for it." She straightens up. "I've recommended you for an internship at the Glass Slipper Theater here in Silverton, starting after the holidays."

I bite my lip and blink. "A...a what?"

"An internship. And don't worry. You will be no one's coffee girl. You'll start off as a supporting actress, and you'll be working with the children for the Glass Slipper's developing youth program. I think you would be absolutely perfect."

"I..." I have to get up. In two seconds, I'm pacing around the office. "Dr. Hastings, did you already tell them..."

"No," she assures me. "You have awhile to decide. And believe me, I know you're far too occupied with these murders right now to focus on much of anything else. To tell you the truth, I consider it a miracle that you're doing as well as you are. But please consider it."

"Dr. Hastings, I..." I chew my lip. My heart is beating so hard I think I'm gonna go into cardiac arrest. I have to get up and move or this room is going to crash in on me. My heart tells me to scream "yes," throw my arms around my professor, and laugh and cry all at the same time. But my head insists we're both crazy, and if I even think about turning in my badge, I'll spend the rest of my life in the gutter, figuratively and maybe literally.

I pace in front of the basket chair. Past Dr. Hastings' desk. Around the whole room. Back again. "Dr. Hastings, please...please don't do this to me now. I don't know...I can't...I can't leave the force. Ever."

Dr. Hastings rolls her eyes. If I felt like it, I'd laugh. My dignified prof just rolled her eyes at me. But when I blink, she just does it again. "Who says you can't leave, Maria? You didn't sign some kind of indentured servitude contract."

"Well, no, but..." But yes, in a way, I sure did. My years of service in exchange for security and safety. Most of my identity in exchange for having the moniker "Maria the Mistake" scrubbed off my psyche. If I left, I wouldn't have any of that. And adventurous gal though I am, that is one risk I will not take.

"I think you did." Dr. Hastings' voice is serious now, almost mad. "I think you did, and I think it's hurting you. You think this whole school doesn't know your history? Let me assure you they do, and as your advisor, I know it best of all. Maria, forget the force. Forget the force, the rapist and suicide accusation that put you there, and all the rules you think you have to follow as a cop. Forget it. Live your own life."

"Hey, I am living my life." But it's a lie and I know it.

"Like heck you are." I have never heard my advisor talk like this. She shakes her head. "I don't know much about the cop world, but I can guess what goes on because I see it here. They

tell you to put your hair up, to dress this way or that way. They tell you to plan your life around their schedule. If you're the wrong sex, the wrong race, the wrong anything—if you think the wrong thing—they can abuse you and hide behind their badges or their supervisory authority or...well. They take away your right to your own opinions, your own emotions, your own anything. They even take your name.”

Why do I get the feeling we're not talking about cops anymore? In fact, were we ever? I take a deep breath. “Dr. Hastings, I understand, and believe me, I've thought about this stuff too. But cut my brothers and sisters in blue some slack, okay? They did a lot for me back then. They took me in when nobody else would. If I hadn't had police training, I'd have ended up as a waitress at McDonald's or a greeter at Wal-Mart.”

“Right. And now that you've had some time to recover, you've been sucked into their mind games. You couldn't get out even if you wanted to. It's...” She throws up her hands. “It's slavery.”

“Hey, hey, whoa,” I half-laugh. “Where in the...Dr. H, what are you, an ex-cop?”

“No, I'm a civilian. But I do know mind games for what they are, and I can see when a student is being sucked into them. You're shutting down a vital part of yourself, Maria, and you're causing yourself great pain. Please, don't do this to yourself anymore.”

I stare at her, trying to read her eyes. I don't think Dr. Hastings has a grudge against cops, but what she said about being owned...about mind games... I'm pacing again. Little bits of other stuff I've heard come back to me. Grace Webb's explanation of the feud. What the old guard said about the chairman, Dr. Delacroix. Dana Piggott's testimony. What Rinaldi said about Dr. Laughlin. And now this. Could Dr. Hastings...

No. I don't even want to think it. Not this sweet lady who seems to care so much about me. But then, I am still a cop, and right now, my cop face is on tight. Could my advisor be so mad at the legalists in this school—so upset about how far the choir feud was going and how it influenced so many people in her division—that she knocked off a couple of kids to prove her point? The thought makes me gag inside, but I know I have to follow up on it. The detective in me even wants to. She wants to really bad, actually. And I think I have a way to do it.

“Dr. Hastings, um...I’m really gonna need some time to think about this, okay? You mind if I get out of here?”

Dr. Hastings grins. “Of course not. See you soon.”

Those six words are all I need. Within minutes, I’m rushing across the parking lot, hopping into my car, and booking it toward the library. Heidi Pruitt, the night lady, is sitting comfortably at her post when I get there.

“Hey, Maria. Got another paper due already?”

“No, something even more important. I need access to any and every record you have on Dr. Christine Hastings. Newspaper articles, Internet stuff, microfilm, microfiche...”

Heidi frowns. “Well, since you’re a student, I’m not sure I can...”

“I’m doing this as a detective. Can I trust you with something very private?”

“You’re looking at the only librarian who knows where the research specialist keeps his special collections key.”

“Okay. Dr. H may be on our suspect list.”

“Ah.” There’s that frown again, but Heidi schools her features and steps out from behind the desk. “Come.”

In a few minutes, I’m sitting behind a desk in the back. There’s a laptop in front of me, and around it, like the body of water surrounding an island, is a bunch of printed info on Dr. Hastings. Most of it’s basically useless—biographical stuff, academic accomplishments, that kind of stuff—but wait. One of the microfilm clips has grabbed my attention. It’s a newspaper clipping from the *Silverton Star-News*, dated July 1987. I flinch at the date. That was the year, and the exact month, I lost Mama and Daddy. They drove up from Texas to a theater conference in Asheville, and they never came back. Dr. Hastings would’ve been a college kid herself then. Did she face some kind of tragedy, too, one that would make her innocent of...

“Maria Keller, will you quit it? Not everyone is innocent, and you don’t care! Get that through your stupid head!” Darn the fact I’m in a library, because if I weren’t, I’d be screaming my throat raw. I grab the microfilm and stare at it. The headline reads **BOMB SET IN CHERRY CREEK CHURCH NARTHEX INJURES 25**. The article doesn’t say Dr. Hastings was involved,

but it does mention her as a suspect. I read the whole thing five times, stopping every once in awhile to crack my knuckles, which are slick with sweat. Would Dr. Hastings really have bombed, or at least tried to bomb, a church? Was she ever arrested? She's obviously clear of the charges now, but... I rub my forehead.

"Jesus," I mutter at the ceiling, "it's Maria Keller again. Honestly, I don't know how you put up with me sometimes. I can't get this Christianity thing right to save my soul—oh, wait, you already did that. See? But listen, please, I know I don't deserve it, but I desperately need grace. I need you to help me figure out some stuff, and I'm not talking perps' names. Well I am, but I'm not. See, Dr. Hastings is...but she's my...and she wants me to...and I want to, but I can't, but she says..." I sigh. "Forget it, okay? My prayers are useless. I'm not a decent Christian. Just a desperate cop shooting off her mouth."

I pick up my tote bag, duck out into the ever-chilling fall air, and head home. When I get there, Monique's in her basement studio working on her latest design project, and Meg, she says, is out with a guy she met at the church singles' group, a doctor named Derek Marquette.

"As in, a French name?" I ask when Monique tells me this. "Meg will love that."

Monique grins. "Yup. They've been out for coffee and to the movies with the whole group a few times, but I think this dude has a serious crush on our Meg."

"Hmmm. And a doctor to boot. Not bad."

"You're telling me. And..." She draws the word out. "He reads Shakespeare, loves the water—you know how Meg always looked forward to going to the pool or the lake when we were kids—and is a complete and utter chocoholic. Plus, I've seen Derek in passing a few times, and he's cute. Sandy blonde hair, turquoise eyes, and dimples."

"Dimples?" I snort. "Mo, was I ever impressed with dimples? And blonde—seriously?"

"You're just prejudiced because Gil is classic tall, dark, and handsome. By the way, he called earlier. Wants to know if you'd like to come see the Stage Door's production of *Godspell*. He's got a director's box, and he says he'll save a spot for you."

I feel my face brighten for the first time in I don't know when. "I would love to." I grab my cell phone, dial, and tell Gil the same thing. "Uh-huh...right...Saturday. I'll be there if I have to

jaywalk...no, not really. What? Oh, I can do that? Okay...right, bring the M&Ms...yeah, I'll wear that blue sweater you like so much. Okay...okay, see you in a couple of days. I love you, Captain."

"I love you, Captain," Monique mimics. "Good grief, when did you get so mushy, Miss Tough Cop?" She laughs, then sobers. "But really, I am happy for you and Gil. I've wanted this for you for so long. And I'm happy Meg's found somebody too. But I..."

"Ah, Mo." I sit next to her. "Your turn's coming soon. I know it. You're gorgeous, and you're godly, and you're smart...any guy who doesn't think you're a catch needs to have his head examined."

"Mia, c'mon. What does any decent guy want with a chick who can barely read? I didn't learn to read anything but the word "the" until third grade, remember?"

"Well, so stinkin' what? You're still a wonderful artist, and a math whiz, and...Monique Teresa Delaney, you are terrific. Third grade was then. This is now. And even if somebody were to question your IQ now, you should be proud of it. It's a 129!"

Monique thinks this over and grins. "You know what, you're right. I'm gonna go up and listen to my Bible on tape—get some divine backup. And you..." She points her finger. "Get up to bed."

"Yes, Mom." But I do what she says anyway. The further upstairs I go, the more exhausted I get. In fact, the only time I wake up that night is when Monique slips in and takes off my shoes, and Meg readjusts the covers.

CHAPTER 8:

“Barely gettin’ by, it’s all takin’ and no givin’...”

-Nine to Five

A couple nights later, Gil and I are at the Stage Door for a performance of *Godspell*, in his private box, and I’ve just shared the details of the appointment Monique dragged me to this morning, during which Dr. Bramwell gave me a lecture on stress and a prescription for sleeping pills.

“Don’t worry.” I open my purse and show him a bottle. “See these? Just one of these babies and I’m off to visit the sandman.”

“Just don’t kiss him,” Gil jokes before leaning over to kiss me. He wiggles his eyebrows. “What do you say? Shall we be teenagers again and concentrate on each other more than the show?”

“Gilbert Montgomery!” I exclaim in my Scarlett O’Hara voice. “No gentleman says such things!”

“Frankly, my deah, I don’t give a hoot what gentlemen do.” Gil pecks me again and buries his nose in my hair. “Mmmm. You smell like oranges and cream. And...” He chuckles. “Just the barest hint of gun smoke.”

I frown. “I thought I got all that off in the shower.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ve grown very partial to Eau de Cop.”

“Oh, you bad boy.”

Gil moves out of “eager lover” mode and dials it back to “mild passion” by holding my hand. “Seriously, Maria,” he says. “I hope you do listen to your doctor. I’m not seeing nearly enough of you.” He laughs. “Maybe I need those sedatives. Sometimes I think about you so much I can’t sleep.”

“Me, too. You want to know something crazy? Last night, after I took the first pill, I dreamed about you. We were in *Oklahoma*—you were Curly, I was Laurey. And when Rawlings—that’s who was Jud Fry—came after me, you popped him a good one, swept me off

my feet, and rode off with me on your white horse with the closing titles playing.”

“Now, that’s a dream I’d love to have seen,” Gil says. He settles back into his seat as the house lights go down. “Oh...okay, here we go!” he says, sounding as excited as most men get about kickoff.

“Here we go.” I clutch his hand, and when the curtain goes up, we sigh in sync, then smile at each other because we’ve recognized our favorite moment.

That starts the best evening I’ve had with Gil since we started dating. We don’t drop hands for the whole first act. Because we know all the songs, we both sing along, and because we’re in an enclosed box, we can even get away with fortissimo at the right times. When the theater gets cold, Gil slips his jacket off and puts it around my shoulders. In return, I let him have the rest of my ice water because his throat is dry.

“This is incredibly cool,” I say at intermission. “Mama and Daddy took me to a lot of plays, and of course I watched theirs sometimes, but I never got to sit in the director’s exclusive box.”

“So, what’s your favorite musical of all time?” Gil asks.

“Oh, that’s not fair. I love them all—the clean ones, at least. After I became a Christian, I ended up giving away some of my show tune CDs and just transferring the clean songs from them onto my iPod. It was a little sad, and then I felt guilty for being sad.”

“But would you trade back your relationship with Jesus?”

“No, never,” I say. My voice is vehement.

“I knew you wouldn’t.”

I want to ask, then why did he ask me that, but I just shrug. I don’t need conflict with the one and only guy who truly loves me. I shrug again. “Well, at least I wasn’t throwing out stripper clothes and booze bottles, huh?”

“Yeah, but you didn’t answer my question. Favorite musical.”

“Okay. Um...” I laugh. “This is gonna sound so hokey, but I really do love *The Sound of Music*. I was too young to get the whole Nazi part when I first saw it, so Mama would always stop at the place where Maria and the Captain get married. But sometimes we’d curl up in her bed and

watch it together, like when Daddy had to go on a business trip by himself. Sometimes she'd sing "My Favorite Things" to me when I was sick or had nightmares."

Gil gives me a compassionate look. "What gave you nightmares?"

I bite my lip to think back. What had? "Not the usual stuff like witches or monsters. My parents taught me right off the bat that those things weren't real, and growing up in a theater, it was always easy to see how the bad guys in plays were really just people I loved in masks and weird makeup. And Daddy was pretty good about turning the news off when I was around. But..." But there had been something in that theater that, on occasion, scared the ever-lovin' daylight out of me. What was it? A certain room? A musical arrangement played in a scary minor key? No...

"So what gave you the creeps?" I turn the question back on Gil.

"Not much," he says. "But that wasn't because I was brave. I was scared of a lot of things. But my parents told me that if I truly believed Jesus was watching over me, I didn't have reason to be scared, so even if I was, I never told them."

I fiddle with the drawstring on my red silk clutch purse. "Gil, um...I hate to say this, but..."

"I know, Maria. They probably didn't handle it well. But my parents were not and are not abusive. You know that."

No, I don't. I have my doubts. But again, I don't want to fight, so I smile and offer him my M&M bag. "Want another one?"

"No, not now. I'll go get some coffee. You want something?"

I'm fine, but I stand up from where we've been sitting on a bench. "Yeah, I think I want some more water. I'll come with you."

On the way to the concession stand, I try to forget what Gil just said, but it won't leave me alone, so I tap his shoulder. "Gil?"

"Yeah, honey?"

"Can I ask you something? I'm not picking a fight. I just really want to know."

His smile is strained, but he nods. "Heaven forbid I try to stop your natural curiosity."

“Did your mom and dad...did they say that about all your feelings? Like, Jesus doesn't want you to be sad, or angry, or anything?”

Gil clears his throat. “Maria...” But we're next in line, so he cuts himself off. I'm reaching for my purse to pay for a bottle of water when I hear,

“Ah, Miss Keller.”

I straighten up just in time to see my VMS prof, Dr. Showalter, standing there. “Oh, hey, Dr. S. I didn't know you were a Stage Door supporter.”

“It is ‘hello,’ not ‘hey,’ Texas girl,” Dr. S says. He's smiling, but it's as fake as a plastic gemstone. “How on earth are you ever going to survive in theater if you refuse to speak properly?”

“I don't refuse, Dr. Showalter. I'm just having a somewhat casual night. Oh...um, Dr. Showalter, I want you to meet Gil Montgomery. He's my...”

“I know who he is,” Dr. S says. “Montgomery.” He shakes Gil's hand. “Pleasure to see you again. And I see you and Maria are quite fond of each other.” He nods. “You have superb taste. Maria is one of my best students, if not always as poised as I'd like her to be.”

Gil puts his arm around me. “Tell me something I don't know.”

Dr. S nods again. “New love is always a pleasure to watch. My Judith and I could take a few lessons. Well...” He shoves his hands in his pockets and glances at the clock above the concession stand. “Do you two mind if I...”

“Go ahead,” I say. I'm not thirsty anymore.

Dr. S steps to the front and orders a Coke. When he gets it, he takes a few sips and looks back at Gil. “As always, Montgomery, a visually stunning and technically sound production, if not the most godly one you could've presented. But then, you've heard my spiel before, and since your father does it much better than I anyway, I'm sure you don't need to hear it again. Well, good night.”

“You okay?” I whisper on the way back to the box.

Gil clears his throat loudly. “No. I will be, but right now, no. I know I shouldn't let him after ten years, but that man always manages to get my goat. I don't know how you stand his classes.”

“He is weird,” I agree. “Kinda like Jekyll and Hyde. And I think he thinks I’m his personal, Texas-style Eliza Doolittle. You know, the rough-edged, tough-talking street cop he wants to turn into a diva? And I mean, in the bad sense of the word?”

“Yeah, I got that. I wish he’d let me off that easy.”

“Yeah. You said ten years. Is he around often?”

“Not too often, but often enough. He’s got a side job as a drama critic, and he has never—and I do mean never—given me one positive comment in his column. To him, my productions are pushing the boundaries of worldly and unclean just because I don’t perform exclusively Christian works.”

The hurt in Gil’s voice pricks my heart. “Ah, Gil. That’s not true. You’re the single godliest human being I’ve ever met.”

He grins and takes my arm to escort me back in. “Thanks, sweetie. Sometimes I just wish...”

“Yeah?”

But he’s far away from me, taking a trip through a bad neighborhood of his memories. I want to be there to give him a police escort—to make him feel safe—but my gentle inner guide warns me not to push. So instead, I take my seat in the box and enjoy the rest of *Godspell*.

“Your actors get better every time,” I say when Gil and I are in his car. “I miss being with them.”

“You could come back any time,” he says, his voice serious enough to tell me he’s not just answering me.

“I know. But...”

“I know. You’re swamped.” He sighs. “I’ll be glad to see Christmas. This is getting old.”

“It is for me too, but Gil, it’s not my fault. And think about it, hon. Do you really want a girlfriend whose only degree comes from Sam Houston High?”

“I don’t care about your educational level. You could have an IQ of fifty and I’d still love you.”

"I know. And I appreciate that, but even if you don't care, I do. I'm getting this degree so I can come back to theater someday. And because...well, a lot of other people care, too. If you've got nothing but a high school diploma, you're automatically a bum. Bum-ette, in my case." The joke's weak.

"Ha, ha. Maria, are you talking about my parents again?"

"Not exclusively, but yeah. It's kind of hard not to think about the guy who called you a lazy, uneducated former jailbird every time you pass the college clock tower."

"Whoa, hold it." Gil pulls up to a red light and stares at me. "My dad called you what?"

I repeat it. "And furthermore, according to Sophie, he calls me much worse on a regular basis." I feel a little like a tattling kid, but the truth is, Montgomery Sr.'s attitude makes me want to ram my hand through a wall every time I think about it.

Gil clears his throat. "Sophie probably misinterpreted what she heard. She's only five, and as you have seen, she tends to be—impassioned. Quick-tempered."

"Oh, I get it. So everything she says has the potential to be a lie?"

"No! She's my daughter, for heaven's sake."

"Yes, Gil, she is, and she desperately needs her daddy. But she can't get to him because at every turn, someone makes her feel unworthy of him. She does one thing wrong, and she's punished so harshly she just gets madder. Like at the pizza parlor that time."

Gil's eyes bore into me. "Maria, I realize you love them. But you do not—do you hear me, do not—have the right to tell me how to discipline my children."

I sigh and crack my knuckles. "Okay. You're right. That was out of line. But I'm not done. Because even though you don't want me telling you how to discipline your kids, I know you're not telling yourself how to, either. There are two specific people telling you that, and you need to quit listening to them. For mercy's sake, Gil Montgomery, be a man!"

His teeth are clenched. "I will be a man when you grow up and act like a woman."

His words hurtle me back to my last phone conversation with Luke. He said some similar things then, but they didn't hurt as much as what Gil just said. I look up. Jesus, what is the deal?

I'm trying so hard to be everything to everybody. To be worthy of everybody, especially Gil. Why doesn't anyone understand that?

Suddenly, it's like I'm not in the car anymore. I mean, I am, but it's like I'm not focused on what's happening in it. I'm focused on a presence I feel next to me, and it's not God, it's me. It's me, but it's the eight-year-old version of me. She's small, way too skinny, afraid to talk to anybody, and aching to fold up inside herself and disappear. I can even see what she's wearing—the red dress I always called the “new foster home outfit.” I loved that dress, but most days, I just wanted to burn it.

I turn to Little Maria and tap her shoulder, but she won't look at me. She does talk to me, though, and what I hear nearly makes me lose it. *Everybody's always mad at me, and I don't know why. I always make mistakes and I don't know what they are. No one will tell me.* With that, she tucks her chin into her chest and folds herself up. *I am invisible...*

“Maria? Maria...”

Too late, I realize my hands are on my shoulders and my head is on my knees. Gil's tapping my back. “Gumshoe? Are you sick? Should I pull over?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“Nothing you could possibly understand.”

We drive the rest of the way to my house in tense silence.

The Autumn Opener concert is the following Tuesday night. Getting into formation and taking the stage without Tim and Patrick there feels awful, but Dr. Laughlin allows us a moment of silence for them. Not that that's fooling me. She's been especially irritable these past few rehearsals, and while everybody else blames it on pre-concert stress, I'm looking deeper. And as much as I want to believe a choir director wouldn't kill her own singers, I can't ignore the funny, almost nervous looks she's been shooting at me. Nor can I pretend I don't see her staring at Patrick and Tim's empty chairs. I smile. Schmidt would be proud. At least, I hope he would. And even if he wouldn't, he won't complain about my singing. He, Dorothea, their kids, Gil and his kids, Tunney, and Debra Fortney are in the audience tonight.

I take the stage, straighten my black velvet skirt, and turn so I'm "in a window" where Dr. Laughlin can see me. We all wait, slightly tense in that last second of silence, before the piano starts playing and our director raises her baton. My eyes are glued to her, and a couple times, I catch her smiling at me. With each song, my voice gets stronger and more confident, until I wouldn't give an ax-murderer a second thought if he tromped in here. By the time we reach "Broadway Medley," I have to almost physically hold myself back so I won't over-sing and drown out everybody else. But I do have a solo descant in the middle, and when I hit those notes, it feels like I'm gonna burst right through the ceiling. When the concert ends, I have to make myself leave the stage, still humming chords from each song.

"Maria!" Gil runs up to me and sweeps me up in a hug. "You were fantastic!"

"You rock," Schmidt's two oldest, Kurt and David, agree.

"Not just me," I correct them. "The whole choir rocks."

"But you were best of all," Desi says, giving me an adoring smile.

"You have gold in your throat," Dorothea says. "Doesn't she, Brendan?"

"What? Oh, yeah." Schmidt gives me the first real smile I've seen out of him in the past couple days. "You get better every time I hear you sing. You keep that up, you'll charm the perp right into our hands."

And naturally, he relates my singing right back to police work. I'm not sure how to take that, so I just nod and wave to Rose, who's been soaking up her own accolades. We're busy hugging, congratulating each other, and hitting the highlights of the concert all over again when I turn my head and see Schmidt gesturing to me. I excuse myself and head back across the vestibule. "Yes?"

Schmidt puts a finger to his lips and mouths, "Look to the right. No, my right."

I look and feel my detective's instincts kick in. Dr. Laughlin is headed toward the exit, but she's practically slinking along the wall. She's got a cell phone to her ear, and from her face, the person on the other end is getting an earful. When we move closer, Schmidt and I both catch the words, "murder...good thing...get rid of the school's trash."

Without even looking at each other, we follow her. She leads us out of the music building, down the front stairs, and around the corner to a bench. We crouch behind it.

“Oh, no,” we hear my choir director say. “Don’t give me any credit. I don’t like it anymore than you do. But the end justifies the means, as they say, and if killing off a few students nobody’s going to miss anyway helps the school, I say go right ahead. Rock on, as the slang goes these days.”

“Okay, cover me.” Schmidt’s pulling out his handcuffs, but I’m not ready to move in yet. “Wait,” I whisper. “Let’s wait to see if she confesses to one of the killings.”

“Confesses to—Keller, has the spotlight heat fried your brain?” Schmidt hisses. “I know what I’m doing.”

“I know you do, but...”

“But? But what? She’s your director and you can’t stand seeing her locked up? Don’t give me that, girl. If you’d been paying attention instead of whooping it up with your little friend back there...”

Schmidt’s words burn worse than the time I accidentally popped a whole habanera pepper in my mouth thinking it was a harmless jalapeno. “Girl?” “Little friend?” He might as well have called me a...

“Keller! Honestly, what is wrong with you? Get off the stage and back to the real world—now!”

“Shhh. She’ll hear you.” I can barely talk.

That gets through to Schmidt. He opens his mouth, closes it, pushes a hand through his hair, and nods. Just then, Dr. Laughlin says,

“Look, don’t worry about that cop, okay? She’s so focused on her studies she won’t notice anything that might go wrong. Just do what you have to do. Just don’t tell me who the target is next time. I don’t want them to have any evidence against...”

Schmidt and I say “Let’s move” at the same time.

“Drop the phone, ma’am,” Schmidt commands. He’s not yelling, but his voice would make Hitler stop in his tracks.

She drops it and glares at us. "What do you want?"

"We want you to come with us," I say. "You're now officially on our suspect list."

Dr. Laughlin huffs. "Well, let me assure you two of something," she says. "Patrick and Timothy's blood is not on my hands. But this school will collapse if someone doesn't do something, and that someone is going to be me. And by the time I get through, you'll wish I'd killed both of you!"

Schmidt steps toward her with the handcuffs, but Dr. Laughlin turns around and runs.

CHAPTER 9:

“They had it comin’, they had it comin’, they had it comin’ all along...”

-Chicago

Schmidt was wrong about my not wanting to arrest Dr. Laughlin. I've wanted an excuse to question her since I talked to Rinaldi, and the way she's been acting lately, she might as well have tattooed "suspect" on her forehead. But he was right about one thing. This case is beginning to feel surreal, especially now that, two days after the concert, my choir director's out of jail on bond and Schmidt and I are using a warrant to search her office. Whatever happened to the good old days when a girl could just go to school and sing?

Schmidt's pounding the soup out of Dr. Laughlin's computer. Meanwhile, since I don't know much about computers beyond how to type and check my email, I'm searching the room for a paper trail, fingerprints, anything that might give us usable clues. Clues to what, I am not sure, but...

"Oh, Tunney's gonna just love this," Schmidt says. "Says here that Dr. Victoria Laughlin was part of a small Christian movement known as Back to the Bible in the '70s and '80s. Apparently..." He waves me over so I can look over his shoulder at the Internet page he's found. "They were concerned that the school was going to hell in a hand basket, pardon the expression, because of what was happening in the music and theater departments, but also because of what was going on in various other departments."

"Hey, this I gotta see." I grab a chair so I won't have to stand over him like an annoying shadow. Wow. English teachers doing lesson plans on banned books...the science department teaching evolution and the possibility that homosexuality comes from genetics...courses being offered in Eastern religions and Islam..." I sigh. "Crumb, don't you know they started screaming over that when 9/11 hit?"

"Amen." Schmidt presses "print" and runs both hands through his hair. "If there's one thing I hate, it's when these fundamentalist whackos decide they know everything there is to know about religion, but totally discount grace."

“Especially when one said whacko ends up committing murder.” I grab the info off the printer and scan the names. “Hey, hold up. I think I’ve got a lead here. It says the head of this Back to the Bible group was a man named Adam Baker.”

“So?”

“So, don’t you remember what Dana Piggott said when we were interrogating him? ‘I’ve got to finish this paper or Baker’s gonna kill me?’ And then, before Tim died, Patrick mentioned that he’d just transferred into the choir from one of Mr. Baker’s classes. I think I just found a new suspect, or at least a person of interest.”

Schmidt’s nodding like a bobble-head doll. “Yup, looks like you’ve still got the touch. Wanna go back to the station and see what we can find out?”

“Sounds like a plan.” I give him a thumbs-up.

“Great.” Schmidt drops an arm around my shoulder for a minute. “It’s good to have the old team back together. And listen, I am sorry I’ve been so weird lately.”

“I’ve seen weirder,” I say. But seriously, what is up? The suspense is killing me, and if my doctor finds out—whew, are you ever gonna be in big trouble.”

“Okay, okay, but you have to keep it to yourself ‘cause what I’ve got is only hearsay.” Schmidt takes a breath. “Rumor back home has it that I’m up for a promotion. Tunney might make me his second-in-command. It’s between me and Walker, the guy who came to Cherry Creek from Asheville to replace Rawlings. But they say Tunney doesn’t want Walker bringing ‘big-city methods’ into his homicide division. So...”

“Oh—wow, Schmidt, that’s wonderful,” I say, because it really is. If anyone deserves such a promotion, it’s my partner.

“Sort of,” he says. “I mean, I’d love to get it, but I’ve got you to think about. Even though I don’t think Tunney would split us up if it happened ‘cause he usually likes working alone, I don’t want to take that chance. But on the other hand, I really want this shot. The other guys were treated so badly under Rawlings—I know I’d do it right. And that’s what cops need. Somebody who cares about them as people and treats them like people, not automatons.”

I nod when my mental light bulb goes off. “So this whole thing was about being torn?”

"Yeah. And I didn't know how you'd take it. I was afraid you'd think I wanted to get rid of you. And I didn't want to get my hopes up about it, but it was already too late, and..."

"Ah, Schmidt. It'll happen if it's supposed to. Isn't that what you and Dorothea tell me?"

"Yeah. Why'd you have to be such a good student?"

"Because I love the two of you to death. By the way, tell Dorothea that for me, okay?"

"Tell her yourself. We want you over for dinner next Friday. She's making her mom's seafood casserole."

"If that's a bribe, I'll take it."

"Well, the bribe gets better," Schmidt says. "We've invited the Montgomerys. We had to invite Gil's parents, but with me and Dorothea there, they'll be nice. They like us."

"What'd you do, give them a brand new car last Christmas? Okay, I'll be there."

"Good. In the meantime, we've got to see if we can make a choir director sing."

"Lame, Schmidt."

"No more so than your cooking."

"Oh, no, you did not just go there! Just for that, I'm taking the last can of Coke in the station fridge."

"You'll have to arm-wrestle me for it, and frankly, I don't like your chances."

"Hey, strategy wins over strength every time, partner."

We walk out laughing, and I feel myself relax. Maybe now that Schmidt's got the promotion worries off his chest, we'll be okay.

"All right, so maybe I was in Back to the Bible," Dr. Laughlin admits. "But that does not mean I had a thing to do with the murders."

"Then suppose you tell me what it does mean," I say, "because I for one am sick of this murder mess. I want to get back to my degree, my family, my boyfriend, and my life."

Dr. Laughlin does that huffing thing and leans away from the interrogation table. "It means I was in Back to the Bible," she says. "It means I might still believe in their tenets. But it

also means the group disbanded years ago, and so you can't pin the murders on me based on my association with it."

"Maybe not," Schmidt says, "but we sure can pin them on you based on your threat back at the college." He leans over. "What's going on, Victoria? You can tell us."

She slumps so far down in the chair she almost falls out. "What does it matter? You think I'm guilty already."

"No we don't." Schmidt pats her hand. It's a good thing he does, because I don't feel like jumping in with the bad cop routine right now. I don't know what to think, let alone what to say. This is Dr. Laughlin, the woman who's always got it together, the woman who takes our choir from sounding like a bunch of screaming, screeching, groaning ghosts to sounding like something people want to listen to. And yet, she's a suspect, so... I sigh. Luke, did one of your arrestees ever make you feel like this?

Whoa! Why did Luke just pop into my head? I haven't thought of him in weeks, and I don't want to now. I pin Dr. Laughlin with my best glare. "C'mon, Dr. L. Start talking, now."

She shakes her head, and her black hair falls over her face like a spider's web. "I didn't kill those boys. I care about my singers."

"Just like you cared about Nina Rinaldi? The alto you flunked because she dared get pneumonia?" I ask. I'm not really acting this time. That little tidbit does make me mad.

Dr. Laughlin's face hardens. "I plead the Fifth on that. My policy is my policy."

"Or else that policy changes when a member of a section you don't like is involved," I say. "C'mon, Dr. L. Whatever anger you had against Louisa Carstairs, isn't it time you let it go? You say you know so much about the Bible. Well, didn't Jesus say not to hold grudges? Forgive as the Father forgave you?" Whoa, where'd that come from? That was good! One more gold star for Maria—one less red check mark, I think, remembering the way my elementary school teachers used to mark down bad behavior.

The spider veil quivers, then shakes. "It's not that easy. She didn't earn her place, and we all knew it."

Okay, now she's making me mad again. "Dr. Laughlin, I am not a big believer in people earning 'places,' if what that means is, people earning a brand of respect they should've gotten just for being decent human beings. As far as I'm concerned, Louisa was a decent human being who was doing her best to stay clean, and everyone around her sabotaged all her efforts to do that."

"Then you only heard one side of the story," Dr. Laughlin says. "Maria..."

"I'm Detective Keller as long as we're in this room."

"All right. Detective Keller, I know you haven't been a Christian for long. Let me try to explain this. Grace does figure into salvation, yes. But once one is saved, certain things—certain behavior—is expected. And at Christ and His Saints, there are students who want to sabotage our image as a school that truly represents Jesus and His teachings. For instance, Timothy Everson..."

"Had a gambling addiction," I say. "But the key word is 'had.' Jesus set him free. Shouldn't the school celebrate that?" Wow—Jesus must really be stepping up to the plate to help me tonight. I shoot up a silent thank-you and look down to hide a smile. Gold stars, two. Check marks—well, still a lot, but...

"We have no proof that he intended to stay 'free,'" says my prof. "And it's not that simple. Even those students who claim to be Christ-followers can have issues that would indicate otherwise. Patrick Marcello suffered from clinical depression, for one."

"I never knew that," I say.

"Did he tell you?" Schmidt asks.

"No, but it was documented as a medical disability. Surely you noticed how often he had already missed class this semester, Detective Keller?"

Thinking back, I do remember Patrick being absent a lot. One time, I asked where he'd been, and he said he'd had a migraine. But at the same time, his eyes were puffy, and his hair looked like he hadn't combed it in a few days. Could he have had an episode?

“His professors will tell you,” Dr. Laughlin rolls on, “that Patrick would come to class wearing the same clothes all week, with uncombed hair and un-brushed teeth. He regularly slept through Music Appreciation with Mr. Baker.”

“Well, gee, maybe the class was just boring.” Schmidt laughs in an obvious attempt to loosen her up.

Dr. Laughlin cracks a half-smile. “If only. No, he would be in the throes of an ‘episode,’ as they are called. Poor Adam—that’s Mr. Baker—I don’t know how he stood it. He used to tell me, ‘honestly, Victoria, you’d think these supposedly Christian students of ours would recognize these...these head-sicknesses...for the demonic presences they are and learn to stand up and fight!’”

I force myself not to grab my notebook. I screw my bad cop mask on a little tighter. “Okay, I get it. So if a person—Christian or not—has a problem like a gambling addiction or depression, and said person dares bring it into a Christian environment, then said person deserves to get killed?”

“I don’t know that.”

“I think you do. And furthermore, I think you know who the murderer is.” I’m not sure if she does or not, but at times, bluffing works wonders in the cop game. “Tell me the truth, ma’am. Does your Back to the Bible philosophy involve killing off anyone who’s not as godly as you?”

“Again, I’d like to use my right to remain silent.”

“So you do know who it is,” Schmidt says. “Come on, Victoria. If you tell us, it will save the school.”

“No, I don’t know. And if I did, I would not tell you. If you want my opinion, neither of you are true believers.”

“And that’s not your right to judge,” Schmidt says, reading my mind. “Victoria, listen to me good, now. I know Christ and His Saints is supposed to be a refuge for students and teachers who truly love Jesus. But whoever’s killing these kids—they don’t love Him. They don’t even know Him. So if I were you, I’d quit worrying about whether somebody’s a true believer based on what

their past tells you, and start looking for someone who's working for the guy out to destroy all believers."

Go, Schmidt, go, Schmidt, I think. I send him a quick victory sign, which he returns.

Dr. Laughlin looks like she's about to collapse. "Do you have anymore questions?"

Schmidt and I exchange eye messages, and he gets up. "No. You can go on home. But we'll be in touch, so think long and hard about what you're gonna say when we call."

Schmidt runs a hand through his hair when Dr. Laughlin leaves. "I'll call her tomorrow. Let's pray she decides to talk between now and then."

"Why bother? We're not real Christians."

"Ha, ha. I'm gonna put on a pot of coffee. If you want some tea, I'll make you a cup."

I rub my forehead. "That'd be good if you don't care. My teabags are in the upper left cabinet. Chamomile's right up front."

"Got it."

While Schmidt's gone, I say a prayer for my prof, and a prayer that she'll lead us to the perp. As usually happens, once I get started on prayer, it's hard to quit. I pray for Schmidt—for God's will in the promotion issue—for Dorothea and the kids, for Rose and the other choristers who all must be terrified, for Meg's relationship with Derek, for Monique to realize how special she is, for Gil...

Gil. Last time I saw him, I acted like he wasn't much better than a perp. I groan and drop my head onto the table. There goes a check mark—a big one. He's right. Why do I keep trying to get between him and his folks, anyway? Don't I know how important his family is to him? Well no, Keller, of course you don't, because your family's dead, and the folks who call themselves family—they don't even want you. But who would? Who wants someone who cares too much about everybody who walks in the police station, usually has to make herself read the Bible because she thinks it's boring, still loves show tunes more than Christian music, and...

I wanted you. And whether he knows it or not, so does Gil.

And right then, I know what to do next. I take out my cell phone. Gil picks up after one ring. “Hi, Maria.”

“Hey, Gil. I don’t have much time to talk, but...”

“Of course you don’t.”

I sigh. “Please, Gil. I called to apologize for the other night.”

“You—you called to...”

“Yup. I’m trying to eat humble pie here, and you won’t even let me pick up my fork.”

He busts up laughing. “I love it when you talk like that.” He sobers a little. “I love that you make me laugh.”

“Yeah, yeah. So are you gonna let me eat it or not?”

“You once asked me that about a bowl of ice cream.” He laughs again. “Of course I am. Maria, I accept your apology.”

“I appreciate that, but please...” I think about it and decide to try making him laugh again. I quote part of a line from *The Sound of Music*, in Julie Andrews’ voice. “Please, Father Gilbert, do let me ask for forgiveness.”

He chuckles. “It would make you feel better?”

“Yes. You see, I didn’t mean to get between you and your parents or tell you how to handle your children, but I love them. I love them too much to be tactful sometimes. And they need to know you love them too, no matter what bad things they’ve done.” I feel myself smile. “Oh, please, Captain, love them—love them all. And...I...you...” Crumb, I am so far out on a limb I might break my neck any second. “Gil, I know you do, but—love me, too. Try to understand how much it hurts that your folks hate me for no reason.”

He clears his throat. “I am trying, Gumshoe. It’s just...I’m torn here, honey. I’d do anything for you, but Mom and Dad are still my parents. And right now, with how they feel about you, if I were to choose you, I’d have to cut myself off from them completely, and I can’t do that.”

I’m up now, pacing the interrogation room. I’m trying to understand too, but it’s not working. I take a deep breath. “Gil, do you know where I am right now?”

“At work.”

“Yes, but I’m also in an interrogation room. Now, not too long ago, I was in another one—on the wrong side of the table. Neither one of us knew if I was gonna come out of that room a free woman. And later, after I did, you told me that almost losing me to the prison system made you realize how important I was. Did you forget about that? Did you change your mind?”

He clears his throat again. “Maria, of course I didn’t. If they’d taken you from me, I wouldn’t have made it.”

“Right. But now that you know I’m safe from that, are you taking me for granted?”

“You can’t accuse me of that.” Gil’s voice is a little cool.

“I’m not accusing. I’m telling you what the evidence says.”

“Well, if the evidence had been right, you’d be on Death Row.”

It’s actually appropriate that he should mention the joint, because that comment felt like an electric shock. “Gil, don’t.”

“Don’t what? Don’t tell you the truth?”

I’m practically chewing my lip off. “Look, Gil, just tell me this, okay? Why do your parents have to keep butting into our relationship? I thought we were done with that.”

“And so did I, honey. But you’re not just fighting my parents here. You’re fighting my entire upbringing. And like it or not, that upbringing says that a woman like you is not good enough for a man like me.”

“Well, of all the...” I taste blood when I bite down to avoid a dirty word. “Well, Gilbert, if that’s the way you feel about it, you can tell your upbringing, your parents, your church, and whoever else three little words. Bring it on!”

And I hang up.

“Chamomile tea here, get it while it’s hot,” Schmidt says exactly five seconds later. He frowns. “What’s with you?”

I sum up the conversation with Gil. “Schmidt, why are men such idiots?”

He sits down. “As a man, I don’t really know. But here’s what I do know. Like it or not, you can’t care right now. You have to focus on the case. And Keller?” He frowns. “I’ve never had to

mention it before, but now that it's come up...as your senior partner, I'm telling you, I don't want to see or hear you making personal calls in here again."

Oh, yeah, that helps. If I were a braver woman, I'd stand up and tell Schmidt that I, in fact, don't care. I don't care how torn he is about this promotion that's not even his yet. I don't care about his stupid cop rules. But I do care about what's going on in my life, and I do care that I'm bleeding inside, and I do care that he doesn't care. So there!

I even try it. "Schmidt..."

"Yeah?" he asks, like he's waiting for me to agree.

"Schmidt, look, I..." But I chicken out and just point downward. "There's a jellybean stuck to your shirt."

"Oh—oh, thanks." He plucks it off. "Ah, blueberry." He eats it.

Disgusting.

Dr. Laughlin didn't talk, of course. But lucky for her, I've got another lead to check out. I call Rose and tell her I'll take my own car the next day because I want to get to school early. Once there, I have no trouble finding Adam Baker's office.

"Come in!" he half-yells when I knock on the door. "What—oh! Detective...Keller, isn't it?"

"Yes, but just call me Maria," I say. "I'm here as a student today. I'm looking for some advice."

"Well, I'm not your advisor." Is it me, or is his tone borderline angry? No, it's definitely not me.

"I know, sir, but..." Okay, time to play the "damsel in distress" card. Crumb, I hate that one. "Sir, it's just that after the choir concert last night..."

"You're thinking of dropping choir, and you know your only option is my Music Appreciation 101 class," he finishes.

"Yes. When I registered, I..."

"No," he says. "Absolutely not. My class is full, and even if it weren't, I do not want you in there disrupting it, leaving every five minutes to go chase down one of your perps. If you really appreciated what we do in this department, you never would've pinned on a badge."

I feel like he just slashed a check mark right across my chest, but I ignore the inner pain. It's part of the plan, girl, I coach myself. Just part of the plan. I pull the "sassy" card from my mental sleeve and prepare for part two. "Some of us have no choice," I snap at him. "And furthermore, if I weren't out there dealing with perps, you could've gotten strangled just like Marcello and Everson, thanks to those Back to the Bible whackos."

Baker stands up then. I expect him to stay behind the desk, but to my horror, he comes out and gets right in my face. We're literally nose to nose. My vision is full of unyielding, mud-brown eyes and a reddening face, but I don't dare blink. "Don't...you...ever...mention...them...to me again," Baker grounds out. "Now get out of my office before I call the cops and get you thrown right back into a cell."

Don't back down, Keller. Don't do it, girl. Have no fear of men who can destroy the body, but cannot take your soul...the angel of the Lord delivers those who fear Him... My hand finds Mama's angel pin on my left lapel and taps it. I hang onto the jewelry and purposely slump forward, like he scared me out of my mind. "Yes, sir. I'll leave right now," I agree, feeling like Prissy from *Gone with the Wind*. Yes, Massa, right away, Massa! I think I'm gonna puke.

"See that you do." Baker slams the door in my face.

It takes all of three seconds for me to rush around the corner, laughing under my breath because Baker thinks I'm running like a scared little mouse. I let out a real laugh when I'm sure it's safe, open my purse, and pretend to be very busy getting a Nestea from the vending machine as part three of The Plan.

"Maria!"

I whirl around to find Rose standing there. "Shhh! Not so loud."

"What? Oh, are you...investigating?" she asks, with all the excitement of a person who's never seen the inside of a police precinct except on TV.

I laugh. “Not yet, but I will be in about thirty seconds. If I’ve done this thing right, Baker’s gonna storm out of his office because he knows if he stays, I might come and bother him again. Then I can...”

“Maria.” Rose sounds horrified. “Please don’t tell me you went in there alone.”

“What? It’s not like it’s a lion’s den.” Of course, I didn’t get to see the dude with his full mane on.

“True, but...” Rose shakes her head. “I cannot believe nobody told you. Adam Baker is the meanest, most unfair teacher in this school. In fact, he...”

“Shhh!” I caution her again. Before Rose can react, I pull us both into an alcove. As I predicted, the next person we see is the man himself, stomping down the hallway with ear buds in his ears. Once I know it’s safe, I start moving forward.

Rose grabs my arm. “I’m coming with you.”

I give her my most patient look. “Rose, thanks for being concerned, but you’re a civilian. I can’t...”

“Maria, please, you could be in real danger.”

“Rose, c’mon, what’s the guy gonna do, flunk me? I’m not even in one of his courses. And we’re too old to be kept after school.”

Rose shakes her head. “No. He...he’s violent.”

“What do you mean?”

Rose takes a deep breath. “You remember Patrick? How he missed so much choir? Well, that was because...”

“I know, clinical depression. Dr. Laughlin told me and Schmidt about it down at the station. And...well, she did say Patrick slept through Baker’s class a lot.”

“Yes. The thing is, he and I were in that class together at the beginning of the semester because the choir didn’t have any soprano or tenor openings. But then two seniors quit because they were sick of the tensions and everything. Well...” Rose pauses. “One time, Baker flunked me on a paper, and I was gonna go contest the grade, but when I got to his office, he and Patrick were in there together. Patrick was saying how he was sorry and he was going to drop the class

before he failed, but...Baker didn't let him. He said something about 'don't ruin my reputation.' And then he...Maria, Baker slapped Patrick. I heard it."

Now she's got my full attention. She's got so much of it that she makes me spit a mouthful of tea onto the floor. "Rose, why didn't you say something about this?"

"Because I was afraid you'd go to Baker and question him and tell him I..."

"I would've protected you."

"No, that's not it. See, he denies it. There're rumors all over this school that Patrick's not the first student Baker kicked around. But he's got a lot of respect around here, and none of the other students will say anything. They're too scared."

"Oh, is that so? Well, I've got news for Baker. I'm not." I leave Rose standing in the hallway, slack-jawed. I feel kinda guilty about that, but I know I'm only doing it for her safety. I follow Baker at a safe distance, thanking the Lord I decided to wear flats today. I end up slipping into the music building's faculty lounge a few feet behind him, then squatting behind a long drape at the room's one window. For a second, I think about the Captain being outraged that Maria made clothes for his kids out of drapes in *The Sound of Music*, and have to gnaw my lip so I won't laugh.

I pull the drape back just enough to get a view of Baker. He doesn't seem to be doing anything unusual, but he is listening to whatever's on his iPod more intently than someone would if they were just playing music. Especially since he's not working on anything, which would necessitate blocking outside noises...I wonder if there's some way to get him to abandon the machine so I can...

Bach's "Toccatà and Fugue in D Minor" screeches out of Baker's cell phone, which is lying on the table next to him. The perfect ringtone for a murderer, I think before looking up. God, not that I necessarily want this guy to be a killer, because I know you don't want anybody to be one—but please let this phone call lead me in the right direction!

The phone call might not, but I always will. If any of you lacks wisdom, she should ask God, remember?

Right-o, God, I answer. And I am asking, because I could really use some wisdom. And not just for this, but for everything that's gone wrong in my life so far.

Hmmm. Yes, we do need to discuss that. But right now, you've got a phone call to eavesdrop on. It feels like God winked at me.

"No...no, you absolutely cannot. Not yet," Baker is saying. "You understand me, Christine? Don't forget, I know you were there that time...yes, I know you didn't set the bomb. You weren't even in on the plan. I know...oh, for..." He cusses. "Will you stop that whining? I know you were just a witness, but nobody else has to...what? Oh...oh, don't worry about that. I know better...Christine, stop it!" He's practically screaming now, and I can see veins popping in his neck. My hands turn cold and dry, and I ache to crack my knuckles. Chandler used to sound just like this when he got good and mad at me. He never hit me, but he threatened to. I don't know why the jerk didn't just go on and do it, except if he recognized that I wasn't a delicate flower who'd just lie there and take it. I gulp in air. Would this jerk do something similar to my advisor?

"Christine, stop," Baker says again, but his voice is smooth as butterscotch syrup this time. "It's going to be all right. Those people—Vicki Laughlin, Herb Showalter—they can't control this school forever. But you've got to trust that I know what I'm doing."

Showalter? So my VMS prof is involved too? I look up. Honestly, Jesus, I do love a challenge, but this is an out-and-out conspiracy! Give a girl a break! I rub my forehead. I've had a low-grade headache all day, but that ache, which turned into a throb after my confrontation with Baker, is now kicking up its heels and pounding my brain into mush.

"Yes, yes, I know they made their choice...Christine, for the thousandth time, this is not about any of that! Just stay cool, okay? It'll be all right. Okay? Okay. See you at the next faculty meeting. 'Bye now."

'Bye now, indeed. I literally crawl out of the lounge while Baker's busy rummaging in the fridge for something to snack on. I've just gotten up when a voice asks,

"Miss Keller, what are you doing here?"

CHAPTER 10:

“Walk on through the wind, walk on through the rain...”

-Carousel

Dr. Showalter! Crumb, crumb, crumb!

“Ah...Dr. uh, Showalter...great to see you. Um...sorry, I was, um...” The headache slams into my brain again, and I put my hand to my forehead. “Ouch!”

My prof gives me a concerned look. “Are you all right, Miss Keller?”

“Yeah...yes. I’m fine. Just a head—ow!” Man, this thing is serious. But maybe it’ll provide a convenient alibi. “Do you have any ice in the faculty lounge I can have?”

“I don’t think we do, no. Maybe you should get to the infirmary.”

“Oh, no, that won’t be...” Another wave of pain hits. I shake my head even though it hurts. I am rarely sick or in pain, but when I am, it’s always a doozy.

“Here.” Dr. Showalter takes my arm, and I don’t even think to pull away. In two seconds, I’m back in the lounge, and Dr. S is guiding me toward the couch. “Why don’t you lie down? I know we have some ginger ale in here somewhere...Adam, if you’ll excuse me...”

“For goodness’ sake Showalter, she’s not a kindergartner,” Baker says, but he sounds less like he’s sticking up for me and more like he’s mad that somebody got in his way. Hey, Baker, ever heard of anger management?

“Here we go.” Dr. S is back, carrying a cup of still-fizzing ginger ale. “Drink this and then stay here until you’re ready to drive. Adam, let’s leave her alone for a minute. I need to speak to you in my office anyway.”

Now, that is one conversation I would love to eavesdrop on. Too bad my head had to...but wait. I feel my mouth curving up. Baker forgot his iPod. If I can find out what he was listening to, maybe it’ll give me a clue. But I can’t move yet. I gulp the ginger ale like I’m slamming a shot, hoping it’ll brace me, and it does. Bless you, Canada Dry. I check to see that the coast is clear, close the door to the faculty lounge, and head over to the table in the center of the room.

Okay, little music machine, come see me... Mama needs to put away a scumbag... I pull the device into my now-gloved hands and rub the ear buds on my blouse before I put them in, which is the best I can do of cleaning them since I can't spit and leave evidence.

I start scrolling through Baker's playlist, and the further I go, the weirder it gets. The song titles are mostly ones I recognize from listening to the radio's Christian station, but somehow, they seem out of place on such an angry man's iPod. I give myself a mental slap for judging the dude and keep going. The Christian numbers give way to mainstream country—nothing wrong with that, but I've heard those songs too, and most of the ones Baker picked out aren't that clean. Country turns to rock, and I blink several times. Why would Adam Baker, who claims to be a Christian teacher at a school where, according to the website, they only hire Christians, have music like this on his playlist? It's your standard filthy, obscenity-sprinkled, Sin Central stuff about dead bodies, voodoo, alcohol, fast cars, drugs, and sexy girls. I'm getting this junk out of my ears before it penetrates... wait a sec.

Baker doesn't just have music on this machine. He's also got what appear to be—taped sermons? I shoot God another wisdom request and listen in.

The sermons, or snippets of them, are from a pastor I don't recognize. I don't catch his name, but I sure catch his message—

"We are under the new covenant, folks. Yes, that's right, I said new covenant—not under law, but under grace! Jesus promised forgiveness, and so we are free. Don't let anyone tell you differently—that's Satan trying to suck you back into slavery! Don't let anyone tell you that what you're doing is sin. Sin is an antiquated notion, just as the old covenant is. Don't let those legalists tell you the Bible has no errors. Of course it does—it was written by fallible humans back in old covenant's day! Don't let them tell you they have a corner on the truth market. God loves you, and He understands that your truth is just as valid as the next person's truth. He invented truth—why would He, a loving supreme being, choose only one? Is that the kind of narrow-minded God you want? No..."

"Holy crumb," I breathe. "What has this guy been drinking?" I may be a rookie Christian, but even I'm not dumb enough to fall for this "there is no sin, do what you want, all things are

truth” baloney. The question is why would Adam Baker of Back to the Bible fame fall for it? Unless he abandoned the group somewhere along the way, which would definitely explain his extreme anger when I brought it up. But then why did he jump all over Patrick Marcello and allegedly slap him for... My head is starting to ache again. I move on to the next track.

This one’s another sermon. It’s from a different pastor, but like the other guy, this one preaches grace and love. The catch is, he doesn’t mention anything about sin one way or the other. In fact, he’s telling his congregation to be at peace. No matter what happened in their pasts, God still loves them and has a purpose for them. He’s promised them wonderful lives in addition to Heaven.

I hike the volume. Now, one question. Where was this guy twenty years ago, when I was sure God hated me? Where is his theology now, when people like the senior Montgomerys are still certain that I’m nothing but a filthy, sin-covered borderline suicidal rape statistic?

Don’t ask that question yet, Maria. Keep listening. Not every spirit is of me.

So I keep listening, and a few minutes later, I see what God meant. This pastor is now preaching that there are absolutely no consequences for sin. He’s also promising these people that God wants them to be physically rich, to have perfect health, and to have every material thing they want. I roll my eyes, shut off the iPod, and look up.

“Okay, God, so can I have my parents back, the perfect wedding with Gil, six or seven kids of my own, a few pets, a million dollars, and maybe a contract with Broadway? Oh, and by the way, Santa-God, can I have a brand new Steinway piano? Say hi to the angel-elves. Love, Maria. Oh, puh-lease. You’re God, not an ATM. Honestly, legalistic killjoys, people who think you’re Santa Claus—what happened to real Christians around here? Am I the only one? Or...” I think of all those check marks in my life. “Am I even a real one? I mean, I know I’m saved and all, but I feel like I can’t do anything right. I was ready to join that quack preacher’s church. I judge people. I get angry just like Baker. I’m not...”

The lounge door creaks open, and Dr. Hastings enters. “You’re not going to be on time for class if you don’t head that way,” she laughs. She studies me. “Are you okay, Maria?”

“No.” Whoa, where’d that come from?

“What’s wrong? Can I help?”

I shrug. “I don’t think so. Not unless you can make me perfect.”

“Why do you have to be perfect?”

“I just do. For everybody. I have to be the perfect student, the perfect cop, the perfect girlfriend...” And Keller, it would be perfect if you could shut your stupid mouth. She’s a suspect, for Pete’s sake! I get up and start walking out. “I have to go. Sorry, I just...I have to go.”

Dr. Hastings lets me go, but my dark thoughts won’t give me the same service. Thank goodness today’s Friday. I’m invited to the Schmidts’ for dinner tonight. Afterward, I can talk to Dorothea. Maybe she’ll know what I can do to get rid of the leftover sin slime covering my soul.

For the first time, I have trouble paying attention in Dr. Hastings’ class. I don’t even say anything, which for me is just plain weird. I try to pull myself together. I even give myself check marks for not paying attention, thinking only of my problems, and forgetting how much God wants me to finish my education so I won’t be a bum-ette. But worries about the case, my spiritual life, whether Gil and I are officially done, and all kinds of other stuff keep needling my brain. Plus, I have a strange sense, deep in my intuition, that something awful is about to go down, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

Shake it off, girl, I scold myself. Intuition’s a myth and you know it. As for the rest of it, quit worrying. Jesus specifically said not to, remember? I tick off another check mark.

Dr. Hastings finally dismisses class. It’s my only one today, which means I’ll have time to go back to the Cherry Creek station and give the guys an update before meeting Schmidt at his place. I’m rehearsing what I’m gonna say to Gil when Rose slides up and taps my elbow.

“You okay?” she asks. “You were so quiet tonight.”

“Yeah, fine. Just thinking a lot.”

She smiles. “Well, don’t work too hard. God will give you the answers when you’re ready.”

“Yeah, He will. Thanks for reminding me.”

“Anytime. So, you want to go down to the cafeteria and get some ice cream or something?” Rose asks, because this is her last class today, too.

“Oh, no, I can’t. I have loose ends to tie up at work, and Schmidt invited me to dinner. Hey, you want to come? I could show you around the station, and trust me, Dorothea Schmidt can cook like nobody’s business. I could make a meal off her garlic bread.”

Rose beams. “I’d love to. You sure she won’t mind?”

“It’s cool,” I say. “Schmidt and Dorothea have been bugging me about letting them meet you. Schmidt says it’s about time I became friends with a girl who doesn’t carry a gun.”

Rose cracks up. “Okay, I’ll be there.”

“Great. I’ve just got to run check my mail,” I tell her. “I’m expecting a package from Books-a-Million. I ordered some Christmas presents for Gil’s kids early.”

“In late September?”

“You know me, Rose. If I don’t do something as soon as I know I have to, it won’t get done, including casework, term papers...and Christmas shopping.”

“I’m sure they’ll love what you give them,” Rose says. “I’ll meet you at the Common Building in ten minutes. I have to check and make sure the choir assistants finished hemming my skirt.”

Sure enough, my package has arrived—a book and a set of colored pencils for Clayton, a Sesame Street DVD with accompanying plush Elmo for Sophie, and for Desi, a book of fairytales with a “real princess crown”. Really, it’s a plastic silver tiara with an adjustable strap, but she’ll still be the cutest princess in Cherry Creek. By the time I get the package, though, I’ve been in line ten minutes, so I call Rose. “Looks like I’ll be late,” I laugh. “Like that’s a surprise.”

“No problem,” she laughs back. “I’ve seen those mailroom lines. I’ll wait. I’m coming out of the music building right now—oh! Oh, my gosh!”

“Rose? Rose?” But her phone’s gone dead. That awful feeling comes back, and as much as I tell it to, it won’t go away. I give in to a hunch, put the package in my backseat, and drive back to the music building. When I get there, I spot Schmidt’s unmarked car. A couple others are behind it, along with some Silverton police cruisers. Before I can react to that, my pager goes off.

“Keller.” It comes out as a funny mixture between a squeak and a croak.

“Keller, where...oh, never mind, I see your car,” Schmidt’s voice says. “Get over here. We’ve got another body.”

He barely has time to finish the sentence before I’m pushing past my fellow cops and up to my partner’s side. “Schmidt, who is it? Who’s dead?”

“You’ll be able to identify her better than I will.”

The next few seconds happen in slow motion. Schmidt sidesteps, and I see the heel of his right shoe hit the pavement. I see a flash of ginger hair, vacant hazel eyes... I feel myself folding forward, going down on my knees, grabbing the still-warm wrist, searching for a pulse, no matter how weak. There isn’t one. No breath, either. Someone—Schmidt—takes my hand away from her wrist and says my name, but I can’t hear him. He says it louder.

“Keller? Keller, she’s gone.”

I feel myself look down. I’m taking it in because my eyes force me to. I close them, but I still see it. Dr. Hastings’ hair, yanked out of the bun she was wearing...the crumpled yellow business suit... the right leg out at an angle, bloody where it scraped against the steps...her hair sticky with blood, too...the telltale bruises around her neck and throat...

“No! Oh, no! Oh, dear God, no!”

“Keller, what in the...who is she?” Schmidt demands. But I can’t answer. That...that...I say a few cuss words under my breath in quick bursts. He killed my favorite professor. No, he did more than that. He killed my mentor. She was going to help me figure out what to do next...she was gonna help me see if the cop inside me was real, or if she’d just been put there because of what other people told her...she was the only professor around here who seemed to care that I was a person. I remember from pictures in her office that she’s got a husband and a baby—a baby who’ll never remember his mama, all because somebody killed her over a stupid choir feud! She was a theater professor—why did that stupid perp go after her? She must’ve had some secret, something that made her an “unworthy” Christian...man, if this is Christianity, why did I ever sign up...oh, I know why, but...

“Keller, for mercy’s sake, will you calm down?”

No, I will not. I will not! No, it’s not that I won’t. I just can’t. I’m crying. I can’t believe it. I’m

kneeling next to a dead body, crying—the first time I’ve ever cried on the job. I can’t see anything but my own hands, filling up with water and salt from a downpour of grief that won’t let up.

Someone’s hands are pulling me away from the body and making me stand up. They’re Schmidt’s hands, but right now, I couldn’t fight them off if they belonged to a serial rapist. He’s gripping my arm and leading me across the parking lot, opening his car door.

“Get in the car. Just...just get in the car.” His tone is unreadable.

I get in the car. Schmidt drives about a block and pulls over. “How could you do that to me, Keller?”

“How could I do what to you?” It’s supposed to be a demand, but it comes out as a choked whisper.

“You know very well what! How could you have an emotional breakdown right there in the parking lot in front of at least a dozen cops? You know that is totally unacceptable. You know better than to get attached to...”

“Hey, my mentor was just murdered! Give me a break.”

“No. I will not, because that’s all I’ve done for a year and a half. And you know what, I’m sick of it! I am sick of worrying, sick of making excuses for you...”

“You never made excuses for me! And I never meant to make you worry. And you know what, for the past year, I thought you actually cared about me. So what was last year, huh? Was it all an act? Were you just being nice to me because of Rawlings and how...”

“Forget Rawlings, blast it! Forget that! Get over it! You think people are gonna keep feeling sorry for you just because...”

“I didn’t ask for their pity!”

“No, but you sure got it. And because of what happened, people are more inclined to let little things slide with you. Well, I am not letting this slide. You cannot bring your emotions onto an investigation, Keller. No, nix that. You should not. You will not. It is one of the worst things you can do. And let me tell you something, missy. If I had the power, you would be off this case right now.”

I could kill him. For one minute, I really could kill this guy. But I don't. All I do is shoot words at him. "I'm not surprised, because this is all about power. You've been treating me like dirt because you're afraid if everything in your career isn't perfect—including my actions—you won't get that precious promotion. You've been bossing me around because you want to look like the big man who has control of his pet rookie. You've been acting like I don't exist because if people see me around you too much, they'll assume I'm needy. And all because of some rumor about a promotion that isn't even yours! Well, let me tell you, Brendan Schmidt—you want me not to care? Well, fine, because *I do not care about your stupid promotion!*"

I scream that last part, and when Schmidt looks at me like I've gone crazy, I keep on screaming. "Do you have any idea how hard I have worked on this case? Do you have any idea how many headache pills I've taken? My Lord, Schmidt—my doctor's got me on sedatives! Do you care that Gil's walking out on me just because I don't fit his version of perfection—his parents' version—just like I don't fit yours? Do you know how dirty and lousy I feel every night when I finally go to bed just because I can't be a perfect Christian like you always were? Do you care about any of that? *Well, do you?*"

Schmidt doesn't answer. He just stares at me like I'm a total stranger. Highly appropriate, because that's what he feels like to me. I sigh. "You know what, just...just take me home."

Schmidt shifts the car into third gear and points it toward Cherry Creek. I sob all the way to my house. I don't care what Schmidt thinks.

"Maria, please eat something."

It's three days later, Monday morning. Sergeant Hirsch called to pay his condolences and to tell me not to worry, he doesn't expect me at work right now. I tried to tell him to put someone else on the case, but he wouldn't hear of it.

"I'm not punishing you for grief," he said, like he knew exactly who was punishing me. "Come back when you're ready. Schmidt can take care of things for awhile. He's a fifteen-year veteran, after all."

Indeed, he is. Not that that fifteen-year veteran would ever stoop so low as to call or email to see how his overly emotional rookie partner is doing. I'm surprised he didn't call home

and ask Tunney to terminate the partnership. I'm glad he didn't, because that would rip my heart out, but number one, I'm not sure why I care. Number two, my heart feels as dead as Dr. Hastings' corpse.

"Maria?"

"I'm not hungry, Meg." My voice is monotone.

"But sweetheart, you haven't..."

"I said no." Still monotone, still flat.

Monique enters, covered top to toe in a paint-splattered smock. Normally, the colors would make me smile, but I think I forgot how. She sits next to me and holds my hand.

"Mia," Monique says, "we are so sorry. We didn't know Dr. Hastings, but...I just hate seeing you this way. I mean, well..." She seems to be searching for words. "You know she's in heaven, don't you?"

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah, and that helps some, it really does. But I don't want to hear that right now, because all that means is, I'm not allowed to grieve. I'm not allowed to feel anything. Forget the fact that Christine Hastings is the first teacher since high school who wanted to see me succeed. Forget the fact that she was the only professor I knew who didn't either fall all over me or glare at me because of the feud. Forget how much she helped me. I'm not supposed to miss her, or even be sad. People said that when Mama and Daddy died. Some even ordered me not to cry. And you should've heard Schmidt when..."

"What?" Monique sits up straight. "Maria, what did he say to you?"

I tell her and Meg. It hurts so much I start to cry again.

"Of all the nerve," Monique yells. "That's...that's shameful. It's indecent, it's..."

"It's the way cops handle this stuff," I cut her off. "He's right. I've got to grow up. I should be used to this."

"Used to what? Your best friend dying? After all the death you've already experienced? After what else you've been through—and no, I am not just talking about being accused? Of all the nerve." She starts to march out.

"Where are you going, Mo?"

"I'm getting on the phone and telling that blue-suited son of a..."

"Mo!"

"Well, I am. I'm telling him he cannot and will not..."

"No!" With more energy than I've had in three days, I leap up and block her exit.

"Monique, no, don't. That'll just prove his point. Besides, I...I need you here now. With me. I need to talk to you and Meg. You have to help me."

Monique sits down. Meg sits on my other side and puts her arm around me. "What can we do, *cherie*?"

I sniffle and take a deep breath. "You can tell me something. What have I done wrong?"

Meg reacts first. "I don't understand."

I sigh. "What have I done that is so bad God would take yet another person from me? If He's so mad at me, why doesn't He kill me? I'd let Him, you know. Why doesn't He believe I love Him? Why can't I be a good Christian? Why does He keep punishing me?"

"Whoa!" exclaims Monique. "Stop right there. Maria, God is not punishing you. He never will. The only thing He punishes is sin, and you're not a sinner anymore."

"Oh, yeah? Well, listen to this." And it all comes out—the check marks, the Back to the Bible group, my question of whether I should believe like they do...everything.

Meg and Monique look at each other for a long time. Finally, Meg speaks.

"We can answer that," she says, "but we don't think we can do it the best of anyone. Someone else will have to. But in the meantime, please do three things. First and most important Maria, please hold onto the truth that God adores you. Second, I beg you again, eat something. Tell us what you think you can manage, and we'll make sure you get it. Third, curl up with your Bible and read the verses I give you. Let Him hold you, okay? Promise?"

I nod. "Okay. I'll go get my Bible, and—well, tea sounds pretty good. A tall glass of iced tea and some of Meg's eggplant parmesan."

Meg heads for the kitchen. "Coming up."

The food is in front of me in record time. I read while I'm eating—tons of verses about God comforting His people, redeeming time locusts ate, loving them through grief. They galvanize

me, and for the first time in three days, I'm able to eat an actual meal, get up, shower, put on an actual outfit, and go to our porch for some fresh air. It's chilly out, but the air feels great.

Good, Maria. That's good. Hang on, darling. You'll be on your feet again soon.

I chuckle. "Thanks, God, but being on my feet again means I have to go back to this case. And right now, I don't know what to do about it. I feel like I'm driving through a horrible thunderstorm and can't even see past my bumper."

I head back inside, and Monique puts her arm around me. "Feeling better?"

"Better than I have so far," I say. "But..." I let my eyes say what my mouth won't.

"We know." Meg's voice is hard. "Do you want me to call your partner? I promise to be nicer than Mo would. Slightly." She giggles.

"No, don't. You shouldn't, because...no, forget it. Just don't. He's been treating me like trash for weeks, and if this is the way he's gonna act, I'm gonna let him. I realize I'll have to forgive him, but to be honest, I'm not ready, and I don't think now is the right time. I refuse to grovel to that idiot. I'm going back to work next week, and if he comes up to me and says I'm not good enough to be his partner anymore, I'll...I'll..." I trail off. "I don't know. But for right now, Brendan Schmidt can go jump in a lake."

My cousins stare at me. I expect them to launch into a lecture about not letting the sun go down on my anger and not holding grudges, but they don't. Instead, Meg grins, and Monique pats my back. "You go, girl."

CHAPTER 11:

“Loathing! Unadulterated loathing, for your face, your voice, your clothing...”

-Wicked

On Thursday, I feel ready to go back to the station. I'm glad to be there, but it's difficult to deal with the reaction I get when the other cops see me. Most give me pitying looks without saying much. Sergeant Hirsch puts his hand on my shoulder and says,

“You need anything, let me know.”

Worst of all, when she sees me, Rinaldi goes a little nuts. “Oh, Keller!” she exclaims. “I heard...I'm so sorry...why do you think someone would kill her?”

“If I knew that, I could've stopped it,” I say, putting all my effort into not sounding as ticked off as I feel. It barely works, and when I see Schmidt in the cubicle next to mine, my effort flies out the window. I feel my spine straighten and my teeth clench, and I start to march by without a word. However, Schmidt stops me with,

“Keller, could you...”

“The report from the other night is in your email box. It was McClintock's turn to pick up the doughnuts. And no, I did not stop by the morgue for the Everson autopsy report. The doctor on call is going to fax it to me.”

“Keller,” Schmidt says, “you know it always works better if you go to the morgue and interview the coroner.”

“Yes, and I also know I cannot handle morgues right now, so I'm not gonna risk it. I wouldn't want to tarnish your image anymore than I already have.” I stomp into my cubicle. What I wouldn't give for a door to slam.

In the next few hours, I decide maybe I should've gone to the morgue in person after all. The atmosphere in the station is a lot chillier. Not even my lightest, most upbeat show tunes cheer me up. Meanwhile, Schmidt spends the morning barking at anyone who dares say two words to him, until Sergeant Hirsch says,

“Hey, Schmidt, take a break, would you?”

“I do not need a break.”

“Watch it, mister. I say you do. And when you come back, leave the attitude at the door.”

You tell him, I think with a wicked smile before making myself open the file on Dr. Hastings’ death. Maybe working out a puzzle will make me feel more like myself. The catch is, Rinaldi’s right. I can’t see even the smallest connection between the death of a tenor, a bass, and a theater professor. It would’ve made more sense for the perp to hit the soprano or alto section...oh, crumb, what if he does? I pray against that and get back to work. Okay, girl, think this through. What do you know about Dr. Hastings that might have spelled “target” to a religious nut with murder on his mind? I replay our last real conversation, when she tried to convince me to take that internship. She seemed eager to bash cops every chance she got, and she kept talking about mind games. Religion...mind games...Back to the Bible...she was in Back to the Bible, but could she have committed some sin beforehand that...

I open the suspect database and type in “Christine Hastings”. Nothing, not even when I enter “Christie,” “Chrissy,” and “Chris.” So next, I head for Google, typing in “Dr. Christine Hastings, Silverton College of Christ and His Saints.” That one pulls up her faculty profile, which I avoid, the article about the Cherry Creek church bombing, and...ah, what’s this?

Dr. Hastings also shows up on the website of one of Silverton’s churches, Welcoming Light Anglican. She’s listed as a prominent member and Bible study leader, and her testimony is included. Raised Catholic...loved teaching even as a kid...always thirsty for knowledge...got sucked into a cult...

Cult?

I check the page for a cult name and actually feel myself grin. There it is in the second paragraph—Christ’s True Brothers. I Google it, and the more I read, the more shocked I get. The cult was broken up in the early ‘70s, but before that, these poor people were being starved, beaten, raped... My heart ratchets up the beat.

“Researching for a term paper there, Keller?”

I jump so hard I feel my body vibrate. “Oh, hey, Sarge. No. Just following a hunch. I think I’ve got a motive for the Hastings murder.”

Sarge studies me for several seconds, but then nods. “Do tell.”

So I do, but he frowns. “I don’t see it, Keller. I mean, if you ask me, this Back to the Bible deal is a cult itself.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” I point out. “And plus, look at this. It says the leaders were revered as gods—gods, as in, serious worship. The men would pick different women to force sex on. The leaders would make people burn precious possessions, like pictures of family members, in these weirdo ceremonies. So, what if she never told anybody about the cult, and the Back to the Bible people said she was concealing sin? What if they blamed her for getting involved, or thought she enjoyed the sex part, or was too worldly because she said no and kept her stuff, or...”

Sarge holds up a hand. “I get it. Interesting theory, Keller. Very interesting. I think you’re on the right track. Tell you what. When Schmidt gets back, you two go...”

“Sarge, I can’t.”

Sarge sighs. “Look, Keller. I heard how Schmidt’s treated you, and if you ask me, it’s infantile and totally unbecoming. Personally, I wouldn’t promote the guy for a million bucks right now. But one, I’m not sending you into this alone. You can take care of yourself, yes, but it would be far too easy for you to become a target, or heaven forbid a hostage, at that college. You’re a true Christian. I’m not religious and even I can tell. That makes you a threat to these whackos. Two...” He squeezes my hand. “You and Schmidt are partners, and you make a great team. Don’t let a perp ruin that.”

“So what am I supposed to do, grovel?”

“No. But here’s what I think. Schmidt’s doing all the wrong things to get an advancement he wants for all the right reasons. The problem is, he cares about you, and he knows if Tunney split you two up, he’d miss you like crazy. But rather than deal with that, he’s trying to put up a wall. He’d rather you get mad and cut ties than have to do what he considers walking out on his

friend. So you've got to be the bigger person. Pull the center brick out of that wall and say, 'I don't care what you do, I'm still your partner, and I'm still your friend.'"

I think about that, shoot up a quick prayer, and then nod. "I'll give it my best shot. Thanks, Sarge."

"Anytime. Now, I believe you've got some more investigating to do."

Once my supervisor's gone, I turn back to my computer, praying for guidance as to the next step. I'd have to find someone in Back to the Bible willing to talk, but my gut says most former members would rather die than admit their past association, so I decide to back up and come at the case from the choir feud angle again. Who are our suspects so far? Dr. Laughlin, maybe Showalter, and—Baker. Of course, Mr. Baker! I grab my mouse, click into Google, and find Adam Baker's profile on the college's music and theater page. Hmm—he's a Mr., not a Dr. He only has a master's, as opposed to the rest of the faculty, all but three of which are Ph.D.s or at least close to finishing a Ph.D. Could Baker have some kind of strange resentment because of that? And would that be at least one reason for him to kill people? I would think college-level teachers would be more mature than that, but lately...

I hear the door open, and Schmidt's voice, speaking in low tones. I take a breath and head for his cubicle a few minutes after I'm sure he's there. "Schmidt, I..."

His head jerks up. "Oh, right. Now you want to talk."

"Schmidt, I don't have time for your drama, okay? I need..."

"My drama? That is really rich coming from somebody who thinks life is a dadgum musical!"

"I...I..." I'm trying to figure out how to answer him without making the fight worse when I hear a crash, and then,

"Oh, of all the...McClintock, don't you ever look where you're going?"

"As if I could even see, LeBlanc—your bulk is everywhere!"

On top of that, a machine down the hall screeches in distress, groans, and dies. A second later, Anderson's voice shouts,

“For Pete’s sake, Rinaldi! How many times have I told you not to leave the copier unattended?”

“Hey, I’m not your little copier lady, pal, and if you...oh, crumb, look what you made me do!”

“Rinaldi, would you please stop trying to be Keller’s twin?”

“I thought that’s what you wanted. By the way, get your own copies. I’ve got to get going on the Stanford case.” I hear her crack her knuckles.

“Would you both cut it out?” Lockhart demands. “Rinaldi, before you do anything else, redo these statistics. Every single column has an error in it.”

“You’re exaggerating. You know, perfectionist behavior is highly overrated—I mean, if you weren’t such a dang nitpicker...”

Within the next few minutes, the whole station goes to pot. McClintock and LeBlanc are still arguing, although by now, they’ve moved on to why there are always only two strawberry doughnuts to a dozen. Anderson’s cussing out the copier, Rinaldi’s started to cry, Lockhart’s screaming at her, and Sergeant Hirsch looks like he’s trying to decide who to kill first. And of course, Schmidt’s glaring at me like the whole fiasco’s my fault. So I throw up my hands and just walk out.

“Keller? Keller, you get back in here!” I hear Schmidt yell.

“Not on your life,” I yell back. And, because of his musical comment, I decide to throw a real zinger at him. “I hope you’re happy, now that you’ve groveled in submission to feed your own ambition!”

A few minutes later, the drama has calmed down, for all but two people. When I leave for class, Schmidt and I still aren’t talking.

“I never thought about that,” Rose says. She and I are waiting for Dr. Showalter’s class to start, and I’ve just asked her if she knows about any resentment Baker might have. “But,” she says, “I’ll bet you’re right. Power structures are huge around here.”

“Thanks. I’ll do some snooping after class.” I let what I don’t say hang in the air. We won’t be having Dr. Hastings’ class today.

“Hey.” Rose touches my arm. “Do you have to do the cop thing right now? I mean, we could go to the gym or borrow a music room and do some duets. It might make you feel better.”

“Thanks, Rose, but it’s better if I put work first right now. I know you might not get it, but after the initial grief, it...when somebody gets killed, trying to figure out who’s responsible makes me feel better.”

“No, I get it. But since I can’t really help, is there anything I can do?”

I want to say no, but I don’t want to disappoint my friend—one of the few remaining ones I’ve got. “Tell you what. I’m probably going to be so busy I won’t be hungry for a real dinner.”

“No problem. I know a place that makes excellent smoothies.” We both laugh because we know she’s referring to the campus smoothie shop. “Want me to meet you at the music building entrance in a couple hours?”

“No, come to the library. I want to snoop through the archives.”

“Ooh, fun.”

And in its own way, spending time in the library archives is fun, almost like a treasure hunt. I start with the bombing article—it says the church that was bombed was called Cherry Creek Worship Center. A call to Information tells me said church no longer exists, at least not as far as the operator knows. So I Google it and gasp. The church does exist, but it’s been renamed—to New Life Community. “Wow,” I breathe. “That is so...thanks, God. Thanks a lot. Maybe I can solve this case quicker than I thought. No, wait, maybe we will do it quicker than I thought.” I feel myself smile and dial the church’s number, where I ask the secretary for Pastor Ken. A few seconds later, she has me on hold, and my hands are shaking. That’s partly because I’m excited, but also because I’m scared of what I might find out.

“Hello?”

“Yes, Pastor, um...Ken. Hi. You probably don’t remember me, but this is...”

“Maria Keller. Who could forget you?” he laughs. “Yes, Maria. It’s fantastic to hear your voice. I heard you met Jesus since we last spoke. May I be the next in what I am sure was a long line of people eager to congratulate you?”

“Sure. And thanks. Yeah, Jesus has become a good friend and a sanity-saver lately. See...” I explain about Dr. Hastings’ death, as well as the deaths of Tim and Patrick.

“Yes,” the pastor interjects. “I know Christine Hastings was close to you, and I know you’re no stranger to grief. If you’d like me to counsel you, we can set something up.”

The idea makes me recoil, but I remind myself to play it cool. “Thanks, but no thanks, at least for now. I actually called because I think your church might lead me to who took those lives. I don’t know if it was before you became the preacher over there, but there was a bombing, and...” I explain some more and can almost feel Pastor Ken nodding.

“The bombing was before I came here,” he says. “I was in Charleston at the time, pasturing a mega-church, and the Lord prodded me to get into a church where I could truly know my congregants and help people heal. But enough about me. I heard all about that tragedy, and you’re right. It did have to do with a group of sadly misguided folks who believed themselves to be Christ-followers. Hate to tell them, but our God does not sanction murder.”

“Amen,” I say. “You know, maybe you and I should go into business together. Between us, we might clean up that particular crime for good.”

He sighs. “We can dream, but I’m afraid there’s little hope of that on earth, Maria. Anyway, I arrived during a time of massive rebuilding, physically and otherwise. We cleaned things up, changed the church name, and tried our best to promote the true teachings of Jesus. I wish I’d been half the success I’d hoped to be. Maybe then people like Laurence Montgomery wouldn’t have driven you away.”

I bite my lip. “Don’t...don’t feel bad,” I tell him. “You’re a great pastor. It’s not your fault. I just can’t deal with the corporate worship gig right now.”

“Hmmm. If you were in my office, I’d have something to say to you about that, but since you aren’t, let’s both keep doing a little detective work. I don’t know who was directly responsible for the bombing, but I did hear from the news and local police that the parties responsible were

connected with Silverton College of Christ and His Saints. Two professors were mentioned, both from the music department. One is still serving time, and the other, praise God, was paroled for good behavior and met Jesus in the process. I actually met him because I was involved in prison ministry at the time. Last I heard, the man was attending an Asheville church. But when we spoke, he mentioned a woman named Louisa, a former Christ and Saints student, as the impetus for the crime.”

“Louisa Carstairs,” I back him up. “Tell me, Pastor, do you know where I can find her?”

I can hear the pastor chuckling. “You really are an ace detective. I happen to know she’s a former member of this church. Her name is now Louisa Price. She’s still in Silverton if you want to look her up.”

I seize a pencil and write down everything in my notebook. “Thanks so much, Pastor. You’ve helped more than you know.”

“Glad to do it, Maria. And while I’ve got your ear, here’s some more help. You spending quality time with your Bible?”

“Yeah. Sometimes just a verse or two, but every day.”

“Very good. Okay, so when you pick up your Bible tonight, I have a reading assignment for you. Spend some time with Jesus’ parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee. And while you’re at it, look up James chapter two and find out what God has to say about favoritism.”

I feel my mouth go dry and lick my lips. “Um, and James would be? Sorry. I don’t quite have the book order down yet.”

“Don’t worry. You will. It’s one of the little ones in the back. Just after Hebrews, before you get to the two Peters.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

“So will I see you Sunday?”

“I...I don’t know. Listen, I gotta go.” I hang up, then look up. “What? Would you rather I lied and said yes?”

I can't wait to start investigating Louisa Carstairs, but Sarge's warning about not opening new avenues without Schmidt ruins that plan right quick, as we say in Texas. So instead, I drink the smoothie Rose gave me—raspberry cream—and head back to the station, where I grab some goggles and my gun and lose myself in bullets, paper holes, and freezing metal. I start off shooting a hundred percent, but gradually, my accuracy slips. It takes a few minutes to realize why. I'm crying, and not just over Dr. Hastings. I'm crying for her, for Luke and Jasmine, for Mama and Daddy, for the rape and the suicide, the mistake I made when I dropped out of college the first time, the mistake I am...everything. My hair's a mess, every inch of my body is burning, I reek of gun smoke, and I can't stop crying.

A familiar voice disrupts my thoughts. "Keller..." Schmidt's striding toward me.

"No!" I grab my gun, its chamber emptied, shove it into my police bag, and run for my car.

What seems like a century later, I stop in front of my house, but instead of going in, I sit on the porch. "Okay, God," I say. "One question. What in the ever-lovin' heck was that?"

"We hope it was the first signs of grief," my partner's voice says. But wait, he said "we". I look up. "Wha—"

Standing in front of me are Schmidt, Dorothea, their kids, Rose, my cousins, Gil, and his kids. Most of them are holding some kind of food or an unmarked shopping bag. Gil's holding a bouquet full of orchids, snapdragons, roses, and other flowers, plus a whole box of milk chocolate truffles.

The only empty-handed person is Schmidt. I'm not sure what to say to him, but he doesn't give me the chance. Instead, he steps forward and hugs me. He holds on for a minute before saying,

"Keller, you know what the difference is between cop friends and civilian friends?"

"What?"

"Civilian friends have never seen you cry." He steps back, and I realize he's blinking.

"Cop friends cry with you."

CHAPTER 12:

"It's insanity for me to worry so...I'll try not to..."

-She Loves Me

It's funny Schmidt said that. Because in the next thirty minutes, we all cry so much I'm surprised the porch doesn't flood.

"I'm sorry, Maria," Schmidt says at the end. "So sorry for everything. I should've looked past your badge and seen the hurting woman underneath it."

"Please don't say that," I tell him. "You were right. I'm not...and I didn't...and I shouldn't...oh, crumb. What I'm trying to say is, I know you were right about Dr. Hastings. If we broke down sobbing every time somebody died, we'd never get anything done. And I honestly don't know where that little scene came from."

"Your heart, dear." Dorothea's talking now. "Your beautiful heart."

"Well, okay, but...Dorothea, you've been married to a cop forever. You have to know he was right about..."

"Yes," Dorothea says. "In a way, he was. Letting your emotions get in the way of your job is not kosher. I have the same problem as a nurse. Brendan, tell her. How many times have I sat up at night crying over a patient, dead or alive?"

"Too many to count. But see, Maria," Schmidt says, "that's the big issue here. Dorothea and I...we have people in our lives that we can run to when we need to let that nasty stuff go, and we know it's safe to with them. You've never had that, ever. And you needed it with me, but I let you down. To tell the truth, I've spent our whole partnership letting you down. I've made you keep that infernal cop mask of yours screwed on so tight you don't know what's underneath. I've made you do everything my way so long you don't trust yourself. I made big deals out of really inconsequential stuff. And...well, the other night...I was the one who broke a huge cop rule. I turned my back on my partner."

I shrug. "Well, that's not to say you can't ever tell me if I do something wrong. I like it better when you do. But the way you've been doing it lately..."

"I know, and you were right. That was all about nobody but me. But...well, what do you say? Can we start over? And by that I mean, start the whole partnership over?"

"Sure. I can't imagine working with anybody else. In fact, I was afraid you were gonna tell Tunney to split us up. I would've deserved it."

"No, you wouldn't. Not that I'd have done it, anyway. And it's understandable, what happened. I mean, she was your best friend. And Maria...we are going to find out who killed her."

I blink, realizing something. "I...that's the third time you've called me 'Maria.' In all the time I've known you, you have hardly ever used my real name."

Schmidt shrugs. "Well, maybe I've got some changing to do. Anyway..." He gestures to the rest of the group. "What do you say we go on in the house, get this stuff unloaded, and have a...well, not a party, but...well, a massive cheering-up session? We can't stand out on the porch all day, and you..." He gestures to my coatless, scarf-less body. "You are gonna absolutely freeze out here."

Gil laughs at that. "Sounds like he's the same old big brother wannabe from a few days ago."

"You said it." I give my partner a light punch in the shoulder. "Know-it-all."

He tugs at my hair. "Pest."

"Oh, is that so?" I put on a nasty little kid voice. "I'm telling your mo-om!"

"See if I even ca-are, see if I even ca-are!"

We head for the kitchen en masse, and soon every inch of counter space is covered with casseroles, salads, desserts, appetizers, and I don't know what all. Meg grabs Gil's flowers and goes off in search of a vase while Monique, Rose, and I unload the unmarked shopping bags. When I see what's in those, I start cracking my knuckles and biting my lip because I can't talk. Those bags are full of books—inspirational fiction and devotionals—relaxing CDs of stuff like Irish harp music and piano numbers, and a few lighthearted DVDs, plus a few aromatherapy candles.

"They're all used," Dorothea says when she sees my face, "except the candles, so don't you start with us about the money. Use what you need, return it when you want to, or pass it on to someone else who might need it."

"I...well...I...thanks," I manage. "If it's okay with you, I think I'll send most of this stuff to the Marcellos and the Eversons. Their boys lived pretty close by." I make myself laugh. "I don't think Dr. Hastings' husband would want this girly stuff, but I'll get him a card."

"Let me do that," Rose offers. "And I'll get in touch with some ladies I know she was close to at church."

"Okay. Um..." I get up and start trying to organize the food into piles without really knowing what I'm doing. Meg sees me, laughs, and tells me to sit down, but I frown at her. "Meg, I've got to do something. I'm not gonna be a freeloader just because I happen to be in mourning or grieving or whatever. I let this go on too long and I'll turn into a pity-party-throwing brat."

Gil comes around the table, leans down, and kisses the top of my head. That's not gonna happen, Gumshoe," he says in my ear. "No matter what I said about you needing to act like a woman. I didn't mean it. So come on, sweetheart. For once, put yourself first."

I crack my knuckles. "I don't trust myself to do that. When...when I got out of foster care...it was my first year with Luke and Jasmine, and I got a C on a test. When I brought it home, Luke said he understood, but then he said, 'Maria, people have made excuses for mediocrity because you were a foster child. Well, that part of your life is over, and so are the excuses. You are going to have to do better. You shouldn't expect people to coddle you just because you've had it a little rough.'"

"So that's what this is," Gil says. "Maria, I know Luke loved you, but that was inappropriate, even for a parent."

It doesn't escape me that he's one to talk. Apparently, it doesn't escape Schmidt either, because he gives Gil a Look. Then he turns to me. "Keller, no one in here is coddling you, and you have never expected that. If anything, you've pulled yourself up by your bootstraps so often they're broken, and if I had your adoptive dad here, that's exactly what I'd tell him. So you just sit back and do what Gil says."

I shrug. "I really don't know how. I don't know how to handle anything anymore, except to hang on and pray."

“Then you’re in the right place,” Schmidt says. “Remember what Pastor Ken says. Some of our greatest times with God come when we’re clutching Him for dear life. He’s not gonna drop you, partner, and neither will any of us. We’re right here, and we’ll make sure you don’t drive yourself into a ditch.”

“Especially me,” Gil says. “If you need me, call or email or something. I don’t care if it’s two AM.”

Yeah, but what’s gonna happen if your parents find out? I think. Just as quick, I mentally slap myself. He’s trying to help. Plus, he really is having a hard time with this parent thing. He deserves a break. I squeeze his hand. “Thanks. Just...just pray for me, okay?”

“Of course I will, my love.”

“Thanks. That’s what I need the most.” I laugh, but not because anything’s funny. “I’m sure God’s sick of hearing me yell for help. You know, He probably took Dr. Hastings to teach me how to quit being a self-centered brat.”

“Whoa!” Schmidt exclaims. “Maria Keller, you are not a brat. Give me one shred of evidence otherwise, just one. I dare you.”

“Do you triple-dog dare me?” I laugh. “Sorry...couldn’t resist. Okay...well, for one thing, I still dress like this.” I run my hands down my black, sequined turtleneck, black jeans, and matching black, sequined sneakers. “A strong Christian would understand that makes her look like a Goth hippie. A true Christian would listen to Christian music, not show tunes. She would stay up reading her Bible, not writing songs. She would...”

“Hold on.” Gil is grinning. “You write songs? You never told me.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t get back into it until recently. I hadn’t written a thing since high school, but then Rose was asking me about...we were listening to the radio in her car one time, and...” I sum up the conversation.

“And those are great ideas,” Rose says. “I’d want your songs on my iPod. And no, I am not just saying that because I’m your best friend.”

“You do have a musical gift on a deeper level than most,” Dorothea says.

“A Broadway director would not agree,” I say.

"I'm sure at least one would," says Monique. "And nuts to all the rest of 'em."

I sigh. "Look, I know what y'all are doing and I appreciate it, but I'm a big girl. I can take a little tough love. Well, a lot. You can tell me the truth, which is that if I were a good Christian—if I knew a dang thing about contentment—I'd be happy being a cop, and perfect at it. I wouldn't cry over victims or do other stupid stuff. I'd be practical and serious and..."

"And boring," Schmidt says. "You'd be so boring you'd make chick flicks look cool—ow!" he says when Dorothea elbows him in the ribs.

I shake my head and pop a truffle. "Y'all don't get it. I love the Bible, I really do, but some parts of it, I find deadly boring. That's wrong. I haven't been to church since I converted. I can't go back to Gil's, knowing people like his parents are all over the place—and no offense Gil, but you know I'm right. And I can't go to my cousins' church because all those people will do is ask all kinds of questions about last year."

"Well, you know there are more than two churches around," Schmidt says. "One of them is yours—just keep looking. As long as you're praying and making an effort with your Bible..."

I barely hear him. "And," I roll on, "I'm on an inter-church prayer chain, but I'm having trouble with it. I get so sick of hearing how this or that person has cancer, or a kidney infection, or a this, or a that..." I sigh and go on. "I hate the legalism I see at school. I hate the choir feud. I couldn't cook for a potluck if my life depended on it. The idea of leading a Bible study makes me want to run all the way back to Texas. And thanks to the news media, all these people at my Christian school know about the rape and the suicide thing, and..."

I'm up now, pacing the kitchen, rattling silverware and drawers, washing dishes that don't need it. "They don't know me at all. I'm not good enough for them. I'm not good enough for anyone, even Jesus Christ. I'm just Maria the Mistake. And I deserve that nickname. All I do is the wrong thing!" And before I know it, I'm down on the floor, crying like I'm Gil's twins' age. I feel so stupid I...

"Oh, dear." Dorothea's down there with me, hugging me. Soon, Monique and Meg are in on it. Meg is murmuring "shah, shah," Monique is stroking my hair, and Dorothea is praying in tongues like she did when I was in jail. I shake my head. Is this what I really am? Some awful,

wimpy, messed-up woman who has no purpose other than for people to feel sorry for her? Well, I don't want that. I don't! What I want to do is...

I push myself up. I know what I want to do. I take a few steps out of the kitchen, remove my left shoe, and chuck it as hard as I can into our "rumpus room," where I keep my piano, Monique keeps her easel, and Meg has a whole shelf full of cookbooks, French literature, and aerobic tapes. It feels so good I let the right one fly, too.

"Hey, let me try that." Monique's already untying her sneaker. "Bombs away!"

"Allow me!" Meg calls out. "All right, now this is a message to the animal that killed my heart-sister's favorite teacher..." Meg yells something in French that I only hope doesn't contain curse words and sends both ballet flats hurtling through the air.

Of course, it doesn't take long before we're all in on it. Somebody puts on some clean "attitude" music—stuff about fighting back against the devil or telling off mean girls—and we all end up stomping, clapping, singing, and even throwing shoes back and forth to each other. The little kids—Schmidt's two youngest and the twins—don't get what we're doing, but they join us because it looks fun, and because it means that for the moment, I'm not sad. Only one person isn't with us.

"C'mon, Gil!" Schmidt tries to pull my Captain into the chaos. "This really helps—I know you've got some emotions bottled up in there."

"No, thank you. I don't want to dent Maria's wall."

"Too late, honey," I laugh. "Now, come on..." I grab one of his wingtip shoes and pull.

"Maria Keller, you let go of my shoe this instant. Throwing shoes is not the way I express my emotions."

"I've hardly seen you express them at all," Dorothea says. "Now Gil, be honest. Aren't you even a little upset about what Maria's been through? What you yourself have been through?"

I don't know what changes Gil's mind, but slowly, he nods, gets up, pulls off a shoe, and heaves it toward the window. Luckily, it bounces off without a hitch, but he aims the next one more carefully.

When we're all out of shoes, we flop back on the floor in a heap like kids at a birthday party who've just ran themselves ragged in a game of tag. I lie there for a minute, my head on Meg's chest, and absorb the silence. Gil speaks first. "How do you feel now, Gumshoe?"

"Better. It may come back, but I feel pretty good now."

"See, I knew there was a reason you bought all those shoes," Monique says.

A few minutes later, after we've all reclaimed our shoes and some people are leaving, Clayton comes up to me. "Miss Maria? I'm awful sorry about your teacher. You must feel kinda like I did when my mom died."

"Yeah. Yeah, buddy, I think I do. I'm gonna be okay, but I still miss her."

"Yeah. It stinks a big one when people die, especially if it's 'cause of cancer, or if they got killed."

"I know. I know you and your sisters miss your mom. I wish I could make things better."

"But you were," he says. "Before, when you were at the theater, and when you'd come to the house to see us. But now you're at school, and I barely ever see you anymore. Desi worries that somebody's gonna shoot you or something, and then Sophie calls her a crybaby." He frowns. "She's getting punished a lot. She tells Dad she hates him sometimes."

"Oh, Clay. I'm sorry. I didn't know." I feel a check mark coming on.

"That's 'cause we can't tell you," he says. "You're always somewhere else. You're always leaving."

"Clayton, buddy, I know this is rough on you, but I have to work. And I have to go to school so I can finish my degree."

"Yeah, since Grandpa called you stupid," Clayton says. "I told him you were not stupid either, and he punished me. But you're not. You don't have to have that dumb degree. You could come home."

"Clay..." How to explain all this to an eight-year-old? I'm not sure I can. I look up. God, give me words! "Clay, I know I don't have to have that degree. But sometimes we do things because we know they're right for us. And I know that I need to finish school so that when I look in the mirror, I'll like who I see."

“Even if it means other people bite the dust?”

Ouch! I hug him, not caring that he doesn’t think it’s cool.”Clay, I...please try to understand. This is tough on me, too. I miss you like crazy. But I just don’t have a choice right now.”

“Mom didn’t get a choice about cancer. She told us it was just for ‘right now,’ and that she’d be better soon. But she wasn’t. She left. She went to Heaven. And maybe you won’t go to Heaven, but what if you leave and just...don’t come back? You’d never mean to, but... What if I don’t have anybody to talk to? What if Desi never stops crying, and Sophie keeps acting bad...”

I feel like somebody just clonked me with a brick. So that’s what’s up. I’m this child’s glue, and I’m doing a miserable job at being said glue. Oh, Father, forgive me. Forgive me and show me how to help this precious little boy who’s trying so hard to be a man.

You tried so hard to be a woman when you were his age. What did you need?

That’s easy. I needed someone to tell me it was gonna be okay. Not just tell me, but show me. In fact, Ms. Ravensworth, my social worker, and I had a little ritual. When we came to a new foster home, we’d give it a time limit—three to six months—to turn into ‘the adoption house.’ If things went wrong, it meant that house lost the contest. It was comforting because it meant something was wrong with the home, not me. And if things got really bad—which they did sometimes—I always knew exactly how long it was before Ms. R would come get me.

“Clayton, come downstairs with me, okay? We’re gonna borrow Miss Monique’s studio and do a little project.”

About fifteen minutes later, we’re holding a makeshift calendar that counts down the days until my graduation date, December eighteenth at exactly ten AM. “Okay. So now, every day, you can fill in one of these squares here. And you don’t have to worry about the date moving, because not even Sergeant Tunney can change it.”

“But what about the bad guy in the choir? What if you can’t catch him by then and Sergeant Tunney makes you stay in Silverton?”

“Not gonna happen, bud. Because if that perp is still loose by then—which he will not be, but just in case—then I’m gonna go up to my boss and say, ‘Sergeant, please put someone else

on this case. I have to come back to Cherry Creek because I have four very important people who need me more than you do.”

Clayton lights up. “You mean it?”

“Of course I do. You and your sisters and dad are the most important things in my life right now. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” This time, Clayton starts the hug.

“So, uh...is there anything I can do to make all this up to you? I want to try.”

Clayton smiles and shakes his head. “Nah. Dad says if you ask somebody to make something up to you, it means you don’t really forgive them. We’re cool. But...”

“Yeah, sport?”

“I know you’re busy and everything and I know Grandma and Grandpa will be there and won’t like it, but I don’t care what they think and—would you come to my birthday party? Even if you just stayed for a piece of cake?”

I’m a cop. I’m not scared of anything—well, okay morgues, but let’s not get picky. If I know someone’s guilty, no amount of tears and pleading can keep me from locking them up. So why does my heart constantly turn to melted chocolate, especially around Gil’s kids?

“October eighteenth,” Clayton says as if he’s scared I forgot.

“I know.” I push myself back to reality. “I will be there, even if Tunney threatens to strap me to a gurney and take out my voice box.”

Clayton laughs. “I wouldn’t let him. I’d protect you.”

“Thanks. So...” I wink at him. “Your dad and Mr. Brendan were talking football last I heard—they’ll be at it awhile. Wanna play some Monopoly?”

Clayton frowns. “But Sophie and Desi are too little.”

“I know. Miss Meg was going to put on a princess movie for them. I meant you and me.”

“Really?” Clayton’s face lights up, and then he puts on a tough-guy face. “You’re goin’ down, Keller.”

“Oh, is that so? You’re on—loser makes the other one a milkshake.”

Half an hour later, I skip my shoe toward Kentucky Avenue and glance up. “So Clayton, does your dad do this kind of thing with you?”

“Sometimes, yeah. We play games and stuff, and sometimes we go to the park or the bookstore. That’s my favorite.” He thinks for a minute. “We used to do things like that every Saturday, before...before Mom. But now it’s usually Grandpa who’s around. He’s great—I mean, I know he has a lot of rules, but he’s nice when somebody’s not in trouble. But he’s not Dad.”

“Hmmm. I’ll take that.” I indicate Kentucky Avenue. We keep playing, but Clayton wins. Of course, that’s probably because I wasn’t paying enough attention to the game, but Clayton, bless his precious heart, doesn’t mention it. Instead, he offers to make me a milkshake, and when he and his family leave, he promises to say an extra prayer for me.

Schmidt and Dorothea are the last ones out the door. Dorothea hugs me hard and gets the kids in the car, but Schmidt stays behind. “Keller,” he says, “I wanted to say one more time how sorry...”

“Forget it,” I say. “Seriously. It’s not all your fault, you know. I was a real witch the other day.”

“Yeah, but it was appropriate. I looked up that musical lyric you threw at me. It’s from...”

“*Wicked*. Yeah, that’s one of my favorites.”

“They’re all your favorites.”

“Well, top ten, then. And by the way, I’ve been investigating lately—without the musicals.”

“Keller, please know I didn’t mean what I said about you and your music. It’s never gotten in the way of your work, and if it did, I honestly don’t know if I’d care.”

“I know, but you’re gonna flip when you hear what I dug up.” I tell him, and by the end, I’m pacing the room. “So if we can get to Louisa,” I finally say, “maybe she’ll give us the key to the killer.”

Schmidt’s face becomes an all-over grin. “I love the way your brain works. So...” He winks. “You ready to get back out there and defy some serious gravity?”

“I’m already oiling my broom. Whoever that perp is, he’ll wish he never messed with us.”

I may sound confident, but I spend the rest of the night in serious prayer, and not just for Schmidt, Gil, and the kids. I'm mostly praying for me.

CHAPTER 13:

"I have confidence, in confidence alone...oh, help!"

-The Sound of Music

"Can I help you?"

I study the woman behind the door of 651 England Street, just outside Silverton, looking for a trace of the hopeless former bulimic with the criminal record Grace Webb told me about. But all I see is a pleasant-faced, blonde, gray-eyed lady in her fifties, holding a cup of coffee and curling bright pink toes into the carpet. I feel myself smile. It's always cool to meet a fellow nail polish enthusiast.

"Louisa Price?" I ask. "Hi. My name is Detective Keller, and this is my partner, Det—"

"Whatever you want, the answer is no." She starts to close the door in our faces, but Schmidt catches it. "Ma'am," he says, his voice level as if trying to calm a scared little kid, "please don't make this difficult. We just want to talk to you."

"Will you arrest me if I don't?"

"No," Schmidt says.

"Then goodbye."

"Louisa, wait." I catch the door this time. "We haven't come here about you, exactly. We're here about Silverton College of Christ and—"

"If that college has anything to do with Jesus, I'm a piece of Swiss cheese. I've read the papers. I know what's going on. I realize you two know about me. Well, my answer is no. I am not talking about what happened to me at that school. Not now, not ever."

I'm not sure what to say at that point, but Schmidt takes over without seeming to wait a second. "I'm afraid you're going to have to, Mrs. Price," he says. "Because if you don't, more innocent students and teachers will likely die. Christians are taught to hold human life in the highest regard. I'm sure you'd like the opportunity to help save a few."

Louisa thinks about this, nods, and steps back. "Come in."

“Nice one, partner,” I whisper as Schmidt and I follow Louisa through the foyer and into the kitchen.

He grins and nods. “The nice thing about this case is, for once, Scripture-based arguments get you everywhere.”

“Would you like coffee?” Louisa asks.

“I would,” Schmidt says, “but Keller here isn’t a coffee drinker.”

“I don’t need anything right now, thanks,” I tell her. “So…” I take out my notebook. “We’ll try to make this quick and painless. First, we need to know what kind of contact you’ve had with the college since you left.”

“More than I ever needed,” Louisa says. “They’re always sending me alumni stuff, asking for my money, or sending sports schedules. And I go to church with a few of the new profs from there.”

“Which church?” I ask.

“Silverton Bible Church. Vicki Laughlin goes there. She’s the choir director now, but I guess you knew that.”

“Yes, we did,” Schmidt says. “Now, Ms. Price, if I may ask, something’s bothering me. You don’t seem to want contact with this school. Why, then, do you leave nearby now?”

Oh, crumb! I remember just in time not to smack my forehead. I should’ve thought of that question, and I should’ve asked it first. I cut my eyes toward Schmidt to try to gauge if he’s thinking the same thing, but if he sees me, he doesn’t let on.

“I didn’t live here for awhile,” Louisa says. Her voice is quiet and strained. “Right after college, I ran off to Atlanta. I didn’t need the past smacking me in the face all the time. That’s where I met my Frederick. We raised two great kids, and we had a good life. But Freddy died last year. Diabetes. He never could stay away from bread and sweets. Anyway, I came back after that. No reason to stay in Atlanta, not with my kids grown and living, respectively, in Pittsburgh and Topeka.”

“Louisa, I’m so sorry,” I say before I realize Schmidt might count that as getting too close to a civilian. I don’t look toward him this time, but he must’ve noticed the way I immediately

dropped eye contact with Louisa, because he taps my elbow and mouths, “what’s wrong?” I shake my head and signal that he should take over. He does, which is how we find out that Louisa has had her share of negative publicity because of the feud, most notably when Back to the Bible, who had several members connected to the college, bombed what is now Cherry Creek’s New Life Community Church.

“Who...I mean, did someone specific contact you and insinuate...I mean, threaten...” Where are my words? “Did someone from the college do anything to...” I hear my knuckles crack. Dang it! Worse, Schmidt is staring at me out of the corner of his eye. His look clearly says, “did you drink some bad tea or what?”

But Louisa’s nodding. “Yeah. Some idiot prof called and basically said that thanks to the bomb, maybe the mess I made would get cleaned up—that people would see what happened when religious nuts were given too much power.”

“Hold it,” I say. “So this teacher called and told you that the church was bombed as a way to get back at legalists? My partner and I thought...that is, I thought...I thought for sure the legalists were the ones behind what was happening because of the changes made in the school since Dr. Delacroix came.” No way am I gonna implicate Schmidt in a theory that turned out to be wrong.

As if he can read my mind, Schmidt stands up. “Excuse me. Ms. Price, where is your bathroom?”

“Through the kitchen, down the hall, second door on the left.”

“Okay. I’ll be back. Keller, take over for me.”

I hear what he’s not saying, and the idea makes me sweat, literally. But I need information, and no matter what, I’ll get it. So I turn back to Louisa. “You were saying?” I ask her.

Louisa shakes her head. “I’m not a cop. I don’t know if these murders are because of legalists or cult members or what. There’s more than one kind of religious nut, after all. I don’t even know what that nut job meant when he called me. But whoever he was, he and his group weren’t satisfied with just a bomb.”

“Do you know why that particular church was targeted?”

"Yeah," Louisa says. "The guy that got out on parole, J.J. Lanahan? He talked. He said the Back to the Bible folks thought the church was too progressive. You know, because it was called a worship center, and they did contemporary music that bordered on rock, and because the associate pastor was a former crack addict. There were all kinds of reasons."

"I'll bet," I say. "And J.J. Lanahan is who, exactly?"

"Used to be a Christ and His Saints prof from the religion department, if you can believe that."

"Do you think he'd know who made that phone call? Whether it was someone currently on the faculty?"

Louisa laughs. "Don't bother. I know exactly who it was, and he deserves a prime spot on your suspect list."

"Really, who?" I ask the exact second Schmidt reenters. Did I sound too eager? I resist the urge to look at him and dial back my reaction. "Who would that be, Louisa?" There, nice and professional.

"You might not know him yet, but his name's Baker. Adam Baker. Teaches some beginner class or other."

"Music appreciation," I fill in. "Yes, a friend told me. And..." Do I really want to ask this yet? Maybe I'll risk it. "That friend also told me," I explain, "that Adam Baker has a history of physically harming students. Can you confirm that?"

Louisa shrugs. "I wouldn't know, but I wouldn't be surprised, either. He didn't always teach at Christ and His Saints. He used to be at a college in Tennessee, and I heard this rumor that he got fired."

"Which college?" Schmidt asks.

"I don't know, but the dean will."

"Okay." Schmidt signals that I should get up. "Looks like we're done here, then. Ms. Price, thank you so much for your help."

Louisa's eyes are friendly, but guarded. "I only did it to help people like me. I hope you catch whoever killed those people." She steps to a counter, takes two scones from under a glass

dish, and gives them to Schmidt. "For the road. Your partner certainly looks like she could use one. She's jittery."

"Yeah, I noticed," Schmidt says. "Well, we'll be going now. Thanks again, and thanks for the scones."

Once we're alone, I expect Schmidt to pounce, but instead, he grins. "That was fantastic. I'd say we just nailed a huge lead."

"But Baker was on our list already."

"True, but we didn't have much solid evidence to back our suspicions, and now we do. Plus, you got most of it. You've gotten great at the interrogation game."

I shrug and nibble the scone. "I have an excellent teacher."

"So, you think you can find a way to keep an eye on Baker while you're at school?"

"Of course I can. Teachers stick together, especially if they teach the same thing. Even if I can't eavesdrop on Baker, someone's bound to say something about him or one of his classes or students. Or I can always go down to the registrar's office and snoop around. I don't think the dean would tell me about Baker's former employment, but the registrar's been kinda jumpy since the murders started. I play on that, I bet I can get her to tell me everything I wanna know. Now if you'll excuse me..." I turn the radio knob. Not half a minute later, Schmidt reaches over me and cuts Point of Grace off in the middle of a verse.

"Excuse me, I was listening to that."

"And I was listening to you," Schmidt says. "Do you realize that one, you told me much more than I wanted to know just now? And two, your voice got faster the more you said?"

"It did not."

"Keller, I thought you promised me you weren't going to lie."

"Well, I..."

"And what was with you darting looks at me every thirty seconds back at Louisa's? It creped me out a little."

"Did it?"

"Oh, come on. You honestly think I needed a bathroom break after half a cup of coffee?"

He's right. It may have started out as a joke, but in my experience, cops really do have the bladder capacity of five people. I sigh. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that, and I didn't mean to lie to you. It's just that a lot of the time, lying is easier than fessing up to how I really feel."

"Hmmm. And right now, what you feel is..."

My spine straightens without my telling it to. "...I don't want to talk. Not about this."

Schmidt gives me a Look. "Maria Keller. Are you afraid that if you do something wrong, or don't do things my way, I'll jump down your throat?"

"You said it, I didn't."

I'm not sure if I'm expecting my partner to get mad or start a speech in which he tries to convince me I'm wrong. Whatever I'm expecting, though, he doesn't do it. He just studies my face, nods, and smiles. "Okay," he says. "I'm gonna let you deal with this one yourself. But in the meantime, I think you've got a day of classes to prepare for."

My first class is VMS. I get there on time, but Dr. Showalter still zeroes in on me as soon as the clock tower bell signals the start of the period. "Miss Keller, welcome back. Would you care to explain why you have not joined us recently?"

No, I wouldn't, buddy. There's a little thing called a note from the dean of students that you should've received in your email. I shrug and stare at my left shoe.

"Do not be surly with me. Your absence has been disrespectful, and you owe us all an answer."

A couple of the girls, including Leanne the snooty alto, trade wicked smiles. One bass dares to speak up with, "you tell 'er, Dr. S." I'd like to tell him something, but...

"Miss Keller, you are holding up my class."

And you are getting on my nerves! I knew from the beginning that Dr. S had a major-strict attendance policy, but I have never seen him like this. Could it be that he has it in for me because he's either the choir killer or an accomplice, so now...

"Miss Keller." Dr. S is in my face. "Answer me this minute or leave."

Oh, I'd love to. As a matter of fact, I'd love to cuss him out, but...Jesus, give me a little

backup here. Don't let me say anything you wouldn't say. I stand up. "First of all," I begin, "I will thank you to get out of my face, now. Secondly, I will thank you not to talk to me like this. We are both adults, and that is how I will be treated at this school. Thirdly, I have been absent because a good friend was murdered. You should have found plenty of documentation to that effect in your email and in your campus box. If you'd like to take this up with the department chair, I'd be happy to explain it to him."

"Ooh," the class says, like we're all on a cheesy '90s sitcom. Meanwhile, Dr. Showalter's gaze is frosted over like vegetables that have spent too much time in the freezer.

"I don't think you understand," he says. "My attendance policy is nonnegotiable. And if you..."

"Oh—oh, I'm sorry I'm late, Dr. Showalter." The voice comes from Chantal Parker, an alto who sits in the back row of choir.

My prof's expression changes faster than I can say my own name. "That's all right, Miss Parker. How is that cold of yours? Think you can handle class today?"

I blink. Jekyll and Hyde on steroids. One of the tenors looks like he knows it, too. "Hey," he says, "that's not fair! Maria was out 'cause somebody died, and you're giving her the third degree, but Chantal was just out for the sniffles, and you act like it's no big deal?"

"Typical alto-bass bootlicking," says a soprano. "Where does he get off?"

"Oh, you want some of this? Come over here and I'll give you a boot to lick. In fact, I'll put my boot right up your..." a bass starts in.

"Thinks she rules the world just 'cause she's a hotshot detective—she deserves what she gets."

"Shut up! She's only trying to keep you alive. Not that we'd miss a few altos here or there..."

In about three more seconds, the class meeting is officially shot. Dr. S tries to regain control, but I know it ain't gonna happen. Instead, he throws up his hands and dismisses class. I'm beating a path to the door when he catches my elbow.

“Congratulations, Miss Keller,” he hisses at me. “Your stellar grade in my class just turned into a C-.”

He stands there smirking, like he’s waiting for me to protest or beg him to change his mind, but I am not giving him the satisfaction. I screw on my cop face as tight as it’ll go, look Dr. S square in the eye, and just nod. Then I rush for the music building’s front doors at Texas tornado speed. The tornado nearly blows itself out, though, when I trip and start falling uncontrollably down the stairs.

“Whoa!” The arms that catch me are my favorite ones in the world. “Where’s the perp, Gumshoe?”

“I don’t know, but if I find out Showalter’s the perp, I’ll take double prints of his mug shot just so I can laugh.” I settle into Gil’s hug, my head finding his chest. “I’m so glad to see you I’m not even going to ask what you’re doing here or how much work you abandoned to come see me.”

“I came to take you to lunch, and the answer to the work question is, none. Caleb’s got things well in hand,” Gil says, referring to the new AD he hired in Sarah Goodson’s place. Gil asked me to sit in on his interview and wouldn’t hire Caleb until I gave the green light. I sigh. I’d give anything to be dealing with something that simple right now.

“Ah, darlin.” Gil holds me a little tighter. “What is it? I knew today was too soon to...”

“No, no. It’s...I’ll tell you in the car, okay? We’ve got a couple hours, luckily.”

“Blessedly,” Gil corrects me. He’s been trying to get me to stop saying anything with the word “luck” in it because he says if God is truly involved in your life, then luck is a non-issue. I see his point, but I really don’t think it’s a big deal. At least, God hasn’t told me otherwise. But I just nod, because I do want to be the best Christian possible. “Blessedly. So, where are we eating?”

“Where do you want to eat?”

“Gil, you know I don’t care. I eat anything as long as it doesn’t involve lemon or coffee.”

“I know, but you don’t usually choose. Go on.”

I have to smile. It's true that Gil has been "wearing the pants" since we've been dating, choosing where we eat, what we do, and so on. I've let him, mostly because I'm so happy to be with somebody who treats me like a lady and appreciates me for who I am. But...

"You go to Cracker Barrel much?"

"No. Do you?"

"No, but I used to waitress at one. I figured we could go and I could tell you some stories."

"Sounds great."

So a little later, that's how we find ourselves seated across from each other at one of Cracker Barrel's wooden tables, munching excellent house salads and talking as if murder and college never figured into either of our lives. In fact, my throat's getting dry thanks to how fast our tongues have been moving.

"So," I ask after a long sip of ice water, "how are the kids?"

Gil shrugs. "There're up days and down days, but none of it is your fault. They need to understand that you are a human, not a fairy godmother."

Well, that could be true, I think, but what Gil doesn't know is that I secretly hope someday, I can be more than a fairy godmother. I love those kids, and lately, I've been praying God will give me the privilege of being Mama, or at least Maria without a "Miss" attached. I smile and hum a bit of the title song from *Mamma Mia*.

Gil notices. "Well, a stray thought made you happy all of a sudden."

"Yeah." Daddy used to say when that happened, an angel had whispered the thought in my ear. But somehow, I don't think Gil would appreciate that. I don't really know where he stands on angels. Not that I think anybody should worship them or anything, but... I look up. God, help me understand. Who's right—me or Gil? Should I buckle down, or should he loosen up? I realize it's probably option one, and I am trying, but... I don't know. Christianity is so hard sometimes.

Yes, because sometimes my children are persecuted or hurt. But as for being hard in the other sense, the only person making it that way is Maria.

My face reddens. *I know. I know I should try harder. I'm working on it. Please believe me.*

“Would you like to try this peg game?” Gil asks, jerking me out of prayer mode. I jump, pull myself together, and answer. We talk for a long time after that, about nothing and everything, and with every word I’m reminded how much I love this man. *Jesus, don’t let my stupidity cost me Gil Montgomery’s love.*

“I love you, Maria.”

“Right back at ya.”

“No, I truly do. I fall in love with you more every minute. When you let me hold you...when you share things with me...did you know, I saw a raspberry-blond woman on the street the other day, and I got so excited thinking she was you, I chased her down the block before she turned around and threatened to call the police.”

I crack up. “She should’ve. Then I could’ve bailed you out of jail and we’d have been even. Besides...” I snicker and give in to a flirty-girl urge. “You’d look kinda sexy in prison orange.”

“But when you were there, they let you keep your regular clothes.”

“I was lu—uh, blessed. They didn’t have a uniform small enough for me.”

“Ah.” He chuckles. “Sexy, huh?” He reaches across the table, smooches my hand, and steals a crouton.

“Hey!” I steal one, too, and Gil laughs. “You’ve got dressing on your lip.”

“Oh, crumb...” I reach for the napkin dispenser, but the image it gives me is blurry, and I can barely tell where the little white dab made itself at home. I scrub at my mouth for a minute or two and shrug.

“It’s wedged in just to the right of your jawline.” Gil leans across with his napkin and finishes the job for me. “You could’ve left it, though. You look delicious when you’re a little messy.”

“You think so, Mr. Neatnik?”

“I know so. You should’ve seen yourself the day we met, just after Nicole died,” Gil says, referring to his former youth director. “You were bent over this corpse, scribbling notes like crazy. You had ink on your fingers, your face was red, you were starting to sweat, and you had this

wealth of wonderful red-gold hair flying everywhere when you turned your head. I was tempted to kiss you right there.”

Oh, I'm meeelting, meeelting... I laugh. “I doubt it. You hated my guts.”

“I told myself I did so I wouldn't have to deal with the truth. And then I held back because you weren't a believer, but even if you had been, I'd have kept things low-key. I could tell you weren't ready.”

I nod. “It takes me longer to trust. And I didn't think...but it really has worked for us, huh?”

“Yeah.” Gil leans in for a kiss.

“Hey, I hate to interrupt here, but I've got to set down this food, folks.”

Gil and I jump apart like a couple of middle-schoolers caught kissing before Sunday school. I recover first and take my plate from the waitress, thanking God—literally—that my grilled chicken still smells appetizing. Being a Christian and being with the most godly guy in Cherry Creek is no excuse to let lust set in.

Gil looks like he needs to cool down, too. “So, about that waitressing job...”

“Oh, right. Well, bless the food and I'll tell you anything you want to know.”

“Would you like to pray?”

I do want to. But even though I ask Jesus to help me forgive them every day, the senior Montgomerys' judgmental attitudes, and those of others, left a painful burn on me. “Sorry. I haven't worked up to praying in front of other people yet.”

Gil frowns a little, but nods and prays. When he says “amen,” I cover the hole in the conversation with,

“Okay, so how I became a waitress. I'm in high school, I just got a work permit, and I want to use it so I'll have a little extra cash and, let's face it, so I can stay away from home a little more. Luke was making more and more noises about my theater interests not being his thing, and I just didn't want to deal.”

Gil nods. “I'm sorry.”

“Hey, it was what it was. And he wasn't abusive or anything. We just...butted heads. And because he was the parent, he could get his way. I had to do all the giving, and he took what he

could. It hurt. But I was responsible enough, and had just enough of my real and adoptive folks' morals, not to want to do anything stupid. So I worked. I said I didn't want help finding a job, but Meg put in a good word for me with the local Cracker Barrel manager, who agreed to work my shifts around rehearsals and shows. I walk in the first day, she hands me an apron and goes, 'okay, kid. Can you walk around a room without dropping food, make nice to customers, and keep the cook from going postal?' I smiled and said, 'just watch me,' and it paid off. I was a good waitress. I loved meeting people, competing with myself to see how many perfect orders I could deliver, entertaining little kids and cooing at babies. People would show up and ask to be seated at my station."

"I would have," Gil says. "Did you get to five stars?" he asks, referring to the stars the wait staff wears on their aprons that signify rank.

"Almost. Four star. Luke made me quit senior year because he wanted my full attention on schoolwork and college preparation." I chew. "He never knew, but I never wanted to go to college. There were so many times I thought, 'the minute I'm legal, I'm hightailing it out of Texas and up to New York.' I had secretly filled out an application to Julliard to see if I could get in, and I did. But..." I focus on the saltshaker.

"Maria." Gil puts his hand on mine. "Honey, I know Luke was good to you. But number one, didn't Jasmine have any say? And two, whether or not she did, why didn't you tell him how you felt?"

I sigh. "She did. But...Luke and I are almost exactly alike, which is why we could never understand each other. I think we knew that if we let a disagreement go on too long, we'd both blow up, so one of us would leave before we started yelling or whatever. Usually. Jasmine was always left to console the one who stayed. And it was rough on her. She was a good Christian wife, and that meant submission. Luke was first, I was second, and so she would end up trying to take his side and stick up for me, too. And as for telling Luke how I felt..." I laugh. "No. You do not tell Lucas Elijah Brown anything. When his mind is made up, that's it. I was going to college whether I wanted to or not. I got a single room at Texas A&M because somebody transferred last minute. Good thing too, because I cried myself to sleep constantly that first semester. I was that

frustrated, and angry, and...hurt. I mean it when I said there was no abuse, but he...they...they hurt me so badly.”

“Oh, Gumshoe.”

“No. Don’t pity me. It’s better this way. And this time around, I’m majoring in just drama, and Luke doesn’t have any say-so in it.”

“Yeah,” Gil says, “which reminds me, what’s going on with Dr. Showalter?”

“Well...” I sip water and tell him.

Gil’s mouth hardens. “Maria, listen to me. That is not only suspicious, it is totally unethical. Go to the dean. Immediately.”

I crack my knuckles. “I can’t. He’ll just retaliate again, besides which, it’ll probably get the media out of bed, and that is the last thing I need. Besides, he’s right. I did touch off that big blow-up, and I was absent and emailed instead of calling, so...”

“So you deserve to have your grade knocked down over two full letters? No way!”

“Look, Gil, I don’t know if I could...”

“Could’ is not the issue. You should, and you will.”

“Since when do you get to tell me what to do?”

“Since I care about you, how about that? You’ve suffered enough. Good grief, Maria, if I didn’t know better I’d think you enjoyed being a victim.”

“I’m not a victim. It’s just bad luck.”

“Maria, what have I told you about...”

“Oh, what are you, my father? You act as if I’m cussing. In fact, when it comes to my spiritual life, you constantly act as if I barely know who Jesus is...as if I’m a former foul-mouthed, drug-shooting stripper.”

“I just want to help you.”

“Yeah, help me by making me feel...”

“If you’d focus on something besides your feelings, you’d have a much easier time with Christianity.”

“Okay, so you want me to focus on a bunch of rules? Oh, yeah, that made you just as happy as a cop with a gross of doughnuts, didn’t it?”

“Why do you have to turn every discussion we have into a fight, Maria?”

“Gil, I’m not...you started it, darn it! Yes, I said darn! Darn, darn, darn!” I could get my point across a lot more easily if I weren’t whispering. Darn it.

Gil clears his throat. “Maria, please. I...let’s get back to what started this, all right? You face felons every day and don’t let them walk all over you. Why are you letting your professor get away with grading you down for no reason? Do you not trust that your instincts about him are...”

“Look, trusting instincts is half of what gets me in trouble. I really am trying to be...”

“Trying to be what?”

The answer—“a good Christian”—hovers in my mouth. After all, even if God saved me the way I was, He doesn’t want me to stay that way. Once you’re a Christian, you’ve got to follow the standards, just like once you’re a cop, you have to follow those. And I’ve got to be a good Christian, or God will be so disappointed in me...He might punish me, He...

Gil’s BlackBerry beeps. He takes it out, tells me it’s an email marked “urgent,” and reads. I see his shoulders go rigid. “Who is it?” I ask. I don’t let him see me do it, but I check to make sure my gun is still secure just below the knee of my skirt.

“Cherry Creek Elementary,” he says. “Maria, I’m sorry, but we need to cut it short.”

“No problem. Sick kid?”

“I wish. It’s Sophie and Clayton. Apparently, Sophie is in the principal’s office for fighting, and Clayton...” He looks up and I can tell he’s praying. “Clayton’s had an encounter with a stranger on the playground. He’s not hurt, but...”

“Say no more.” I dig my half of the bill out of my purse and throw it on the table. “I’m coming with you.”

“I was hoping you would.”

And we’re off, speeding toward Cherry Creek Elementary.

CHAPTER 14:

"It's time to try defying gravity"

-Wicked

"I'll take care of Sophie," Gil says outside the principal's office. "You work your detective's magic on Clayton if you need to."

I bite my lip. "Gil, if it's okay with you I'd rather talk to Sophie first."

Gil clears his throat and frowns. "Maria, if this is another attempt to stop me from disciplining my kids..."

"It is not, and I resent the word 'another.' I am not against discipline, but I'm sure as shootin' against the harsh, legalistic punishments you grew up with."

"Are you saying I'm abusing my children?"

Gil's words shock and hurt me, so much that I give in to an impulse and grab his hands, staring him straight in the eye. "No. No, never. Gil, look at me—no. I know you're a great dad, and I know you would never hurt them. What I'm saying is..."

Gil studies me, looks up, sighs, and then backs off, looking a little shamefaced. No, not shamefaced exactly—more like a lost, sad little boy. "I know. You're talking about my folks again."

"I am. And I know they never treated you wrong either, but..."

"Yeah. Don't you just love family drama?" Gil's joke falls flat, but I laugh anyway and hug him. After all, I had my share of said drama as a teenager.

"Yeah," I tell him. "Just stick with me, okay? I promise, between me and Jesus, we'll figure this all out."

He hugs me back hard, but backs off before I start to tense. "I will. So you want to talk to Sophie?"

"Yeah. I have got to figure out what's eating this kid where I'm concerned before it drives me nuts."

Gil kisses my cheek. "Go on, then. You'll be great."

The school secretary escorts me to a small room in the back of the enclave that makes up the principal's hangout, as it were. Sophie's sitting in one of the tweed chairs, her feet not even reaching the floor, with a bandage on a badly scraped elbow. For a minute the place looks so much like an interrogation room, and Sophie looks so much like a witness who doesn't know why she's been shut up in it, that it makes my chest hurt. When I've pulled myself together, I go over and hug her.

Sophie stays in my arms for three seconds, stiffens, and wriggles out. "What are you doing?"

I sit with Sophie on the floor. "Giving you what you need. You may have been in a fight and yes, that is wrong, but kiddo, you're still hurt. That's what I'm concerned about first."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Sophie considers this for a minute, but then pouts. "I don't care. You still think I should get punished."

She's nailed me. What do I say that won't be a lie? I can't think of anything, so I decide to pull out a cop tactic. "Okay, Sophie, here's the deal. I came all the way over here from Silverton to see you and make sure you're okay. I want to know why you were fighting and what I can do to help make sure you don't do it again. And I am not leaving this room until you talk to me."

"Fine. Then you'll be late for school and get in trouble and I'll be glad." Sophie sticks her tongue out at me.

"Sophie." I get on her eye level. "Put the tongue away. That is rude and I don't want to see it again. You hear me? Okay, good. Now like I said, you are gonna talk to me. What's wrong, honey? I thought you and I were pretty good buddies. Why am I suddenly the Wicked Witch of the West?"

Sophie physically holds in a giggle. "The witch is uglier than you."

"Well maybe, but lately, you've been acting like I'm about as mean as she is. So what's up?"

Sophie slumps down and sticks her lip out. "You lie all the time."

“What? When have I lied, honey?”

“When you said you loved me. If you did, you’d have told Daddy not to hit my hand at the pizza place. And you lied when you said I was a big girl, but then you said I would spill. And...”

She’s actually starting to cry. “You...you...you...”

“What, sweetheart?”

“You lied when you said Jesus loved me!” She practically screams it and throws herself forward onto the floor.

“Oh, crumb...Sophie. Sophie, honey, calm down now, okay? You’ve got to calm down for me. Honey, I did not lie. Jesus does love you. Why would you think He doesn’t?”

“Because I always get punished, just ‘cause I’m mad. Other people get mad. Why can’t I?”

Oh, holy flippin’ crumb. Why couldn’t God have made me a shrink, or at least a police psychologist? I pray for words and hold Sophie tight. “Okay. Well, let’s talk about that. What makes you mad?”

Sophie hiccoughs. “My mommy’s dead, and I didn’t get to tell her goodbye. Daddy’s always at work. Grandma and Grandpa are mean to me. And you got put in jail, and now you’re at school, and you’re always after bad guys—what if you get put in jail again, or what if you die too?”

“Oh, Sophie, darlin’. Why didn’t you tell...” But I trail off. I know why she didn’t tell. Desi is emotional enough for everybody in that family, and besides, crying is not Sophie’s way to deal. I shake my head, hold her, and pray again. But this time, God is silent, so I take a big risk.

“Sophie, did you know something? My mama’s dead too.”

Sophie runs a hand under her eyes. “Is she?”

“Yeah. My daddy, too.”

“W-when did they die?”

“I was Clay’s age. And...” I explain to her, in kid-friendly terms, about foster care and the feelings I carried around for two years related to the stereotypes of orphans, theater kids, and orphans who were theater kids. “And you know Sophie, that all made me very angry.”

Sophie looks wary. “But I bet you didn’t fight with people.”

“Well, no.” Except the time I stood up for Monique against Bobby Judd, but that was later. “I was usually too sad to be mad, you know? And my foster parents punished me enough just for doing things that they thought were wrong, but weren’t really.”

Sophie nods. “Like not getting a hundred on a test.”

“Yeah. So I did different things. I jumped rope. I sang songs where the character was mad, or where the character was a bad guy, like a wicked queen or Miss Hannigan in *Annie*. I squeezed little balls, or ice cubes. I think...” I feel myself smile. “I think we need to find things like that for you to do.”

“You...you’ll help me do that?” Sophie asks.

“Of course. And there are other things we need to do, too. I’ll talk to your dad so he can help. As for you being afraid that I’ll be arrested again or get hurt...” I take a deep breath. “Sophie, I cannot promise you that I’ll never get hurt. Being a police officer is dangerous sometimes. But people like Sergeant Tunney—you remember him? My boss? He knows that, and so he makes sure me, and Mr. Brendan, and all the other detectives have ways to protect ourselves. And thanks to what happened last year, he’s worked to make sure I won’t be accused of doing anything wrong.”

“He has?”

“Yes. In fact...” I get an idea and decide to go with it. “Let me talk to your dad, and then I’ll talk to Sergeant Tunney. I think the two of you need to talk about how safe I am at work.” Actually, Clayton and Desi should be in on that too, I think. Tunney may not be a softy, but he does understand how serious Gil and I are about each other, so if I called and asked him to help me reassure the kids...

“I’m sorry, Miss Maria.” Sophie’s tear-clogged voice interrupts my thoughts.

“That’s okay, hon. Believe me, I more than understand, and I’m gonna make sure you get some help with all this stuff. More than that, I’ll help you as best I can. But understand this. I have never and will never lie to you.”

Sophie nods, hugs me, and leaves a sticky kindergarten kiss that smells a little like apple juice on my cheek. A few minutes later, I turn her over to Gil, assure him that she's okay, and go in to see Clayton.

"Hey, sport," I say. "I heard you had a pretty scary recess."

"I wasn't scared, really," Clayton says. "But..." He looks at me, his eyes begging for understanding. I give it. "Wanna talk about it?"

"Yeah." But he takes several breaths and has a few false starts before coming out with it. "Do you know anybody who wears a lot of black? Like all over?"

My detective's intuition sends a signal rocketing to my brain. "I might. Why?"

"Well, I got a hundred on the fractions quiz, so Mrs. Riley said I could go to recess five minutes early, so I went out and got a good swing. This guy came up to me and said, 'hey, kid, are you Clayton Montgomery?' And I did what they taught us to do in school last year, and didn't say anything. So then he said, 'you know Maria Keller?' but I didn't say anything again, so he muttered something about how I must be retarded. And he got down in front of me and said, real slow and loud, 'well, if you do know her, and I think you do, you tell her to get out of Silverton before I do something worse than kill her mentor.' And then he left, and Mrs. Riley and the other kids came."

Why, oh, why, did I leave my notebook in my car at school? I snatch a pen and legal pad from a table instead and write down everything I just heard before looking up. "Okay, Clayton. Think you can help me out a little more?"

"Sure. What do you want to know?"

"This man—did you notice anything else about him? How tall he was, his eyes, his hair?"

"He had sunglasses, but he had brown hair. He was a lot shorter than Dad, but taller than you. Maybe..." He stands up and frowns, studying me. "We haven't had measuring yet, but maybe an inch?"

"Fat or thin?"

"Thin, but not real skinny."

"Did he just walk up to the school or was he driving?"

“He had a green truck. I think it was pretty new.”

“Okay. This is very important. Did you see the license plate? If you didn’t, that’s okay, but don’t make anything up.”

Clayton ducks his head. “No, ma’am.”

“That’s okay. Did you notice anything about the truck at all?”

Clayton’s face lights up. “Yeah. Yeah, he had bumper stickers and stickers on the window. I didn’t understand what some meant, but I remember one said, ‘Jesus hates your attitude,’ and another one said ‘Jesus’ on it, and something else, but there were bad words.”

I squeeze Clayton’s hand. “Thanks, bud. You did real good.”

“Did I?”

“An expert detective couldn’t have done better. A vehicle like that should be easy to track down. I think you helped me catch our murderer.”

“Wow! Wait’ll I tell...” he starts, but stops when he sees my face. “Oh—is that supposed to be a secret?”

“Yes, until I tell you otherwise.”

“Okay. I won’t tell.” Clayton pretends to zip his lips. “Good luck, though.” He frowns. “Oops. I’m not supposed to say that.”

I smile. “Well, that can be my secret.”

Gil and I meet up outside the principal’s office shortly afterward, and on the way back to school, I give Gil the scoop. He responds with alternating frowns, smiles, and thanks. “Especially about Sophie,” he says. “I knew she was angry because of Anne’s death, but I never should’ve let it get that deep.”

“It’s not your fault,” I say, because it’s not.

Gil squeezes my shoulder. “I know. But when you’re a parent, you’ll understand how days like today can feel like they’re your fault whether it’s true or not.” He shakes his head. “I am going to put effort into helping Sophie, and you can be sure I’ll call the school tonight and have a word with the principal about letting teachers allow kids on the playground alone. If the city would allow school resource officers...”

“Then the homicide division would be down a detective,” I say. “I’d take a demotion in a heartbeat to help out. Speaking of kids, I’m hoping Sergeant Davenport will ask Tunney to borrow me back in December. I missed doing Shop with a Cop last year.”

“Yeah—what is that again? I’ve heard about it on the radio, but how exactly does it work?”

“Well, it’s different in each participating town, but for us it means the patrol officers—just them, since kids don’t normally understand that “cop” doesn’t always mean “uniform”—get together with kids whose parents can’t shop with them, or who are shopping for their siblings alone, or something. We help them pick out stuff, wrap it, and pay for it. And we get to know the kids—show them that the police aren’t the enemy. That’s important too, because a lot of these kids are fosters, or they’ve seen relatives get arrested. It’s the highlight of my Christmas, that’s for sure.”

Gil grins at me. “I love your passion for children, Maria.”

“Passion for...no,” I laugh. “I don’t have that. That’s for Sunday school teachers or camp counselors. I don’t have what it takes to be those things. I just care about them. I want to see them loved on, cheered for, allowed to be themselves, and in a safe place at night. Not to start a pity party, but I want every kid I spend even two seconds with to have what was ripped away from me.”

“Hate to tell you, but that’s passion.”

“Call it what you want,” I say with a grin of my own. “Look, I’ve got to get back. Call you later.” I peck his cheek and let him return the favor.

Maybe I’ve got too many things on my mind, or maybe I’m too lovesick to notice it at first. But it’s not until I’m in the front hallway of the music building that a question bubbles up in my mind. How can a man who says he loves me as much as Gil says he does—who constantly praises my “passion” for kids, my detective skills, my singing, and other qualities—get so bent out of shape over my saying “good luck?”

“A Christian murderer. Will wonders never cease? I personally feel sorry for you, Keller. As if your religion didn’t have a black eye already thanks to these fundy nuts.” Sergeant Hirsch snorts, and I sigh. It feels like a lot more than forty-eight hours have passed since my discussion with Clayton. I’m exhausted, my appetite is out the window, and my supervisor’s cynical attitude is so not helping. Of course, Jesus reminds me, I used to have the same attitude. I look up, ask for forgiveness, and tick off a check mark before giving Hirsch a smile.

“Did I ever tell you...” I reach for a little pod from the one-cup coffeemaker in the corner, “how grateful I am that for once, a supervisor keeps me in tea? Saves me some money every month. Want some? I promise it’s good.”

“What the hey? You’ve only been nagging me for weeks. What do you recommend for us nonbelievers?”

“In the tea or in Jesus?”

“The tea, smart gal.”

“Right. Well, start off slow. Try something with a sweeter edge, like strawberry.”

“Strawberry it is. As for the Jesus part...like I was saying, these fundy nuts are half of why I don’t buy it, the turn-the-other-cheek thing being the other. I did that, and felons would be running the streets.” He laughs. “One thing—the only thing—Tunney and I agree on.”

The tea gurgles in my cup, then in his. “Careful, it’s hot. You want me to respond to what you just said?”

“Keller, I like you a lot, but no. Focus on the case, please.”

“Okay.” I grab my file. “We’ve got the same suspects—Laughlin, Baker, and possibly Showalter. Schmidt and I have talked though, and we’re about ready to eliminate Laughlin because there hasn’t been anymore suspicious activity from her. In fact, we think...” I gulp in air. “Christine Hastings was the last corpse. Maybe now the perp will get cocky and lead us right to him. If so, I don’t think it’s Laughlin. She slipped up once, and she won’t do it again.”

“But then why weren’t the women’s sections hit?”

“I’m not sure,” I admit. “I did receive a phone call threatening an alto, but they’re all still alive. As for sopranos, well...” I shrug. “The thread tying all three murders together seems to be

that each victim had a dirty little secret. Some sin in their past that would tarnish their Christian image. Patrick had depression, Tim had gambling, and Dr. Hastings was a cult gal. Maybe none of the sopranos has a secret that big.”

Hirsch chuckles. “Really? Look in the mirror, Keller. I hate to remind you, but you’re a rape statistic. Why wouldn’t this piece of slime kill you, rationalizing that you were probably a tramp who asked for it?”

“I...I’m not sure.” I crack my knuckles. “Unless he’s not willing to risk worsening his sentence by making himself a cop-killer.”

“Could be. And I don’t mean to get you nervous. Wearing a badge is tricky business, Keller. It offers less protection than you think, but when it comes down to it, that little piece of metal is your best friend. Besides,” he laughs, “what would look more out of character for a legalist than killing a lady of the law? I mean, seriously...Keller? Keller, what on earth are you doing?”

Well he might ask. I’ve snapped my fingers really loud, jumped up, and am now pacing the room like I’m the nut. When I finally notice my supervisor, I laugh. “Sorry, Sarge. It’s just that—what you said...that’s it!”

“What’s ‘it?’ How can this case have an ‘it?’ It’s a simple matter of a bunch of whacked-out teachers on a legalistic power trip.”

“No, sir, I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Because the suspects don’t fit that picture. They used to, sure, but Back to the Bible’s not been around in years, at least not in its original form. And I especially don’t like Baker as a legalist. He could’ve been at one time, but I just keep thinking about the stuff on his iPod I talked about in the group meeting before—before Dr. Hastings. I keep thinking about the phone conversation with Hastings. Something’s not right.”

“You think all three suspects are in on it?”

“No. The victims were strangled, and that doesn’t seem like Showalter’s style. Believe me, I know this guy, and he does not like his hands dirty. Laughlin or Baker, though...”

“Okay, that’s good, but go further. This could still be a conspiracy. Maybe half the faculty’s in on it.”

I drink the tea and bite my lip in between sips. “I thought so once, but something tells me...no. I’m not going there. It’s just intuition, and Schmidt spent all last year trying to get me to quit...”

Hirsch’s hand goes up. “And sometimes he’s right, but Keller, step back. You’re heavily under his influence. You’re scared to death of doing or saying something he doesn’t like. That’s what you need to quit.”

“Well, after that fight we had...”

“Oh, Keller. Partners fight. People fight. Just because somebody doesn’t trust your judgment doesn’t mean they’re gonna walk out on you. Or that you shouldn’t trust your own judgment.”

“Well thanks, but if the past twenty-nine years have taught me anything, it’s that my judgment su—um, stinks.” I can’t say “sucks” anymore either, not that I said it much to begin with. Check mark for Maria. Well, maybe half a check mark. After all, I did stop myself in time.

“I’m not getting into that. Schmidt’s not here, but you are. You tell me what you think.”

“Okay. Okay. Well...” I get up. “Here’s what I think. This has nothing to do with legalism, at least not in the classic sense. Back to the Bible disbanded years ago, and some of its former members are in Christ and His Saints, which is still a pretty rule-oriented joint. Some of those people, like Baker, may have...”

There’s a knock on the door. “Hey, Sarge, just wondering if you had an extra...”

“No, I do not have an extra set of shooting range goggles. The extras are downstairs where they were yesterday.”

“But...”

“No buts, Schmidt. I know why you’re really here. C’mon in. You should hear what your partner has to say.”

“Oh. Go ahead.” He sits down. That puts me off for a minute, but Hirsch gestures “go on,” so I do.

“Like I said,” I begin, “this isn’t about legalism. This is about former legalists who finally got out from under Back to the Bible’s thumb, but instead of living like Jesus wanted them to, they went too far the other way. Now they believe in a form of watered-down Christianity that excuses sin, and they use their pain as an excuse for it, which is where you get the murders, that bombing at the Cherry Creek church all those years ago...all that.”

“But then why are they killing kids who’ve been involved in controversial stuff like gambling?” Schmidt asks.

My resolve is shaking, along with my hands. But both men look anxious to hear my opinion, so I brace myself and give it. If Schmidt hates it, I’ll woman up later.

“To prove a point,” I say. “If they can show the legalists that this is what happens when the rules get out of control, then...”

Hirsch is nodding. “It works, Keller. Now, I know you’ve been busy trying to get back in the game since your professor died, but think back. That phone call you mentioned between Baker and Hastings. You think there was anything to that?”

I flip some pages in my notebook. “Hard to say. I mean, Rose said Baker allegedly slapped a student. That indicates tendencies toward violent behavior. And he did sound too eager to have his own way, but nothing in here definitely says ‘murderer.’ Plus, I think Showalter needs a Silverton Homicide tail, too, and not just because of what he did to me.”

“That alone makes me want to book him,” Schmidt half-growls. “Okay, I’ll trail Henry Higgins Wannabe. Think you can handle Baker?”

“I know I can,” I say, even though I don’t know.

Schmidt gives me a thumbs-up. “That’s the spirit. Just remember one thing.”

“Yeah?”

“You’ve got a gut. Use it.”

CHAPTER 15:

“Counting all the cracks in the tile, struggling to smile without choking...”

-Footloose

“Jesus, give me strength,” I pray in a whisper. “I know I can do this because you’re with me, but seeing someone else in Dr. Hastings’ office is going to be horrible.”

The “someone else” I’m referring to is a lady named Dr. Robin Young, a relatively new professor who offered to take over Dr. Hastings’ classes shortly after the murder. She’s a great teacher, and I’ve been able to keep up my grades for her, but when we look at each other I can tell she can see grief in my eyes. I still can’t decide if that’s good or bad. But today, my mind’s not on grief. It’s on the case, and Dr. Young might just be my linchpin in it. So I knock on my new advisor’s door. “Dr. Young?”

She waves me into her office. “Come in please, Maria. What can I do for you? You don’t need extra help, I’m sure.” She laughs at her own joke. I barely resist a good-natured eye roll. If this woman only knew how hard I had to work at school just to get B’s... Of course, it wasn’t that way when Mama homeschooled me. I got A’s then. People thought that was because she let me do whatever I wanted, but that could not be further from the truth. She could be strict when necessary, which it sometimes was. But there is something to be said for letting a kid go at her own pace, and for reassuring said kid that getting a wrong answer does not mean she’s dumb. Public schools with all their gold stars, red check marks, standardized testing, and whatever oughta all just go jump in the—

“Maria?”

Crumb! Focus, girl! I shake my head, remembering the brief time in fourth grade when a teacher thought I had ADD. Ms. Ravensworth showed up in the middle of all their tests and said,

“ADD? Baloney! You want to label this kid? Label her what she is—a smart, brilliantly creative little girl named Maria Keller who happens to be not even one year out from losing her parents and has been shuffled to foster homes the way most people shuffle piles of clothes into drawers. So she daydreams in class from time to time. So she taps her pencil on her desk because she can’t concentrate. Well, so would you!”

“Maria?” Dr. Young asks again. “Are you okay?”

“What? Oh—crumb, I’m sorry. You just made me think of...well, never mind. If you’ve got a minute, I need to talk to you about something—uh, spiritual.”

“Ah.” As I hoped she would, my advisor sits up straighter and waves me forward. “I’d be happy to try to help. Come in, and close the door.”

I do. “This should only take a few minutes.”

“Nonsense. I don’t have a class for another forty minutes, so I am at your disposal. Now, what are the symptoms, so to speak? Having doubts about Jesus’ authenticity? Your own salvation? Have a hypothetical situation to run past me?”

I don’t know why, but the way she’s talking kinda gets under my skin. It’s like she’s heard this so many times it doesn’t matter anymore, and how must that make students feel? Easy, Keller, don’t jump to conclusions. I crack my knuckles and sit down, missing Dr. Hastings’ basket chair. “No. It’s kind of investigative, to be honest.”

Dr. Young’s shoulders jerk. “Do you suspect me?”

“No. It’s just that, well, since Dr. Hastings was killed, this case has been hard on me, and I really want to get it closed, but I need help from a professor I can trust, and that’s you.” Her soft smile tells me my little speech scored some major points. “So I basically need to talk to you about law and grace.”

My prof folds her hands on the desk. “What about it?”

I explain as quickly as I can, and without giving anything away, the differences I’ve seen between the legalistic members of Christ and His Saints’ faculty and the ones who aspire to live

“grace-filled” lives—how “grace,” in their minds, translates to “sin.” Dr. Young nods through it all, and when I’m done, she smiles again.

“It is confusing, isn’t it?” she asks. “Trying to find that balance between rules and freedom. Unfortunately, it’s not that easy for some of us.”

Her face is now pain-smeared, and I prod. “Would you say more about that, please?”

Dr. Young looks away. “I want to tell you something,” she says, “but I don’t want anyone else to get hurt, and I don’t want to become a suspect.”

I decide not to break it to Dr. Young that by saying that, she’s already made me suspicious. Instead, I look at her for the hardworking, clean-nosed teacher she is. “Is that so? Then answer me truthfully. Did you kill any of those people? Help out? Give tips?”

Her eyes meet mine and hold them. “No. If you like, when we’re done, you may search my desk, campus box, and computer. I’ll give you my car keys. But I am not a murderer.”

I smile. “I believe you, but I still need your help. Tell me what you want to say.”

She takes a breath. “All right. In the 1980s, I was a member of Back to the Bible. I was a Christian, but...” She looks away again. “I had a fiancé at the time, and I loved him dearly. But he belonged to a different, stricter church, and he secretly believed I was not serious about my faith. He questioned my salvation multiple times. We had some ugly fights—oh, nothing that left me with permanent scars, but still ugly. I joined Back to the Bible to prove my faithfulness.”

“Was this a church group?”

“No. They were members of several area congregations who felt that their style of faith wasn’t being lived out. I...” She shudders. “After I left, I came to realize that they erroneously believed themselves to be the only true Christians in town.”

“So this was a...cult?” The word feels cold and slimy in my mouth, like bad sushi.

“Not according to the classic definition. They didn’t revere their leaders as God, force members to stay, abuse people—none of that. But they were big on condemnation. You, for instance, would be a prime candidate for hell according to these people.” She indicates my jeans, cowboy boots, and red lipstick and nails. “You would also be condemned on the basis that you do a ‘man’s’ job. Your sexuality would be quietly questioned. Your leisure pursuits would be

scrutinized, and it would be strongly suggested that you confiscate anything too worldly. You would be condemned for studying theater.”

“Crumb,” I say. “These dudes sound like walking stereotypes.”

“And yet I’m sure you’ve met a few such dudes.”

“Yeah. What’s scary is that they can back up what they say with Bible verses. Usually, I can spot a snow job, but sometimes that throws me off guard. I’ve only been Christian for a year. I don’t know my Bible well enough to go ten rounds with people like that.”

“Good. Approaching them with that strategy is useless anyway.”

“Yeah, I can see that. But back to you. You left the group?”

“Yes. Yes, but not before the leaders prayed and decided God told them to...to...” She ducks her head and pretends she wants something in her desk.

“Bomb a church?” I ask. “It was in the library archives,” I explain when her head pops up.

“Yes,” Dr. Young says. “I remember, Christine was in the group with me. She was trying to get back on her feet after being involved in a real cult, but...” Dr. Young shakes her head. “She was so confused then—so insecure, so afraid. She thought I never knew, but I caught her sobbing after almost every Back to the Bible meeting.”

“Holy crumb,” I say, almost to myself. “Dr. Young, is there a single prof in this department who wasn’t involved in that...that...group of Christianized slime buckets?”

She laughs without mirth. “Maria, the truth is, a little less than half of all this college’s teachers were involved. At the time, we were all in the middle of huge changes here as far as curriculum and mission statements and...well, dozens of different areas, across the board. We just didn’t...we all felt as though we were under demonic attack or thinly veiled persecution, and Back to the Bible seemed like a safe haven. And for me, I guess it was. I was young and impressionable—all right, stupid. No, don’t look away. You can nod if you want to.”

“Yes,” I agree. “But Dr. Hastings...”

“Wasn’t safe. She was the one who tried one more time to stop the bombing. Begged and pleaded for days, threatened to call the police—and then finally, she ran down to the church on the appointed day and straight into a news crew. She spent two days in a cell, being questioned

repeatedly, before I came and bailed her out. And even then, Back to the Bible's hell-based rhetoric scared her enough to keep her—both of us, really—in the group awhile longer. Of course, for Christine, part of it was the jail time. I don't have to tell you what kind of experience that was."

"It hasn't improved since the '80s, let me tell ya," I say. "But there's something I don't get. These Back to the Bible people basically told you that if you ratted them out, you'd roast like a hot dog at a barbecue, and that was enough to shut you up? Even though you knew you were saved, and salvation equals no way to get to hell?"

"I was having serious doubts, thanks to the fiancé I proceeded to break up with," Dr. Young explains. "As for the rhetoric—you've never sat through a sermon on hell, have you?"

"Um...not in my recent memory, no."

Again the mirthless laugh. "Well, then..." She gestures for me to sit back, goes to her mini-fridge, and pulls out a Yoo-Hoo. "Maria, please keep your hands and arms inside the cable car for your own safety. Keep tight hold of your drink. Welcome to hell."

In the next ten minutes, Dr. Young gives me an up close and personal description of the place I've been threatened with numerous times. By the time she's done, I know I'll never need to watch another horror movie. The color booked it off my face when she mentioned the darkness and oppressive silence, except for the poor isolated soul's screaming. I started biting my lip right around the time she mentioned the flesh-eating worms and locusts. My hands started sweating when she brought up the relentless thirst. And by the time she mentioned souls being tossed forever into what amounted to a supernatural garbage dump...

"Stop!"

"Oh, no." My prof comes around the desk to hug me. "I went too far, didn't I?"

"You..." I gulp the drink. "You were fine until the garbage dump part. Nobody's ever said it, but it's been insinuated several times that I belong in an earthly garbage dump, never mind the one down there."

"Ah." She sits next to me. "It's all right. It's all right. Breathe deeply."

I do. "Wow. And I thought morgues were creepy. Pastors actually...tell people this stuff?"

"Yes. Sometimes, it serves a good purpose, but in my case..."

"I totally get the point." A thought crashes in on me. "Uh, my reaction—that doesn't mean I'm not really a Christian, does it?"

Dr. Young laughs. "Oh, heavens no. It was your first time. I'd be worried if you didn't look a little spooked. And believe me, the first time I heard things like this, I was screaming. You're pretty tough."

"Thanks." I finish off the Yoo-Hoo, toss the bottle in the trash, and point to the mini-fridge. "Do you have water?"

"Sure." She hands me a bottle. "So, does that give you any insight into the locust eating its way through our school's spirit?" She shakes her head. "Sorry. Poor word choice."

"That's okay. Yeah, it does. But...one more question."

"No, enjoying show tunes does not send one to hell."

"Ha. Funny, um...no. I meant..." I ask her about the phone call I overheard between Dr. Hastings and Adam Baker. "Did he blackmail her about being a witness to that bomb? And why?"

Dr. Young gets up, goes to the window, looks out, and sighs. "And just yesterday, I was complaining about grading essays. Yes, he did blackmail Christine, but..."

"And what is it he wanted her to keep quiet about?" I put my hands on her desk and lean forward so we're almost nose to nose. "Dr. Young—Robin—is Adam Baker the murderer?"

She jerks her chair back from me. "I don't know, Maria. Not for sure. Believe me, if I did, I'd tell you. But I do know this." Again, she can't look at me. "Maria, I believe that Christine found out who killed Patrick and Tim. From what you said, she may have confronted Baker about it. And..." She pops the beaded bracelet she's wearing forward, then back, a few times. "I believe he used her history, cult and all, against her. She told me that her job was being threatened, and now that you've shared what you know, I can guess why. I...I believe that finally, Christine let integrity win over fear, and that Adam Baker, or whoever he works for, killed her for it."

I feel my spine straighten and my teeth clench. "That's it," I hear myself say. "I'm finding that louse right now and yanking the truth out of him if I have to..."

"Maria, wait. You can't."

“And why not?” I know I sound disrespectful, but this is my cop’s instinct Dr. Young’s fooling around with.

“Because,” Dr. Young pleads with me, “if you do, someone even more innocent than Christine will die.” She shows me the wedding ring on her left hand. “I’m married, and we have an eight-year-old. If you go to Baker...he...he knows I know about Christine. And he said that if I told anyone, he’d have our little boy kidnapped, and killed.”

“Oh, my Lord. Oh, man. As you would say, holy crumb.”

“I know.” I settle into Gil’s open arms. I called Schmidt with the latest development, got through my classes and the rest of work on auto-pilot, and came straight to the Stage Door afterward. Part of me knows I’m acting like a damsel in distress, but the bigger part knows I need Gil right now. He kisses the top of my head, and I sigh. “I just keep thinking, that could be Clayton.” I feel my teeth on my lip. “Gil, what am I gonna do?”

He’s quiet for a minute, and I feel guilty for being glad that he doesn’t immediately suggest prayer, which I have done plenty of, or throw another verse at me. Instead, he grabs my hand and leads me to his office. Once there, he rummages in the fridge and pops something in the microwave. A minute later, we each have a reheated Greek chicken wrap dripping with tzatziki sauce, and a pile of scripts.

“What you’re going to do,” Gil says, “is eat a hot meal. You’re also going to do something fun. I want you to help me decide what the next play should be.”

“You’re a genius,” I tell him. “An impossibly sweet, impossibly perceptive, gorgeous genius.”

“I try. So, to start, what do you think of *Jane Eyre*?”

“It’s a possibility. Did you know that was my favorite book as a kid?”

“No, I didn’t. How old were you when you first read it?”

“I first tried it when I was ten, but it was too hard. I came back to it during high school. I even did this English project where I rewrote the ending. I was Jane, and instead of running from

Rochester, I stood up to him, made him get his wife legitimate help, and said, 'if you want me, prove it, baby.' Well, not like that, but you know."

"Yes, I do. And did you get an A?"

"Actually, yeah. Mrs. Benson—that was my teacher—she loved it. She was my favorite teacher. She...got me, you know?"

"Yeah, I do." Gil studies me. "I can see you as Jane. I always pictured her with dark eyes like yours." He traces a gentle path under my left eyelid, but then snaps out of it. "Okay, so what about something lighter? *The Odd Couple*?"

"I like that one, too. Maybe I could convince Schmidt to try out, or Greenwood. They'd both make a great Felix."

"No, not Brendan. I wouldn't want him in my theater that long. We agree that we're both too bossy for our own good when we get involved in each other's work."

"Yeah, you're both pretty bossy. If I didn't love y'all so much, I'd hate you."

"Hmmm. Speaking of which, how do Brendan and the others feel about you working so soon after Dr. Hastings' death? I'm amazed no one has suggested counseling."

"Counseling? You think just because somebody in my life died, I should see a shrink? Gil, if that were true, I'd still be in therapy. I'll just keep praying, reading my Bible, that kind of thing. If I decide I need extra help, I'll get it on my own terms. I'll be fine."

"I'm sure you will, but Maria..."

"Oh, no, here we go."

"Just hear me out, okay? Please?"

"Okay."

"Good. Maria, I just want to say that I've been praying about it, and I know I need to tell you this. What I've seen you go through at CCPD, plus what you've shared with me about your history, plus what's going on now with these unethical academia people—Maria, you need a break, and a big one. Have you...I mean, would you consider...I mean..." He clears his throat real loud, does it again, and sighs. "Maria, you won't like it, but I've got to say it. I don't want you on the force."

Okay. Now, I know Gil doesn't want me to become one of those "barefoot and pregnant" women. But still, he's blindsided me. I blink as if I really did lose my vision. "W-what?" Oh, yeah, Keller, that was smart. "I...I mean...since when is that your decision?"

"It's not. But I am very concerned about you. I realize the situation has improved, but I still feel that some people, Tunney especially, are taking advantage of you and your abilities, and that most of what you do is because you feel that you have something to prove. I worry about you working yourself into an illness. And yes, I worry about your getting hurt or killed. Police work is dangerous, honey, and you are not invincible. Maria...I can't lose another wife."

Holy crumb. "Wife? Who said I was..." I laugh. "Not happening, bud, at least not now. For one thing, your folks would have a hissy fit."

"Oh, so we're back to that old song again."

"Old song? You make it sound like I'm just making this up. Gil, you have seen and heard what they've done to me."

"You've met them twice—at the church and at that poetry reading. And may I add that you now refuse to go to my church—any church—because of it? Maria, that's called pride."

"No, that's called trying to figure out where I fit into the Christian gig."

"Maybe you'd fit in better if you weren't so flip about it."

"I'm not trying to be flip. I talk about things the way it seems natural to."

"And maybe what's natural for you needs to change."

I physically back off, because I know if I don't, my temper will start simmering. I bite down on my lip. Hang in there, girl, I tell myself. Remember, this is the man you love. Y'all are past the "I love you, I hate you" stage. Act like it.

"Gil, I would change anything for you. So what changes do you want?"

Gil clears his throat. "Maria, honey, this isn't about doing something for me. This is about doing what's good for you. And what's good for you is turning in your badge, putting your feet on the ground, getting involved in my church, becoming more serious, and just being less...less..."

"Less what? Less me?"

"That's not what I said."

“That’s what I heard. So try this, Gilbert. What’s good for you is cutting your hours at the theater, telling your parents to butt out, wearing khakis and a T-shirt once in awhile, and going to a church that’s not full of pompous jerks.” I fold my arms. “There. Did you like hearing that?”

Gil’s face freezes. “How dare you attack me.”

“Attack you?”

“Yes. That is exactly what you did.”

“And what about what you did?”

“All I did was suggest...”

“Okay, you suggested. But it’s dangerously close to becoming an order.”

“Oh, for...tell me something, Maria. Can you honestly say you’re happy right now?

Dealing with murderers on a regular basis? Working insane hours? Being told to dress, think, act, and react a certain way? Being called by your last name?”

Gil’s words are frighteningly similar to Dr. Hastings’. In fact, they frighten me so much I crack my knuckles a few times. “I don’t know! I don’t know...I don’t know. That’s what I’m trying to figure out. But at this moment, the force is all I have.”

“You have me.”

“We fight all the time lately.”

“You start it.”

“No, I don’t.”

Gil sighs. “You have Jesus.”

“Okay, yeah, but I can’t figure Him out to save my life.”

“Well, if you’d put more effort into it...”

“I’m doing two devotionals a day and praying constantly already. How much more effort do you want?”

“I already explained that. You need to get more pulled together. Join my church. Get involved in their activities. Find something less dangerous to do with your time. Learn some basic domestic skills. Stop talking about luck and vibes. Stop being flip all the time.”

His words are beginning to sting, badly. “Funny. I don’t remember you having these problems with me before I got saved.”

Gil sighs and crosses to me. “Yes, because you weren’t saved. You didn’t know any better than to act the way you did. But now you do know better. Christianity is not about works, but you do need to do things that prove your commitment. Believe me, it’s what’s best for you.”

Okay, that’s it. Not only do I now feel like a just-potty-trained kid being shamed for having an accident, but now Gil has played the ultimate black card. He sounds just like Luke.

“But Luke, why can’t I become a Chamber Singer?”

“Because honey, your schoolwork will suffer. You think it won’t, but I know it will, and you’ll blame it on freezing up. Besides, honey, your director is trying to make you feel good, but she doesn’t understand the reality of music. There’s always gonna be somebody better than you, and you won’t be able to beat them. Just let it go.”

“Luke, why do I have to take a third science course? I got a B last time.”

“Yes, and if you’d been doing your homework here instead of backstage, you’d have gotten an A.”

“Why do I have to get A’s?”

“You don’t. But when I know you’re capable of A’s, that’s another matter.”

“Luke, why won’t you let him take me to the prom?”

“Maria, he’s a theater kid. He plays guitar in a borderline hippie outfit...”

“It’s a Christian band.”

“I don’t like their style, and I don’t like the idea of you going out with any of these drama boys from the high school. Just put ideas in your head. If you want to go to the prom, go with your cousins.”

“Luke, I don’t want to get a criminal justice major, too. I just want to do drama.”

“And then what, Maria? Eat noodles in a tiny, roach-infested apartment while going to cattle calls and waitressing? No. Not my daughter. I realize you have talent, and I know better than to tell you not to do anything with it. But for once, be realistic. Be practical. You need to do something with your life that pays bills and feeds you. It’s what’s best.”

“You don’t...have a...clue about...what’s best for me.” My voice is so cold it makes me shiver. “You don’t have a dadgum clue. And if the only way you’re going to approve of me is making me fit into your little mold, I’m sorry. I won’t do it.”

“Maria...”

“No, Gil. Decide right now. It’s me or the mold. Me or the rules. C’m on, choose. Now.”

He doesn’t answer. I dump my tea in the sink. “Fine. We’re done.”

“Maria, wait, I...”

“No. In the words of Reba McEntire, if I’m not the one thing you can’t stand to lose—if you think you can do better—then consider me gone, Gilbert Montgomery. Gone.”

I don’t know what I’m expecting, but it’s not what I get. Gil gives me a curt head shake. “That’s probably the most sensible thing I’ve ever heard you say. I’m too mature to be with a woman who jumps down my throat over everything. We’re done.”

CHAPTER 16:

“There ain’t nothing as bad for a woman as a man who thinks he’s good”

-Carousel

“He did *what?*”

“No, no,” I correct Debra Fortney. I came to see her at the police gym this morning, figuring that hitting something might help me deal with the breakup. No, I hate that word. It sounds so high school-ish. “Mama, Mama, Gil’s mad at me and I don’t know why and he only wants to date those prisses from the 4-H club...” Gag. No—it’s not a breakup. It’s an ending. That’s it, an ending. Straight, clean-cut, realistic. That’s good.

“He didn’t end it with me,” I tell Debra, trying it out. “We ended it with each other.”

“Well, why?”

“Because he...he...” No. I am not gonna be one of those whiny, immature women who blames it all on the guy and thus concludes all men are jerks. So I explain as best I can, promising God I’ll repent for the bias that I know slips in at times.

“And how long has it been since you...ended it?”

“Just yesterday. I didn’t tell my cousins since I knew they’d freak out, but I knew you’d get it, so I came here. I knew you had your self-defense class with the ladies today, but I came early.”

Debra smiles. “Well, nobody would accuse you of stewing over a problem. Here.” She hands me a stack of CDs. “Pick out a good mix for me. Get as anti-man as you want. Don’t worry,” she says when she sees my look. “If God doesn’t like it, He can take it up with me.”

“Yeah.” I stare at the cover of a Shania Twain album. “Hey, Deb? You think Gil was right?”

“That depends on what part of his little Dear Jane speech we’re talking about. The immaturity part, the you-have-no-right-to-tell-me-the-truth part, or the you’re-a-lousy-Christian part?”

I moan. “The last one.”

“No way, Frito-Lay. And just for the record, ditto on the other parts.”

I rub my forehead and set aside Shania before I reach for a Reba McEntire. The hit song I quoted is the first track, and I toss it. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. There’s a difference between being sold out for Jesus and selling your soul to the church deacons.”

I blink. “Say what? You’re a...”

“Yeah.”

“How long have you...when...I mean...Debra Fortney, why didn’t you tell me?”

She sits down and puts her hand on my shoulder. “I met Jesus six months ahead of you. But you and I weren’t in touch, and with the Stage Door thing—and I know the trouble your adoptive parents gave you, so I was kinda scared to say it. But then when I found out you were a believer too, I...but there was just never a good time.”

“Oh. Well, I...I...oh, forget it!” I hug her. “How did it happen?”

Debra sits back on her heels. “Well, it’s not a very good story. No flashy stuff. But I was alone in the forensics lab one night, feeling a little creeped out—“

“You never did like the dark.”

“No, ma’am. Anyway, I decided to turn on the TV, and *The Wizard of Oz* was on. And I started thinking about Dorothy and how much she wanted to go home. My life’s pretty lonely. Thirty-one, single, no family nearby, no pets even. I don’t have anybody—anybody except God, who up to then I only talked to when I was mad. But then I started remembering all these times when people tried to convince me Jesus was real, and...well, it just kinda...”

“Clicked? Happened? Yeah, sounds familiar,” I say. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks. But let’s get back to you. I don’t see you often, but whenever I do, I can tell you’re serious about your faith, and plus, your way of expressing it is—uh, refreshing.”

“How so?”

“You don’t speak church-ese. You don’t pretend to feel things that aren’t there. When you don’t get what God’s doing, you say so. But whenever you talk about Jesus, your voice changes. It—it vibrates, kind of. Your whole face gets red, but it’s a good red.”

I shrug. "Right now, the only red I'm seeing is the bad red."

Debra winks. "I can fix that. But be warned, today is..."

But she doesn't get to tell me what today is because the other ladies start coming in followed by—whoa. Greenwood? A couple of the narcotics guys? A few patrolmen? I remember what Debra said about "stepping up" the level of the class so we girls could get in a little combat with our "brothers in blue." I edge toward the door. And Maria exits stage left...

Debra's hand claps against my shoulder. "Don't even think about it."

Of course, Deb's too late if she meant that literally, but crumb, she's not too late to keep me from actually running. So, knowing what everybody will think if I don't stay, I suck it up and get into position. Debra, meanwhile, be-bops her way to the front and pumps up the volume. I can't help smiling when I recognize a Broadway number, but the smile drops off my face fast. Intense concentration replaces it as I throw myself into keeping up with Debra and her shouted commands.

"Okay, ladies, time to put our moves to the test!" Debra calls halfway through class.

"Please pair up with the guy closest to your size."

The others find their matches fast and end up staring at me. I feel my face get even hotter. Oh, right. Like a single male cop in this town—heck, in the state—is a measly 125 pounds.

"Hmmm." Debra's eyes tell me she's not about to let me off the hook. "Greenwood, how much do you weigh?"

"Just 138," he says. "I've been working out."

Debra cuts her eyes to me. "You okay with that?"

"Sure."

"Okay, then," Debra says. "Take one, pass 'em down." She hands me several pairs of handcuffs. I take one and dump the rest in the next woman's hands as if they're starved vipers. Once everybody has a pair, Debra explains the rules. The men are our arrestees, but they're going to try to escape us using violent means. Our job is to get them on the ground and in cuffs in sixty seconds. The only stipulation is that nobody can touch anything below the belt. Oh, yeah, I feel much better.

“Go!”

I move behind Greenwood, thinking that'll give me a measure of safety. “You have the right to...”

“Oh, no I don't.” Greenwood has my arm in a death grip. “Nobody arrests Slick Sam and gets away with it, girlie.”

I would laugh, but Chandler used to call me “girlie” when he was in a bad mood. I push away thoughts of the fleabag. “Slick this!” My fist zooms forward and into Greenwood's chin. The blow throws him off balance for all of two seconds. This time, he throws one arm across my middle and digs the nails of the other hand into my neck. My adrenaline kicks in, and not knowing what else to do, I stomp on his foot, grab his strangling hand, and just yank. Once I have his hand in mine, I dig in my own nails.

“Yeeow!”

“Greenwood, you scream like a girl.” I don't mean it, but the sound of my own voice is the only thing keeping me from running.

“Thirty seconds,” warns Debra.

“All I need,” Greenwood says. He shoves me sideways. A scene flashes in front of me, along with the pain in my head—the scene of Chandler shoving me toward his bed.

“No!”

I don't know what comes over me. The next thing I know, I'm balanced again, my hand is flying through the air, and I've slapped Greenwood so hard the sound echoes through the whole room. My shoe kisses Greenwood's groin, he doubles over, and I click on the handcuffs.

The next second, Debra has my hand. I'm expecting her to scold me for using it to slap my fellow detective, but instead, she's raising it. “Our first-place winner, with twenty-one seconds still on the clock, Detective Maria Keller from homicide!”

Cheers erupt. Emily Travers from patrol jogs over. “What was that, girlfriend? You holding out on us all this time?”

“Uh, no. No, I...uh...”

“Keller, you okay?” Greenwood has been freed and, apparently recovered from being slapped silly, is at my side.

“Yeah, I...I just need to sit down for a sec.” Or a few hours. I faced my fear, didn’t I? So why do I feel like the hard stuff’s just begun?

Four days later, Schmidt and I haven’t turned up anything definite, so we’re back to square one. We decided not to bring in Baker on blackmail charges, figuring that if we couldn’t prove he needed to spend the night in the cooler, he’d just hit the streets and kill Hastings’ baby anyway. Meanwhile, Schmidt’s got his eye on the scum, and I’m watching Showalter like a brand new musical—as if he’s the most fascinating thing on earth. Worst of all, every day, I’ve gotten another phone call from the Muffled-Voice Wonder, saying things like,

“That little alto’s clock is ticking, Keller. Ready to give up yet?” Of course, nobody can trace the calls. It makes me want to pull a civilian, as we say in the cop game, and ream my coworkers up and down for their incompetence, which I would, but I know that’s not fair. Instead, I’m spending the night digging for clues in the college library.

“I can get you another cup of tea if you want,” night librarian Heidi Pruitt says. “You’re gonna need it if you stick around much longer.” She points to the clock I have conveniently ignored. Almost ten PM. Lucky for me this place is open 24-7. Yes, I said “lucky,” and I don’t care. Whatcha gonna do about it, Gil?

“Sure, Heidi,” I tell the night librarian. “And I think I’ll go across the street to the coffee shop and grab one of those caramel-iced cookies.”

She gives me a Look. “You? Caramel? You’re the most diehard chocoholic I’ve ever met.”

She’s right. Caramel is Gil’s favorite sweet tooth satisfier, not mine. I clear my throat. “Just the tea’s fine, thanks.”

She nods and heads to the teapot, and I go back to work, but the archives just confirm what I already know. Adam Baker was a Back to the Bible leader, but he was apparently against

the church bombing, and he was never connected with anything illegal. Since leaving the group, he hasn't gotten so much as a traffic ticket. Figures.

"It figures," I say out loud. I look up. "C'mon, Jesus, help me. Send me the Angel of Homicide Cases. Is there a patron saint of detectives? Whoever you've got, just tell them to get their butts over here. I've got to close this case before the killer hits the alto..."

My phone vibrates, and I stare at my hand. Do I dare reach for it? Jesus, protect me.

"Hello?"

"I'll show you what happens when you disrupt my school!" The next thing I hear is a splitting, grit-filled thud.

I crash through the library doors and run for the music building, not even bothering with my car.

The voice of death dogs me all the way to the music building. By the time I round the last corner, it's turned into a screech. That, and the sound of a rattle, tells me I'm too late.

"All right. All right, the game's over you...you..." Jesus would not like my word choice, but somehow, "purple-cootie meanie poopy-head" just doesn't cut it. I whip around the corner. "Okay, come on out with your hands up...I saw y—"

The sound all cops secretly fear punches a hole in the still air. I duck with a quarter of a second to spare. There's a bullet hole in the bricks right where the back of my neck would've been. I slide down onto the asphalt. The best thing to do is make him think he got away and then ambush him, but I can't do it alone. I reach for my radio, cover it with one hand, lie down on my stomach, and put my mouth next to it.

"Sergeant, this is Keller. You reading me?"

"10-4, Keller. Where are you? You sound like you've got your face pressed against something."

If he only knew. "Sarge, I need backup, now!" I never knew I could spit out the college's address so fast.

"We're on our way," Sarge says.

Bless him. Now it's time to listen. I don't hear the perp moving, but that doesn't mean he's not there. If I can figure out just where he is, I can corner him and hopefully hold him off until help gets here. Focus, girl. Listen for a boot heel hitting asphalt, a gun clicking, a stray breath...oh yeah, I'm ADD, all right. About as ADD as your average yoga instructor. C'mon, little choir perp, come to Mama...

I risk pushing myself into a kneeling position just in time for a shadow to dance across the bricks. I grab my radio and take off, but don't let him hear my footsteps. He's headed for the music building's back door, which is at the top of a flight of concrete steps with no railing and overlooks a treacherous concrete ledge. I bite my lip, quote Psalm 91 in my head, and follow him. It's gonna be close...

He turns at the same time I do. A hand clamps across my mouth just before my shoulder blades slam against the door. Adrenaline burns through me like a cup of overheated tea. I grind down into his instep with my left foot and bite his hand as hard as possible. That throws him off for a second, but this guy's no wimp. He comes back with an even harder grip. This one's on my neck.

"Unless you want to die like those kids," he whispers, "quit fighting me. You understand?"

I debate trying to take him down one more time, but he shakes me, hard. "Do you understand?"

I nod more vigorously than I have to so he'll feel my body jerk. Maria Keller never backs down from a challenge, and she also doesn't give up without a fight.

"Okay, now listen. You obviously have a discipline problem. Snatching your favorite professor away from you didn't do the trick, so I'm gonna have to make myself clearer. I'm done. The alto section was my last job. Now you've got the easy part. Let me go."

He's uncovered my mouth, so I can express shock. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I think I was just too hard for you to track down. I think your grief threw you off. Let me go. Let me go back to my job and you go back to yours—if you still have your colleagues' respect after this." He laughs.

Speaking of my colleagues, where are those guys? I raise my chin. “You seriously think I’d let you walk away after you committed...”

He slaps me. “You had better. Because you know what happens if you don’t? Your little friend Rose is next, and then your partner. The idea of stripping away all your friends is incredibly tempting right now. And don’t think I’ll stop there. You ask me, the whole Schmidt family’s a disgrace to Christianity.”

I shove him, hard. “Nobody slaps me around and gets away with it. You just added assault on a police officer to the list of charges you’re gonna get smacked with, Mr.—” I reach up to yank off his ski mask, but he shoves me backward. His weight gives him the advantage. I fall backward, and in two seconds, I’m hanging on the ledge.

“I would just shove you off and finish this,” he says, “but you’re not the one I want. Remember that.” And then he’s gone.

“Oh, great,” I grumble at the air. “Now what do I do, huh?” I can feel blood where my hands are scraping against the concrete. I can also smell a faint trace of perfume—the alto. Which one is she? Where’s her family? Did she have a boyfriend? Pets who won’t understand why she doesn’t come home?

“Keller, stop it,” I yell at myself. “Stop being such a softy. That got you in trouble, remember? Get yourself off this dang ledge!” But there doesn’t seem to be a way to do that. I could rely on the wall to give me footholds, or swing one leg up and then push myself the rest of the way, but in both cases, I’d be off balance too long. And the last time...no, don’t think about the last time, don’t think about balconies... I start singing “My Favorite Things” to calm down. I’m not even through the first verse before sirens drown me out like sopranos who don’t even know what a voice lesson is.

“Keller?” I hear Hirsch call out. “Keller—oh, holy Toledo! Guys, get over here! Keller,” Sarge says when he’s below me, “do I want to know how you got up here?”

“Long story,” I say. “But I promise to explain it if you help me.”

“Let me, Sarge,” I hear Schmidt laugh. “I’m used to this.”

“Very funny, Schmidt. I am so telling Dorothea about that little Ben & Jerry’s binge...”

"Keller, just shut up and let me help you. Okay..." I hear him moving. "All right, now just let go of the ledge and let yourself drop. I'm right here."

"Say what?"

"Keller, trust me. I've carried 250-pound men around in body bags. You're a snap. Now, come on..."

"All right, all right." Big breath through the nose, and...

For two black, wrenching seconds, I'm falling through empty air. Then I feel my body hit Schmidt's arms, and then feel those arms lowering me to the sidewalk.

"Honestly, Keller," my partner laughs. "How do you manage to get yourself into these situations? Most detectives are happy if the most exciting part of their day involves a paper cut."

"Do I look like most detectives to you?" I almost snap at him. "One of the altos is dead, and..." I explain my confrontation with our perp. "I was this close! I could just...just...slam my head against that wall over there!"

"Hey," Sarge says, "don't do that. Don't deck yourself. You did great."

"You sure did." The voice is Rinaldi's, of course. The others murmur in agreement.

"Thanks, y'all." My stress makes my slight Texas accent thicken. "But right now, I feel like a failure. Why didn't I stand up to Luke and just stay in theater?"

I don't realize I said that last thing out loud until after the debriefing. I'm in my cubicle, using a late-night round of pyramid solitaire to tamp down my irritation. Rinaldi was just here, falling all over me about being brave, and I feel like an absolute heel. I study the second row of cards and click through the deck, hoping to find a four so I can remove a stubborn nine. No luck. I bite my lip and start a new round.

"You had an ace you could've used back there."

I groan. "Schmidt, will you just...I mean...ugh. Forgive me. I don't know what's wrong."

He comes in and lowers his voice. "Female issue?"

"Nah, that's next week. No, it's just a little stress. I'll be fine."

"Ah. One question. You got plans in the morning?"

"Thankfully, no. I don't have to come to Silverton until after lunch."

“Okay. Go home, do something for pure fun, and sleep in, but be ready to leave your place about nine-thirty. You need to see my wife, and not for Bible study. If I know her, she’ll want to take you to breakfast.”

CHAPTER 17:

“I know a place where no one’s lost. I know a place where no one cries...”

-Les Miserables

“I wish you’d called me and told me about this yourself. You know Brendan and I are there for you if you need us.”

“I know, Dorothea, but...” I sip my tea to buy time. “I don’t want to treat you two—you, especially—like a therapist. You have lives, and I can’t disrupt them.”

“Maria, dear,” Dorothea says, “you don’t understand. Let me tell you a story, all right? You remember the night we first met?” I nod, and she laughs. “You were so nervous—sure that you were exuding some stench that spelled ‘non-Christian’ and I was going to toss you out on your ear, or that I pitied you. But that wasn’t true at all. I thought, ‘she needs to know how incredible she is, but she needs help to get there.’ And I asked, ‘Father, I know your wisdom is perfect, but why did you take her mother so soon?’”

I nod. “That’s funny. I never had a favorite parent or anything, but somehow I’ve always missed Mama a little more than Daddy.”

“Hmmm. Well, the next morning, I was talking to God, and He gave me instructions. He said, ‘look after Maria for me.’ Of course, I said I would, but He said, ‘no, Dorothea, you don’t get it. You have to be this girl’s spiritual mama. If she needs you, I don’t care if it’s three AM, you’ve got to be there. Brendan has a similar assignment, but you’re the one I’m really counting on here.’ And you know what I said?”

“No.”

“That’s right. I wanted to refuse. I actually said, ‘Lord, I’m a nurse. I spend all my time with broken people. She’ll just burn me out.’ And then...” Dorothea laughs. “I basically got taken to the woodshed. God informed me that no, you would not burn me out, and that if I did get burned out, that was just me trying to save everyone. I was to be secondary to Him where you

were concerned. But no matter what, I was the one you needed. And when I thought of you again, all I could do was say yes, which I don't regret for one second."

"Thanks. I love you, you know that?"

"I did, but you can say it anytime. So, back to you. I'm gonna come at this like a nurse—cure the worst first. You and Gil ended it, as you say?"

"Yeah." I go for the tea again. "Dorothea, when you—did you and Schmidt...I mean, Brendan...did you ever fight?"

"It's not past tense, dear. We do fight. Not often, but we have our moments."

"Yeah, but I mean when you were dating. Did he ever do you like Gil's doing me right now? Make you feel like a treasure one minute, and the next, he hates you? Did he ever make you feel like you had to fit his expectations or he'd walk out? Did he ever..." Gulp. "Did he question your seriousness about Jesus?"

Dorothea chews a bite of her waffle. "You better get busy on that omelet before it gets cold. In answer to your questions, I don't think we had the same problems you and Gil have. I was working at the hospital here in Cherry Creek, and Brendan was a patrolman. He came in with a gash on his head—something about a robbery and a glass door. He was terrified of needles then, so we talked to keep him calmed down. He asked me out to dinner right after I put in the last stitch. So we hit it off pretty well. And though there have been times I've wished he'd consider leaving the force, I've never suggested it. I've accepted it as Brendan's calling. Besides, I knew from our first meeting what the risks of being a police officer's wife entailed. But," she continues, "it hasn't all been good. We had a few bad fights before we got engaged."

"Over?"

"He'd been very serious about another woman before he met me. She'd dumped him just two weeks before that glass door incident. There were times I feared I was Brendan's rebound woman, and on a couple of occasions, I accused him of seeing me as such. Plus, Brendan's girlfriend had dumped him because she didn't feel she could live on a cop's salary. Brendan was afraid I felt the same way. One Christmas, I hinted to him about an expensive bracelet I wanted,

and he blew up about the money. We were hateful to each other, to say the least.”

I gulp a bite of omelet. “Wow. How’d you work it all out, though?”

“What you just said. We worked on it. Neither of us ever said ‘it’s over,’ but we would walk away. Then, after about a week alone, we were both miserable, so one of us would call and make the first move. Finally, we just said, ‘this is ridiculous.’ We figured God wanted us together, and with Him in common, anything else was pretty easy to deal with. We got help from an older couple at church, decided where we could agree to disagree, and the rest is history.”

“See, that’s what gets me,” I say. “You got your happy ending, but I don’t feel like I even deserve mine. You say you and Sch—Brendan! You say you and Brendan had God in common. Well, that’s just it. Gil and I don’t. He doesn’t think I care about God at all, and the only way I can prove otherwise is to squeeze into his mold. And church—ha! I can’t make myself go back in that church. I don’t even have a church right now, and you know, I wonder if that’s such a big deal. What’s wrong with just taking your Bible and going off by yourself somewhere, singing and—Dorothea, where in the Bible does it specifically say I have to go to church?”

“Hebrews.” Dorothea scribbles something on her napkin. “Look up that verse later. Maria, I’m going to be frank with you.”

“I can handle that. Shoot.”

“Okay. I’ve seen you grow a lot in the last year, but I’m concerned that you’ve gone so long without a church family. That’s not only disobedient to God, it’s dangerous. As you have seen, this world is a spiritual minefield. Legalists, people who think God doesn’t care about sin, and everything in between. It’s like going into a crime scene without your partner. You could get seriously hurt. The wrong person or circumstance could shake your faith so badly you might not recover.”

“I don’t think so, Dorothea. Despite what Gil thinks, I love God very much. And no offense, but I don’t think a church full of judgmental, nose-in-the-air hypocrites, most of whom would run for the hills if I told them about my past, would be the ones to help me deal.”

“Okay. Well, let me ask you this. Suppose something happened to me, or to Brendan? Suppose one or the other died? Suppose one of Gil’s children got sick? Suppose you were left

with the same questions you asked us when Dr. Hastings died? Who would help you answer them? Your cousins, yes, but how much could they help in such a tragedy? How long could just two people hold you up?”

Her words remind me of the perp’s—*your partner’s next*. I shudder and look up. “Oh, God, no.”

“I don’t mean to frighten you.” Dorothea’s voice is firm, but tender. “But honey, you have got to face facts. Yes, some members of the body of Christ have hurt you terribly. But you’re part of that body now, and most Christians want nothing more than to take you under their wings and help you find where you fit in it. You cannot let your pain and bitterness drive you to live life as a solo Christian. That bitterness is sin, and if you don’t ask God to fix it right now, it will poison you just like aconite.”

Dorothea’s words hit their target. I cover my chest to stave off sudden pain. Bitterness and pain? Using it as an excuse to sin? Good grief, I’m no better than Adam Baker.

Yes you are, because you have me. And if you ask my forgiveness, you’ll have it. I’ll never throw the bitterness back in your face.

The pain fades, and I look down. “Forgive me, God. I didn’t realize exactly what was going on. Forgive me, and help me forgive them.”

Dorothea pats my hand. “Good girl. You just cleaned house. Now, I realize New Life Community may not be for you, but can I count on seeing you there Sunday? And will you allow me to help you on a church search?”

“It’s a definite deal.”

“Okay. So let’s move on to the next problem. Gil and his mold. “Mold” is actually an appropriate term, because if he were here, I’d tell him his attitude stinks.”

“Ooh. If you’re half as stern as you just were with me, I don’t wanna see that.”

“No, you don’t, because I’d be even meaner. But here’s the plan—some do’s and don’ts. Don’t beat yourself up. Most of the responsibility for this lies on Gil’s shoulders. But at the same time, do acknowledge that he said what he did because he cares, even if he said it the wrong way. When he apologizes, you be ready to do it, too.”

“But how can I apologize if he won’t even email me?”

“I’m getting to that. Don’t try to win him back—as in, don’t call and email constantly, don’t overdress to impress him, and don’t play games. No dating someone else to make him jealous or anything like that. But…” Dorothea gives me a sly smile. “Do use a few feminine tricks. According to Gil’s Facebook account, he’s going to be in Silverton the next few weeks, at the Glass Slipper Theater.”

“I saw that,” I say. “They just got a new director, so Gil’s gonna help them revamp. Plus, he’s helping with their youth program.” I laugh. “Of course, I got that info before he deleted me.”

“Oh, that is low,” Dorothea says. “But here’s what you do. Didn’t you say your advisor offered you an internship at the Glass Slipper Theater starting in January?”

“Yeah. I don’t know if I’m gonna take it, though.”

“Sure, but don’t you have to check it out before you make a decision? Hang around a bit?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. So what if you went over there and just happened to, say, let Gil hear your voice in the hall? Let him see you from across a crowded room? Hear you singing to yourself?”

I have to laugh. “Dorothea Schmidt, you are an absolute genius.”

“Stop!”

I don’t roll my eyes, but I see a lot of the sopranos and tenors in Dr. Showalter’s class doing the same thing. He strides across the stage. “Maria, I’m this close to asking you to leave. You are ruining this entire scene.”

“Okay,” I tell him. “How’d I mess up this time?”

“Stop speaking that way to bait me. It will not work. I want to start the scene again, and this time, softer. More—pathetic.”

If you ask me, Showalter’s doing the baiting. We’re doing a scene from *The Crucible*, and I’m playing Elizabeth, who Showalter gets a kick out of mentioning was jailed for witchcraft. He says it multiple times in every class, and keeps telling me to “think convict” or “think condemned.”

I've thrown myself into that and know I'm doing it right. After years of theater training, you just know. But...

"Maria!" shouts Showalter. "What part of 'think condemned' do you not understand? For you, it should not be hard!"

Keep cool, girl. Ignore those alto and bass morons snickering in the background. "Sir, I am trying to..."

Showalter spits a vulgarity in my face. The sound makes me straighten like a Marine at roll call, and I throw up my hand. "No. No, sir. You do not—you hear me, do not—talk to me that way. I've warned you once, and the next time it happens, I'm reporting your butt to the dean."

Okay, maybe I went a little too far, but I've gotta say, this feels good.

"Whoo! You go, Maria-girl!"

"You just buuurned his turkey!"

"That's what I'm talkin' about!"

Showalter points to the door. "Leave, now. And do not come back in here. You just flunked my class."

I straighten more. "Oh, no, I didn't. Now I really am reporting your butt. And as for not coming back, I wouldn't step foot in here again even if you gave me a Steinway!" The sound of the door slamming is the best one I've heard in months.

I'm halfway out of the music building when I realize what just happened. I just cost myself my degree, for the second time. God probably wants to take me to the woodshed, as Dorothea put it. Actually, He must want to...

Say you did well, Maria. That was righteous anger. You're clear.

My breath whooshes out, taking my energy with it. "Thanks, Lord. But what am I gonna do about..."

"Maria! Hey, Maria, wait up!"

I turn to see all the sopranos and tenors from class running toward me. Rose breaks from the group to hug me. "We quit," she says. "We quit the class, and we're going with you to the dean."

“Oh...oh, you don't have to...”

“We want to.” Rose hugs me again. “You've worked too hard for that degree to let a choir feud and a murderer steal it from you.”

I feel myself smile. “So what are we standing here for? Let's go!”

The meeting with the dean, as it turned out, was useless. He told my friends that he would not have a bunch of “over-dramatic students ganging up on a teacher”. He also told me in particular that I'd better get my act together and that he would think time in jail would've put an end to my “constantly running my mouth”.

I try not to let it, but the news angers and discourages me. To fight back, I drive to the Glass Slipper Theater with the collection of Christian music from my iPod playing in the background. I still don't have as many Christian numbers as show tunes, but I've discovered Point of Grace, Avalon, and a brand new band called God's Daughters, among others, are pretty cool. Of course, the show tune sound is still missing, but I'm working on that. I hum a few measures of the song I finished recently, a kind of darkly funny number where the singer comments on the total lack of happy endings in the world, and asks Jesus to give her a break and let her have a few more. It's a rework from high school, but now that I've applied some fresh perspective to it, I'm amazed at where it ended up. I don't really want to be anything more than a hack scribbling lyrics in her rumpus room right now, and I also know my songs need work before I'll be truly satisfied with them, but it's great to see an old hobby yield better results than I thought it would.

The Christian list ends three-quarters of the way to the theater, and Martina McBride's “When God-Fearin' Women Get the Blues” comes up. Hmm...that's a good way to put my situation, and it even mentions all four sections of the choir. I wonder... I hum a chord, and words start bouncing around in my head. Something about soprano divas, alto snobs...sinning in God's name...God needs earplugs...who wants to hear that garbage... Now, what are those verses about singing to the Lord? Singing praises, singing a new song... I cue up my audio Bible, call out

the keywords, and let the verses flow through the car. It doesn't take long before I'm singing along to "I Will Celebrate," which has the verse about the new song in the lyrics.

Honk, honk! "Hey, crazy lady, shut up and drive!"

Oops. I roll down my window. "Sorry—Jesus moment!"

I'm still humming when I walk into the Glass Slipper. As soon as I explain who I am to the receptionist, her face lights up. "We were wondering when you'd make it down," she says. "Just make yourself comfortable. I'll see if one of our youth actors would be willing to show you around."

The youth actor I get matched up with is a fifteen-year-old girl named Holly. "Like the Christmas berries," she says. "My birthday's December twelfth."

"My cousin Monique's is December first," I say.

"Lucky. People always think they don't have to give me a birthday present because mine's later in the month."

"Oh, that's not good. But surely your mom and dad..."

"I don't have a mom and dad. I'm staying with foster people."

"Oh. Oh, Holly, I'm sorry. My bad."

"It's cool. I like my foster place. I got a couple of the nice ones. The Goldmans. And they're Jewish, so if I stay with 'em this year, I get a real birthday."

"Okay, cool. So what do you do around here?"

"Oh, everything. I like working with the lights. Let me show you." We've been walking, and now Holly is gesturing toward a sound booth. "Uh, heights don't get you freaked, do they?"

"I won't lie. A little."

Holly punches my shoulder. "You'll be okay. I'm right with you."

The way she says it makes me think Holly's got a nurturing streak, so to keep my mind off the stairs, I ask if she has any brothers or sisters. She smiles then. "I've got a little bro. Name's Dylan. He's too little for the techie stuff, but he's gonna be in the Christmas play if our director and that new guy Montgomery ever get it going." She waves me into the sound booth and

proceeds to explain tons of buttons and switches at breakneck speed. In what seems minutes, she's hustling me back down and has picked up the tour.

"Most of the kids are rehearsing," she tells me, "but I'll introduce you around. Only..." She pauses. "Don't say anything about being a cop, 'kay? Most of 'em won't mind, but we've got a few who've been in trouble."

"Gotcha. As far as you're concerned, I'm just a theater geek who likes show tunes a little too much."

Holly laughs. "You're real funny for a cop. Hey, Matt, dude." She waves to a tall, stocky kid painting a piece of scenery. "This is Miss Maria. She might be working here soon."

"What's up," Matt says. "Hey, look at this, will ya? This look like a pear to you? That bonehead Jeffrey says it looks like a squash. Like he'd know. Only vegetable that guy's ever eaten is fries."

"Let me see." I study the "pear," which actually does look a little like a squash. "I don't know much about art," I tell Matt, "but if you work on the stem and make it rounder, you should be good to go."

"Matt, quit flirtin' with the new chick," a voice says. I turn to see a dark-haired, extremely overweight kid about thirteen years old plodding in. "You take my paintbrush again?"

"What would I want with your stupid paintbrush?"

"Since when do you need a reason to bug people?"

"Oh, I'm real scared now. 'Ms. Franklin, Mr. Montgomery! Bad old Matty took my brush! Punish him!"

"Oh, shut up."

"Good comeback. Is the fat starting to go to your brain?"

"You want to take this outside?"

"Yeah, let's go!"

"Hey, hey, hey!" I step between them and point to Matt. "You. Go get Jeffrey a paintbrush and come back here to finish your work." I point to Jeffrey. "You. Calm down and introduce yourself to a lady. I'm Maria, and you are..."

“Jeffrey McFarland. Or Jeffrey McFatland. Depends who you ask.”

“Jeffrey will do fine for me, thanks. And you’re lucky. When I was your age, I got teased for being too skinny. At one school I went to, I had to have a doctor’s note to participate in PE.”

“I wish somebody would give me a note so I could stay out of PE,” Jeffrey says. “So what were you? Army kid?”

“No.” I smile at Holly. “Foster kid.”

“Whoa,” Holly says. “How long did you do time?”

I smile again. I didn’t know foster kids still called it that. But I don’t want to tell Holly how much “time” I really did, in case she’s hoping for adoption and worried she’s too old. “More time than I wanted to.”

“Amen, sistah,” another kid says from behind me. “Hey, I’m Carl. I’m another foster.”

“Hey, another member of the club,” I say. “We should invent a handshake.”

This touches off what is probably the most relaxing afternoon I’ve had in who knows how long. Holly, Jeffrey, and Carl finish showing me around the Glass Slipper. Right around then, rehearsal breaks up, and soon, I’m holding court with a ton of kids, ages five to eighteen. About half are “fosters,” or kids who’ve been in trouble with the law. That last group looks like it would as soon shoot me as say hi, but I figure I’ll win them over later. Soon, I’m busy asking questions, soaking up the answers, and generally getting to know some new friends. I’ve just given Ashley a few makeup tips when another girl, Gracie-Mae, asks,

“So, Miss Maria, you got any kids?”

“No. I’m single.”

Gracie-Mae and several other girls giggle. “You should come back,” one of them, Suzette, says. “We’ll set you up with Mr. Montgomery. That dude is hot!”

“He looks like a prince in a fairytale,” Suzette’s little sister Lisa says.

“Well, maybe not like that,” Holly says, “but seriously, Miss Maria. He is *fine*.”

“Hmmm.” It’s all I can say because I know just how “hot” and “fine” Gil is. And I also know that’s only one of many reasons I still adore him, bless his stupid, rule-encrusted heart.

“Miss Maria?” Holly asks. “Did we say something wrong?”

“No,” I hurry to say. “No, but, um...let’s just say I’m already hot on Mr. Montgomery’s trail. Problem is, he doesn’t seem to know it.”

“Ooh, we get it,” Suzette says. “You’re shy.”

Now normally, if someone put my name and “shy” in the same sentence, I’d literally die laughing. But being dumped like yesterday’s mail can do weird things to a woman’s heart, and deep down, I know I am feeling shy, so I nod. Immediately, Gracie-Mae beams and says,

“I’ve got an idea for what you can do. Mr. Montgomery’s in the costume shop now. Take a few of the little kids and walk down there, talking to ‘em. He’ll hear you and notice you. Guys dig gals who like kids. Plus, he’s got three of his own, so you’ll knock a home run for sure.”

“I wanted to show you my dress anyway,” little Lisa says. “C’mon!”

And that’s how I find myself being escorted toward the costume room courtesy of a trio of six-year-olds. Fortunately, I don’t have to fake being interested in what they say. Hearing about spelling test victories, loose teeth, and who might get the biggest part in the next children’s play somehow reminds me of the old days. It makes me want to braid my hair, skip down a flight of stairs, and meet Mama for another day of home-schooling. In fact, I’m still thinking along those lines when we pass the costume room and I happen to look up. As promised, Gil’s right there. I take a breath and make myself hold eye contact for a few endless seconds, then look away. As I do, I feel myself smile. I’ve never seen Gil look so shocked.

A few minutes later, I’m headed out the door on my way back to school. Before I left, the executive director, Ms. Franklin, asked if I was going to take the internship, and she seemed like she’d be crushed if I said no. I had to tell her I wasn’t sure, but I hope I won’t have to keep her in suspense much longer. “Please, Jesus,” I pray, “show me what to do about this. And please let this plan to win Gil back work.”

It doesn’t occur to me until much later, when I’m in bed for the night, that my prayer didn’t mention the murder case. Or that I’ve spent the day wishing I could go back to the Glass Slipper, or the Stage Door, to stay.

CHAPTER 18:

“I want some happily ever after to happen to me!”

-Once Upon a Mattress

“They say that Cinderella was a liar/and Juliet should just go on and croak/dreaming of true love is just for morons/and ever, ever after is a joke.’ Once you’re out of fifth grade, just forget it/darkness, blood, and grief is all the rage/someone stabbed a best friend in the back and/stage four sarcoma lurks on the next page...”

The sound of clapping makes me jump three feet in the air. Too late, I realize Schmidt, Rinaldi, and my fellow detectives have been listening to my pathetic songwriting attempts. I whirl to face them. “Hey, who invited y’all? This stuff is private!”

“Not anymore,” laughs Anderson. “But that’s okay. That sounded real good. You come up with that yourself?”

“Yeah, but...” I shrug. “It stinks. The sarcoma part’s too depressing, and the fifth grade thing is too clinical. Y’all can’t tell anyone you heard this.”

“Why not?” Rinaldi asks. “It’ll be great once you get it cleaned up.”

“C’mon, Rinaldi, you think everything I do is great,” I say, but with a smile. “I wish there were more of you around here.”

“Still selling yourself short after all I taught you?” Schmidt makes tscking sounds.

“I am short compared to everybody in here. And between a case I can’t solve, a degree I may not get thanks to a jerk professor, and a boyfriend who ended it with me because I was too darn stupid to...”

“Keller.” Schmidt’s voice is kind, but serious. “Forget it, okay? Coroner’s report just came in. The dead alto was Chantal Parker. Sophomore, ex-alcoholic. Perfect target for our so-called Christian friend.”

“Oh...” I bite down on a cuss word. “Well, at least we’ve got a few dead giveaways now. Whoever our perp is, he might have a mark or bruise where I bit him. And we know he drives an almost-new Dodge truck plastered with pseudo-Christian bumper stickers. Although...” I shake

my head. "I have never seen that vehicle in any of Christ and His Saints' parking lots." I sigh and prop my chin into my hand. "I shouldn't have let him know I was onto him back at the ledge that night."

"Hey, better to let the perp have a slight advantage than get yourself killed," Anderson says. "I think we all agree you look a lot better as a police officer than a pancake."

We all laugh, and I roll my eyes. "True." I check the time on my computer screen. "Oh, I better start getting ready to go to class. Rose will be here any minute."

"Hey, Keller, how long is it until your graduation again?" LeBlanc asks.

"I've still got a couple months to go." I think. I hope. Hey, God, does it count as a sin for me to ask for a last-minute twist that makes Showalter the perp?

McClintock gives me a thumbs-up. "You can make it, girl. Just make sure we all get seats at the ceremony."

"And be prepared," Anderson says. "We're gonna blow the roof off that school when your name gets called. We're even bringing air horns."

"Ugh. Spare me," I laugh. "I despise those things."

"Tough luck."

I have to laugh. My coworkers. Can't live with 'em, wouldn't want to think about life without 'em.

"Honestly," I tell Rose, "I love Christmas music, but I think if I have to sing "Wassail, Wassail" one more time, I just might take the song's advice and go get drunk." Even though it's just October, Dr. Laughlin has us working on the dozens of songs for our battery of Christmas concerts, the first of which is a November twenty-ninth Madrigal dinner. She's also called a special afternoon rehearsal just so we can go over the songs on the program—again.

"I might join you," Rose agrees. "What's your drink of choice?"

"Hmmm...maybe a nice cold cherry daiquiri."

"Ooh, wild woman."

“Hey, don’t knock it. They’re decent for alcoholic drinks. I remember this one time when I was about seventeen, Luke and I got into this huge fight because he’d heard some moron at my school got caught with dope. He started telling me that he better never catch me doing that kind of thing—never mind that I wouldn’t even think about smoking dope or anything else. I got so mad, I went to my first and only party—it was a Friday night—and knocked back a daiquiri. And that was only because I thought Southern Comfort tasted like cough syrup.”

“Did Luke find out?” Rose asks.

“No. A bunch of my friends were there, and they knew what our relationship was like. Plus, some of those friends were pretty big guys, so they informed the others that if they breathed even one word about me and the drink, they’d get their faces bashed in. Anyway...” I laugh. “I dashed to the bathroom and threw up exactly ten minutes after I drank the stupid thing. Haven’t touched booze since.”

“It’s not worth it,” Rose agrees. Then she gets real quiet. “Maybe if Chantal hadn’t started...”

“But she stopped,” I cut her off. “And even if she hadn’t, she didn’t deserve death. Nobody does. Not like that.”

“I know, but...” Rose props her chin in her hand. “I just wonder if...if people like Dr. Laughlin and Dr. Showalter and everybody—if they have a point. I’m a divorcee. The Bible clearly says God hates divorce. And...well, what if I...what if He doesn’t love me as much because of it?”

“Rose,” I say, “that’s not true. God understands, and He...” But I cut myself off. How can I tell Rose God understands her situation when, once I’m alone at night, I constantly wonder if He truly loves me? Well, wait, I know He does love me. Why else would the crucifixion have happened? I’ve read about crucifixion, and it makes the electric chair look like something out of a Disney flick. I guess I just don’t know whether or not God likes me.

“Maria?” Rose asks.

“What? Oh...oh, we’re here. Um...I...I’m sorry, Rose. All I wanted to say is that I don’t know much about God. I don’t know half the things Gil and the Schmidts do. I don’t even know half the things you do. I’m still learning. But I do know that even if you committed a sin, which I

honestly doubt you did because your husband left you, not the other way around—even if you did, it doesn't mean you need killing."

"Need killing?" Rose asks.

I chuckle. "I'm from Texas, remember? One of our jokes is, in Texas, 'he needed killin' is a valid defense."

"Oh." Rose cracks up and hugs me as much as the car's space will let her. "Thanks, Maria. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Be bored to death," I say, and we both laugh.

A few days later, Dr. Laughlin announces a special dress rehearsal for our last pre-Christmas concert, a Thanksgiving one in which we'll be singing all sacred music. Because it's an open rehearsal, I invite Monique, Meg, and the Schmidt family. I try to ignore the ache in my chest that comes from knowing I couldn't invite Gil. Dear God, help me know what to do about that, I pray backstage. I miss him so much, even if he did act like a jerk. Does that mean I'm a jerk magnet? One of those weird people who likes being hurt? Do I have a martyr complex? Well, whether I do or not, I gotta say I miss the dude. I won't beg you to bring him back, but would you at least consider it? I try to remember if I've asked for anything big for myself since I became a Christian. No, not really, so maybe...

"Two minutes, singers!" Dr. Laughlin calls out.

"Good luck," I whisper to Rose just before we take the stage. She has a huge solo today. She'll be singing the Doxology, and it's right at the beginning of the performance. Funny thing is, I feel just a little bit guilty for saying "good luck."

But Rose just squeezes my hand. "Thanks."

Rose's solo is a hit, as is the rest of the rehearsal. Our limited audience gives us a standing ovation that makes me feel as if we've just sung to a packed house. By the time Dr. Laughlin dismisses us, I'm almost sure I could float through the ceiling. Honestly, as long as there's music, who needs crack?

Since I don't have another class, I decide to go down to the choir room and celebrate a little more with a few piano pieces—no singing, just me and the eighty-eights. I warm myself up with some scales, a few bars of “Do, Rei, Mi” from *The Sound of Music*, and a tiny bit of “Heart and Soul.” Soon, I'm deep into my repertoire, letting the keys kiss my fingers while I play “Sixteen Going on Seventeen.”

Several pieces later, I've moved onto one of the scores from *Sense and Sensibility*, a chick flick Meg roped me into watching, when the door opens and I hear Rose laugh. “You look like you're having a make-out session with the piano.”

I jump and realize too late that my eyes are closed, my mouth is frozen in a full smile, and I've been making “hmmm” and “ahhhh” noises. “Oh, you are sick,” I tell her.

“Hey, don't knock it. You sound wonderful. Hey, you seen my necklace anywhere? I took it off so it wouldn't snag on my robe's stole, and now I can't find it.”

“Your gold rose-shaped one?”

“Yeah.”

“No, but I can help you look. That's why they call me a detective.”

Rose laughs. “Okay, then. I think if it were in here, it would be around my chair in the soprano section.”

“I'm on it.”

The necklace doesn't turn up in the choir room, so Rose suggests we check the ladies' room and the vestibule. I keep hoping we'll run into someone else who's seen the jewelry since our search of the ladies' room doesn't turn it up, but it looks like we're alone in the building. My intuition sends a signal to my brain. Should I be creeped out about that? No, I reason. If I got upset, it would just show, once again, that I don't have enough faith that God will take care of me. Forget the fact that the perp, whoever he is, threatened Rose in addition to the Schmidts, I tell my mind when it spits that fact at me. Doubting God is still wrong.

“You can go home if you want,” Rose offers a little later when she sees me cover a yawn. “You look like you need a nap, and besides, it's my necklace. I can finish up in here by myself.”

"I look like I need a nap, huh? What am I here, five?" I laugh. But Rose is right. I could definitely use some extra Z's. "Thanks," I tell her. "You're sure you'll be all right?"

"Yeah. I was just gonna check the choir robe closet, and we both can't fit in there anyway."

"Good point. And great singing today." I give in to an impulse to hug my friend and start to head out.

Halfway to the music building's exit, I hear a door slam. My heart immediately goes into metronome mode. Rose would have no reason to slam a door right now. I listen closely and hear what sounds like scuffling sounds. That's all the invitation I need to dash out of the building and jerk my cell phone from my pocket.

"Schmidt," my partner's voice says on the second ring.

"Get down here," I rasp at him. "I think we've got our perp, and I think he's got a hostage."

"Schmidt, he's got Rose."

Schmidt puts his hand on my shoulder. "It's gonna be okay, Keller," he whispers. "Just stay calm and let me lead."

And lead Schmidt does. It's a good thing, too, because his height blocks my face from the perp. I've got my hand over my mouth. Rose is crouched against a rack of choir robes, hands and feet tied, a blindfold over her eyes, a gun to her head.

"I warned you she was next," the perp says. He jams the gun barrel into my best friend's temple.

"Shut up," Schmidt growls. "Let her go. Then stick your hands where I can see 'em so I can rip that stupid ski mask off your mug and take a picture of it for the database."

"Ooh, tough guy. But that's not up to me. Detective Keller?" The perp has the nerve to walk over to Schmidt and yank me forward so hard I feel a muscle in my arm snap. "Quit hiding behind the big man and make your decision. Do you let me walk, or does she die?"

"You want a decision?" I manage through sudden fear. "I'll give you one." And the next thing I know, I've given him a right hook, which knocks him to the floor. I grab the gun and pull off

the ski mask with my other hand. "Well, surprise, surprise. Adam Baker, the student-slapper. The king of cheap grace."

"You think so, huh?" Baker lumbers up, grabs the gun again, and aims a kick at my instep. I go for his nose, miss, and get his chin. Schmidt rushes over to back me up, gun cocked, but Baker turns on him and knees his groin. Meanwhile, I do a quick mental shuffle through my options, go for Baker's solar plexus, and try to grab his wrist. He grabs mine instead and tries to force me to the ground. Schmidt's back by then, and he's coming from behind. He shoots, but it's a misfire. The bullet tears a hole through a choir robe on one of the other racks.

"Keller, go take care of Rose," my partner orders. "I'll finish this."

Baker spews profanity-laced mockery, and he and Schmidt go at it again. I fly to the choir rack and make quick work of Rose's bonds. "Run," I whisper to her. "Now, while he's got his back turned." She obeys, and I shift gears. Baker's got his gun back, but if I can get to mine first...

Another gunshot shakes the room, and a bullet hole appears in the wall.

"Baker, so help me..." I make one more grab for his gun, but his grip is stronger, and he fires. Something thuds to the floor. Blood soaks the carpet. Baker just shot Schmidt in the chest.

"Noooo!"

"Bet you wish you'd listened, don't you?" Baker laughs. He turns the gun on me and fires, but the bullet bounces off my angel pin and hits the floor. Still, the impact is enough to send me crashing into the wall. I hear myself breathing hard and feel my hand going to my lapel. I expect to feel blood, and relief washes over me when I realize the bullet didn't penetrate. But my partner's not been so lucky. I seize my radio.

"Officer down! Officer down!" I scream before Sergeant Hirsch can finish telling me he reads me.

"Keller?" Sarge sounds like a bullet just came flying at him. "Why are you talking, woman? Just lie still...we'll get there..."

"It's not me! It's Schmidt! *Y'all get your butts to the college, NOW!*"

“The only butt you need to be worried about is yours,” Baker growls. He’s bearing down on me, the gun pointed at my face. Within the next second, he’s got said gun jammed up my nostril.

I make a noise that fits somewhere between a scream, a sneeze, and a grunt, throw myself forward, and manage to head-butt Baker. He drops the gun, but picks it right back up. By then, I’m on my feet again. I kick him with all I’ve got and grab the weapon.

“You fire that gun and I’ll—“

“Hopefully, you’ll go burn like you want everybody else to.”

My shot is perfect. The bullet rips into Baker’s neck, and he drops to the floor, unconscious.

The next few minutes don’t register for me. My fellow cops arrive, as do the paramedics. Someone offers to call Dorothea. Someone else grabs Rose for a statement. Sergeant Hirsch kneels next to me on the closet floor.

“You did great, Keller,” he tells me. “You saved your friend’s life, and Schmidt’s. As for Baker, if he makes it, he’ll have a long time to think about what he did.”

“I…” I gulp in air. “I may have killed a man. For real this time.”

“It’s okay,” Hirsch says. “You did what you had to do. And you did it right.”

“If I hadn’t tried to fight him…”

“No. You trusted yourself, and it paid off. Now, c’mon, let’s seal the scene and blow this pop stand.”

I stay at work longer than I need to so I won’t have to face reality. Finally, I grab a Snapple from the vending machine and give in to Sergeant Hirsch’s offer to drive me to the hospital. Schmidt’s been in surgery for three hours already, and I’ve prayed so long I’m out of words.

Silverton General’s waiting room is packed, but Dorothea finds me right away. Tears have left their marks, but she’s calm now. “Thank you, Maria, my dear,” she whispers. “Thank you for defending my husband. You saved his life.”

“Then he...he'll make it?”

“Of course he will,” a voice says. A doctor in head-to-toe scrubs smiles at me. “We’re not quite done in surgery yet, but he’s gonna make it. The gun was aimed at his heart, but...” The doctor pats my shoulder. “Thanks to you, Detective, the guy only got a small section of chest just below the collarbone. There won’t be permanent damage. He should be back to being one of our finest sooner rather than later.”

The roomful of cops, family members, and friends bursts into applause. Dorothea rushes off to call her kids and let them know their daddy will be all right. Most of the others move to leave. “You coming, Keller?” Rinaldi asks me.

“No,” I say. “I’m gonna hang out here awhile. Not to hover, just...I need time to process what just happened.”

“Gotcha. See you later.” She leaves.

The doctor touches my shoulder, but nods when I back off. “Um, if you’re still here, I’ll let you know when he’s in a room. No visitors today, but tomorrow...”

“Sure. Thanks. Thanks so much.”

“Just doing my job. Cafeteria’s on the fourth floor if you want something. The special’s chicken a la king today.”

I shake my head. “I need...I need...” What is it I need?

A memory comes to me. I was about six, and we’d gotten a rare snowfall in Texas, so the neighborhood kids all got together for sledding and a snowball fight. Snotty Laurie Mayhew from down the street hid a rock in a snowball and hit me in the forehead. The injury resulted in red snow, which the boys said was cool. I started laughing, then crying, and all the kids basically freaked out. They knew if Maria Keller cried, something really, really hurt. Mama rushed out into the commotion, took me home, and told me to lie down. Then she studied me and said,

“You need hot soup,” before bringing up a bowl of potato.

“I need soup.”

“You like potato? It’s loaded today—bacon and cheese.”

So I head down to the cafeteria and order up. The first spoonful soothes me. The second makes me think of Mama, and the soup ends up seasoned with salt that doesn't come from a shaker. By spoonful number three, my head is pillowed on my arms, and I'm crying my eyes out. Thank goodness I'm alone in here.

"My dear lady, why do you weep so?" says an English-accented voice. I jerk my head up, about to tell the creep to get lost, but then I recognize said creep.

"G-Gil?" I choke out.

"Yeah, honey. Come here, now." He pulls me into his arms, strokes my hair, and makes sounds meant to be comforting.

"S-sorry," I squeeze out.

"Shhh. You've spent too much time apologizing for tears. But everything's going to be fine. Brendan's gonna make it, and..."

I pull away from him. "Gil, how can you say anything's gonna be okay? Even though the murderer's out of the college, that choir feud—how long will it go on? It could ruin so many other kids' lives. I'm so overworked I'm practically...I love the Glass Slipper Theater, but I can't take that internship, I don't know what to do...and Gil, honestly, are you in La-La Land or what? How can you say I'm gonna be okay when...when..." It sounds so stupid and so female, but it's the only thing I can say. "How can I be okay when my heart is broken?"

"No." Gil shakes his head. "Your heart's not broken. It broke a long time ago, and you had to glue it back together. I just re-cracked it. And I am so sorry."

"That's what you said last time. That you were sorry, that you loved me, that that mattered more than anything else. But then you turned around and went right back to your parents, your rules, and your comfort zone. It kills me, but I can't be with someone like that."

"Then why did you try to win me back?"

I roll my eyes. "Because I love you, you stupidjerk moron!"

Gil laughs. "I deserved that. I am a moron, and I know it. But Maria...c'mon, sweetheart. I've missed you terribly. Can't you give me another chance?"

I want to say yes. I want to more than I've ever wanted anything, except maybe faith in Jesus. But something holds me back. I try to tell that something to shut up. I don't want to hurt Gil. We've both been hurt too much. But...

Trust yourself, Maria.

So I do. I hold Gil's hand, but shake my head. "I can't promise. I don't know yet. I need time to decide."

Gil nods. "I can give you time. And if you walk away, I won't blame you. But I need you to know something, Maria Keller. I adore you, and I always will."

He leaves. A few minutes later, so do I. When I get home and explain everything, Monique, Meg, and I cry together.

CHAPTER 19:

"I must have done something good"

-The Sound of Music

"So you're fine. Try to rest easy tonight."

"Thanks, Judge Lane," I say. "I mean, Sergeant Hirsch and everybody...they kept saying it was justifiable homicide, but I wanted to...I mean, I couldn't let this thing rest until I talked to you."

"Which is yet another piece of proof that this gal would rather die herself than hurt another human being, let alone kill 'em." Tunney grins at me. He's been doing that a lot since I came home to the Cherry Creek bureau yesterday. It's made me feel a little better to know the old crust missed me. A little.

"Indeed," Judge Lane says. He smiles too and looks me in the eye. "Detective, Adam Baker may have intended to kill your partner and certainly intended to kill you. He had a gun up your nose, for mercy's sake. Plus, Detective Schmidt repeatedly attempted to arrest the man, as did you, by trying to help him."

I shake my head and crack my knuckles. "That sounds logical, but I still can't...I...not that I actually want to sit in prison, but..." Yeah, I sound like a moron.

"I know," the judge says. "Your past has unfortunately made a bad situation twenty times worse. But you remember what I just told you, and remember this. You didn't have *mens rea*."

"I didn't have what?"

"It means 'guilty mind,'" Judge Lane says. "According to criminal law, crime does not exist without a viscous will. Nor did you have *actus rea*, or 'guilty act.' There. That's expert authority for you."

"So let the judge go eat his lunch already," Tunney says.

"Yeah," I agree. "Sorry, Judge. I didn't mean to..."

“No, no. I was happy to come down here for you. In fact...” He winks. “I’ve been meaning to share something else with you. I never believed you were guilty the first time. In fact, if I could’ve done it without City Hall yanking away my job, I’d have bailed you out all by myself. I contributed two hundred dollars under the table as it was.”

“Judge, I...I...I don’t know what to say.”

“That makes one time,” Walker guffaws under his breath.

Judge Lane laughs, too. “Well, I’m off. Welcome home, Detective.”

“So get back to work already.” Tunney’s voice tells me he’s only half-kidding, but Judge Lane gives him a Look. “Tunney, easy,” he says. But I can tell he’s saying much more than those two words.

He leaves, and I do go back to work, because I’m anxious to. But at the same time, I’m sad, confused, and worried. My mind knows I’ve done nothing wrong, and so does my soul. I’ve prayed about the Baker thing, and the irony is that God assured me that I was squeaky clean long before the judge did. But my heart... I sigh. Who knows when my heart will catch up?

“Hey, Keller.” Tunney enters my cubicle and makes himself at home in a chair. “I tell ya, woman,” he says after a minute. “You attract trouble the way buffalo wings attract hungry football players.”

I nod. “I know. And if you...I mean, I’ll go back to patrol if you want, or even leave. I...”

Tunney cusses. “Did I say anything about you leaving? I wouldn’t hear of it. That was a joke. I’m trying to make you feel better.”

“Oh. Well then, thanks.”

Tunney grunts. “I never did understand women. Just wanted to let you know, uh—you did good, and that’s what I’ll tell anybody who asks. After all, you did save two lives.”

“I had no choice,” I say. “Rose is my best friend, and Schmidt...I don’t know what I’d do if...” Too late, I realize how vulnerable I sound. But Tunney appears to get it.

“Yeah, I know,” he says. “Schmidt’s a heck of a cop—and I only say ‘heck’ because you don’t like the other word. He’s one of the best. Too bad I can’t promote him—oh, blast it. You weren’t supposed to know.”

"But I did," I say. "Schmidt told and swore me to secrecy. But—you're giving the promotion to Walker?"

"Already have. Schmidt knows. In fact, he asked me not to consider him. Something about treating the one person who's stood by him no matter what for two years like dirt." Tunney actually winks at me. "Which reminds me, have you been to see him yet?"

"No. I thought...I thought I'd wait until...after work," I finish. I know I sound lame, but the thought of my partner and friend in the hospital is a tough one to process.

"Go now," Tunney says. "Might take your mind off that little choir closet fiasco."

"A hospital? I don't think so." I think about what I want to say and decide to risk it.

"Sergeant Tunney? Did you...you've been a cop for a long time. Did you ever..."

"Yeah, Keller," he says. "I have had to kill a suspect I knew would've otherwise killed me."

I nod. "So...so how do you...what do you...when does it stop hurting?"

"What a question," Tunney says. "It doesn't stop hurting, Keller. We're cops, and we get hurt. That's the job. But...well, what I did was remind myself that in keeping my life, I had something much more valuable than my badge. You do, too. But you're luckier than me. You've also got a ton of people around who love you. So stop yakking at me and go see one of 'em."

"Which one of you is Maria Keller?" Schmidt's doctor asks.

I stand up. "That's me."

"He's asking for you. Go on in."

I start to cross the lobby, but hesitate. Dorothea gives me a supportive hug. "Go on, dear. It's all right."

Of course it's all right for her, I think. She's Schmidt's wife, and a nurse. But me? I'm not so sure. I've never been entirely comfortable in hospitals because of how my parents were killed. Daddy died instantly, but Mama lived a few more days, and I was brought to the hospital to say goodbye. She was so weak she could barely say she loved me.

I'm not sure I'm ready to handle this visit. I take the few feet to the door slowly, preparing myself for the sight of Schmidt looking much smaller and weaker than normal, in one of those awful gowns, and possibly ready to snap my head off due to drugs. Or worse, what if he's gotten

worse since the surgery? For a minute, I get a bizarre vision of Schmidt gesturing with one hand that I should lean down so he can whisper a last request in my ear. *Keller, take care of Dorothea for me...tell the kids I love them...always remember you were a wonderful partner...* Oh, shut up! I yell at myself. This isn't a Lifetime movie!

I squirt on some hand sanitizer and push the door open. "You rang?" I ask.

I hear my partner laugh. "C'mon in, Keller."

"Yeah. Um..." I take the chair closest to the bed. I want to ask how Schmidt's doing, but judging from the fact that his face is the color of glue and his eyes are partially glazed from drugs, that would be a stupid question. I go for the truth. "I...I'm beyond relieved that you're going to be fine."

"Thanks to you. I owe you, Keller."

"No, you don't. You were there for me when I was looking Death Row in the face. We're even."

"Okay. But seriously...you saved me. When you got in there and beat the snot out of that dude..."

"That's not exactly how I remember it. I've got a few bruises myself."

"Yeah, but you held him off. You faced your fear. That's huge."

"Well..." I take a breath. "Jesus and I have been talking about that. I'll always have the scar the rape left on me. I was reading in Corinthians the other night—that might be one of my, you know, thorns. Maybe God wants to keep it around so I won't get all arrogant and think I'm above tragedy. But He...He promised me, I'm going to be able to handle...more personal contact now."

Schmidt squeezes my hand. "That's good. That's great, actually. I'm proud of you."

"Well, don't be too proud. I don't know how that scar's gonna affect me in the future. I mean, if Gil and I make it to the altar..."

"Wait. You and Gil are back together?" Schmidt's beaming.

"Not exactly." I sum up what happened. "Did I do the wrong thing? Should I have taken him back?"

Schmidt groans. “Keller, number one, I am more doped up than your average crack fiend right now. I don’t have the brainpower to sort out your love life. But number two, and this is more important, wake up and smell the greasepaint, woman. That’s not my decision to make. The decisions you’re constantly seeking reassurance on are not anybody’s to make but yours. And that goes for every area of your life. As in, for heaven’s sake, stop giving me those am-I-doing-it-right-Teacher looks during interrogations. I can’t stand that.”

“Easy for you to say, pal. You didn’t spend twenty years of your life being told every decision you made was dead wrong.” And why, oh, why, did I say that? Could I be anymore selfish? Anymore of a human mistake? Schmidt’s recovering from a bullet wound, for crying in a bucket! I shove my hand in my purse and feel around for a lemon candy. I don’t cuss anymore, but I still keep them around for moments like this. Ah, a lemon Starburst. That works. I make myself chew.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” Schmidt says. “What’s with the lemon?”

“That’s what I get for being a self-absorbed pig,” I say.

My partner blinks, and I know morphine has nothing to do with it. “You know Keller, for such a cheery lady who gets a kick out of encouraging others, you are downright mean to yourself.”

“So?”

“So, it’s wrong. But I’ll let you and God hammer that one out. And as for the other thing—I know. I know it’s tough for you to believe you could ever do the right thing. But you’ve proven you can on more than one occasion. So stop locking yourself in a mental jail cell every morning just so you won’t sin that day.”

“Whatever that means.”

“You’ll figure it out. Now, get on out of here and let a wounded hero get some sleep.”

“Yeah, sure. See you in a couple days. Oh, and...” I fish in my purse and find the bag of jellybeans I brought—cinnamon, blueberry, and all Schmidt’s other top ten favorites. But for a minute there, I wish I had another lemon fix. Because even though I wouldn’t want him to have a bullet in his chest, I wish I’d been bringing a gift to Gil.

The next night, I do bring a gift to the Montgomery house, but it's for Clayton, not Gil. The family decided to move the birthday party back a few days because Clayton said it didn't feel right to celebrate when "Mr. Brendan" had just been shot. I smile. He's such a sweet kid. I'd give anything if...whoa, do not go there. I ring the doorbell. My worst fears are confirmed when Laurence Montgomery answers—a true lion if there ever was one. I can almost hear his brain—*detective with salsa! My favorite snack!*

"Come in, Maria."

Excuse me? Am I in a time warp?

"Maria, are you going to come in or stand there like a displaced lawn ornament?"

Okay, so maybe I'm not. "Oh, um, sure. Thanks. I'm just here to see Clayton. I'll be out of your way in a minute."

"Who said you were in my way? Honestly, woman, do you enjoy jumping to conclusions? Clayton is anxious to see you. I hope you can eat hot dogs. They're his favorite."

I don't want to jump to conclusions here, but those sounded like slams, even the hot dog remark. Why couldn't Montgomery Sr. have said, "I hope you like hot dogs" like a normal person? Of course, "normal" is a stretch for this dude...*come on, Keller, be nice!*

"I don't eat them often, but I do like them now and then."

"Oh, good. Gil mentioned you had a food allergy, but I can't remember what it is."

"Coffee." Or did he just not want to remember? I'm repeating "be nice" in my head over and over again when we reach the dining room. Clayton gasps as if Santa just made an entrance.

"I told you!" he crows. "I told you Miss Maria would come! I told you she wouldn't have to stay at school today, and that she wouldn't have more work tonight. I told you, didn't I, Dad? Grandma? Grandpa?"

Mrs. Montgomery laughs. "Yes, you certainly did. Calm down and let Miss Maria get settled. Maria, it's so good to see you again."

Whoa. Was that a smile? Genuine happiness to see me? Yes, I think it was. But what does that mean, exactly? I take the chair Clayton pats, figuring I'll answer that question later. Too

late, I realize Clayton has put me next to his dad. Does he realize we're broken up—well, not exactly, but still sort of on the outs—and so he's trying to play matchmaker? Or even worse, does he see me as some kind of mom figure and think that with me next to his dad, literally as well as figuratively, he has a real family again? The thought makes me want to cry.

Luckily—no, blessedly—blessedly, dang it! I don't have time to indulge that thought because Montgomery Sr. asks the blessing. Soon, my plate is filled with a hot dog (courtesy of his indoor grill, Gil says), some cheddar cheese, a helping of salad (who puts salad with hot dogs, except Gil?) and a concoction I don't recognize.

"What is this?" I ask after a bite or two. "It's delicious."

"Oh, that's tater tot casserole," Gil says. "Anne's recipe. Mine isn't as good as hers, though, so we haven't had it in awhile."

"Would you care to guess Anne's special ingredient?" Mrs. Montgomery asks with another smile.

I should be suspicious. I should wonder if she's laying it on too thick. I've seen that plenty of times, especially with foster moms. I had one who called up my social worker, asked about my favorite foods, and made a big meal out of them my first night. She also showered me with toys—I guess Ms. R forgot to tell her I was more of a music-and-books gal—and gushed herself to death over the wonderful things we'd do together, like get beauty makeovers and go shopping. Of course, two days later, she was fuming at me like I'd done something wrong when I asked to go to a bookstore instead of buying my "very first" bag of makeup. Yup, the nice ones always hurt the worst.

So I study Mrs. Montgomery's face without letting her know I'm doing it. I'm looking for the wide eyes, the sugary smile, and the over-crinkled "happy" nose. She has none of those things. She really is trying. I give myself a check mark, nod, and chew the next bite of casserole as fiercely as I want to scold myself. Something hits me in the back of the throat, and I cough, but then the taste becomes familiar.

"Is it jalapeno juice?"

“Yes,” Gil’s mom says. “You know, you and Anne had a lot more in common than you might think.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Now of course, in most ways, you two are vastly different, but Anne had the same optimism as you. She loved to make people smile. And she did have a bit of an adventurous streak. She just didn’t indulge it. She was timid. Too afraid that taking a risk would hurt her or someone she loved. You’re much braver.”

“Yes, you are a courageous woman,” Montgomery Sr. says. “And full of surprises.” He looks away. “If Anne were still with us...”

The subtext is clear. If Anne were still here, he wouldn’t have to deal with my “surprises.” Ooh, I wish that man would just...

Nothing. I don’t wish anything, because I know Montgomery Sr. is trying. He just complimented me, after all. And what did I do? As usual, I made a mistake. I reacted to it with my own stupid, angry attitude instead of acting like the Christian I tell everybody I am now. Why can’t I just forgive the guy? I don’t know how I make it through the cake, birthday song, and presents. It doesn’t even feel good to have Clayton call the knight and castle figures I gave him “really cool” and hug me. The cake tastes like the stuff they put on my teeth to get an impression the year I had braces. The room is getting hot, and I have a major headache. I need to get out of there, so as soon as I can, I say goodbye and head for the front door. But I make a wrong turn and end up in the living room. By then, my head and heart hurt so much I just flop down on the couch with my eyes closed.

A few minutes later, I hear Mrs. Montgomery enter. “Maria? You’re still here?” Her tone softens. “What’s wrong, sugar?”

I try to smile. “Nothing a hot bath and a sleeping pill won’t cure.”

I feel her sit down. “Now Maria, I’m no detective. But I know it’s more than that.”

I can tell from her voice she’s not going to leave me alone. I sigh. “I’m tired, Mrs. Montgomery. I’m tired. Tired of all this. I try so hard, but everything I do is wrong. I’m a mistake.”

“Who told you that?” Mrs. Montgomery’s voice is sharp.

"If you're asking who came right out and gave me the nickname, nobody. But it was implied. I heard one of my meaner foster moms say it was a mistake to take me. My adoptive father used to say everybody made mistakes, but there were only so many he could deal with. Tunney used to say it was a mistake to let a woman in homicide. But," I say so she won't go into pity mode, "it's okay. Not everyone treated me like that. Even in foster care. I made friends easily, and in most towns, some of the other kids would help me out. The older ones used to say, 'don't sweat it, Maria. You're gonna be one of the ones to get adopted. Grownups like leftovers better 'cause they figure you're just sad about your real folks, not messed up and acting dumb.'"

"Leftovers?"

"That's foster kid lingo, at least where I was from. If your parents walked out or beat you up or something like that, you were a throwaway. But if you had good parents like me, and they just died on you, then you were a leftover. Not good enough to have your real parents stick around, but most folks could still stand you. The system hadn't rotted you yet."

"Sugar," Mrs. Montgomery says, "now you listen. Nobody had the right to call you a mistake or a leftover, and those who did ought to go jump in a lake. And if Satan is using that to convince you you're a bad Christian, it has to stop."

"But it's not Satan," I say. "It's...the system, still, I guess. It's the rules. It's..."

"It's me."

I look at Mrs. Montgomery for the first time. She's fiddling with the earrings she's wearing, and her face is stamped with guilt. "It's me, I know. My husband and I have treated you abominably and there's no excuse for it."

Now, if I were a different kind of person, I'd say it was all right, hug her, and start calling her Mom. But I'm not, and for the first time, I'm glad of it. Still, thanks to God, I know better than to act like a kid in a snit, so I just nod. "Yeah, you're right. But there's something bothering me. If you knew...if you knew it was wrong, then...why'd you do it?"

"Oh, Maria, it's a long story. Did you know that I was a lawyer before I retired?"

"No. Criminal?"

“No. Oh, no. I’m not as brave as you are. I couldn’t handle that. Family law was my specialty. Adoptions, foster care cases. And when I found out...Gil recently told Laurence and I that you were an orphan, and hearing it made me feel like the worst of hypocrites—rightly so. You see, before then I conveniently forgot you were a person like me. You were just this—this bold, funny, popular woman who—who marched into my church and my family wearing red and smiling and looking people straight in the face, expecting to be liked. And I...I knew I could never be that. I was too shy. You—you intimidated me. Especially when I saw how much Gil cared for you—you frightened me.”

I can’t help it. I have to laugh. In fact, I laugh so hard I almost fall off the couch. “I scared you? Mrs. Montgomery...”

“Paige, please.”

“Okay, Paige—the only reason to be scared of me is if you’re a perp!”

“I know!” She’s laughing, too. “And it seems so silly now, but there it sits. But...I’ve done some serious praying about my life and how I’ve lived my Christianity, especially in front of you. And even though Laurence might not be ready, I for one am fully prepared to accept you, even as a future daughter-in-law. So...will you forgive me? Will you allow me to show you that I care for you?”

“That’s all I wanted in the first place. Yes. Although...I don’t think I’m gonna be your daughter-in-law. Gil and I...I can’t fit into his mold. Never will. And even though he told me that didn’t matter, his actions don’t back it up.”

Paige sighs. “I’m afraid the blame for that one can be put at Laurence’s and my doorstep, too. We always wanted Gil to excel because—well, because we had. We wanted him to have the same opportunities. And we also wanted him to grow up with an even stronger faith than we had, because by the time Gil was born, Laurence and I had seen plenty of the relativity common to the ‘50s and ‘60s as far as religion and values were concerned. But I’m afraid we may have pushed it all too far. Gil and I are going to need to discuss that. But Maria, if I have anything to do with it, you are going to get a second chance with my son.”

“You bet she will,” a familiar voice says. “Mom...”

"I think I'll go check on the kids." Paige winks and is outta there.

"You heard all that?" I ask when Gil sits down.

He clears his throat. "Yeah. And you know, the crazy thing is, she's right. Mom just put a lot of feelings I've never known what to do with into words, and..." He trails off. "Maria, honey, please believe me. I don't want to be such a— a jerk. A hypocrite whose faith is based on manmade rules rather than what the Bible says."

I nod. "I hear you. Because I don't want to be a shallow Christian. I'm killing myself trying not to be. I want God to be pleased with me."

"But He is already. You take your faith seriously, but you also demonstrate it in ways I never learned how to. I could learn a lot from you."

"I think we could learn a lot from each other."

"Me, too. So...so does this mean we're...together again? For good this time, no matter what happens?"

My head tells me to think about it. To walk away and say I'll call Gil in the morning. To remember that I am a practical, levelheaded detective who doesn't believe in fairytales anymore. I should leave and say I want time to pray about it. Isn't that what Christians are supposed to say? "I'll pray about it"? But on the other hand, I've had plenty of experience with that phrase, and in most cases it's a glorified "no". But then...

I tell my head to shut up.

"Yes. Yes, we are." I settle into his arms. We hold each other tight, and he kisses me. The contact is gentle, but about as serious as ten years of hard time. Forget not believing in fairytales. My vision is covered in green, my nose smells nothing but Gil's cologne, and the room is vibrating with a pure passion I never knew I could have.

"I missed you," I tell Gil when I come up for air.

"I really missed you. Did you know I broke my pen one day this week and caught myself saying 'holy crumb?'"

I laugh and tell him about the night at the library when I almost bought that caramel cookie. "And you know what else? I listened to Elvis all the way over here."

Gil kisses me again, quicker this time. "Sorry for sending you to Heartbreak Hotel, baby."

I kiss him back. "Just listen to the King next time. Never let me go."

"I will listen—to both Kings." Gil points upward.

"Ooh...well, in that case," I tell him, "we better listen to the Big King and cut this stuff out before it gets really warm in here."

"Yeah. Did—did I push you too far?"

I sit back, close my eyes, and think that question through. "No. No, I'm okay." I laugh. "I'm really okay."

"Maria, that's wonderful. But remember, I'll always be as tender as possible with you."

"Honestly, Gil," I laugh. "I have got to nip your Elvis thing in the bud before you invest in a sequined jumpsuit."

CHAPTER 20:

“Love me...that’s all I ask of you”

-The Phantom of the Opera

Several weeks later, it’s the morning of December eighteenth. To be exact, it’s 5:00 AM, but I can’t sleep. In fact, I haven’t been able to sleep since 2:30.

I’m graduating from college today. The president of the college found out about my “flunking” VMS and told the dean that he would either fix it or “never work in this town again”. So last week, I was called into a reluctant Dr. Showalter’s office to give him a prepared monologue as a final exam, for which he gave me a B+. I guess the man’s just never gonna get over his anti-soprano attitude. Well, at least he’s not a murderer.

The thought of Adam Baker makes me shudder. Everyone who matters, including Pastor Ken, agrees I had no choice and did the right thing. But a handful of Cherry Creek citizens are convinced I’m a murderer, and may have even knocked off the Stage Door people. They’ve been sending Tunney, Captain Eatonton, Judge Lane, and Internal Affairs emails to that effect, and although no one’s paying any attention, the whole thing still gets to me. The other guys don’t know, but it does. Lately, I’ve been slipping into the ladies’ room right in the middle of case reports to stick my hands under freezing water. That’s the only way I can stop them from shaking. But, I think with my jaw set, that lousy perp is not gonna ruin my big day. Especially since I’m the...

“Good morning, Keynote Speaker,” Monique whispers, sliding into my room. “Too excited to sleep?”

“Yeah. And...well, thinking.”

Monique frowns. “Not about the case, I hope.”

“Not really, just...just mixed-up emotions, is all. Stuff I need time to think through, including...” I sigh. “Including whether I belong on the force or not.”

“Maria, if this is about Baker...”

“No, no, I mean whether I should go back to theater now that I’ve got my degree.”

At that, Monique sits down. “Are you seriously thinking about it?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I’m not gonna take that internship in Silverton. I needed to come home and figure some things out. My life’s just...mixed up right now.”

“You prayed about it?”

“Yeah, a lot. In fact, I’ve been praying about being a Christian in general. God’s really gotten onto me lately, telling me to relax before I turn into a Laurence Montgomery. I ripped up my prayer list of all those sick people I barely even know, did you know that?”

“No, but if God told you to...”

“Which He did.”

“Then I’m glad. Meg and I could tell you were only praying every night so you could put a check in a box.”

“That’s what Pastor Ken said. I’ve been talking to him. He wants us to meet weekly for awhile, until he can tell I’ve got the legalism out of my system. He wants Dorothea to keep mentoring me—get me ready to participate in a group study with other ladies. And I’m gonna start looking at the ministries and activities at church to figure out what’s right for me.”

Monique smiles and smooths my hair back. “Well, I hope today is the day you start finding that out.”

My speech was the longest five minutes of my life, but judging from the applause and cheering, it went over well, even if I did make a very pointed remark about how feuds don’t do Christians any good. But that applause and cheering was nothing to what happens when the dean calls my name and announces me as a summa cum laude student with a B.A. in theater studies.

There’s no applause at first, but then I see the whole crowd stand up. Meg and Monique lead them—Meg’s cheeks black from where she cried mascara down them, Monique’s grin about to tear her face in half. Dorothea and the Schmidt kids, all smiling and waving, and Schmidt leaning on Dorothea, sending me a victory sign. Tunney, Greenwood, Adams, my old supervisor

Sergeant Davenport, and every other cop I know, all in dress uniforms, including white gloves. Gil's kids and his parents. Paige is beaming, and even Gil's dad squeezes out a smile. And Gil himself...

He's the one who starts clapping. It doesn't take two seconds for the rest of the crowd to catch the spark, and soon, they're clapping their hands off, yelling so much I know they're all gonna have sore throats later. When I finally get off the stage, I'm mobbed. Gil whispers in my ear over the noise,

"Congratulations, Gumshoe. The adventure just begun."

On December twenty-first, I invite Gil to be my date for the Cherry Creek Police Department Christmas party. I even bring along a decent batch of peanut butter blossoms—only burned around the edges. Of course, in case my colleagues aren't man enough to eat those, I also cheated and picked up some red and green M&Ms.

While we're all eating, Commissioner Ted McGuirk, known to those in his inner circle as Commissioner McG, walks around offering everyone a Santa hat for our upcoming round of "dirty Christmas." I draw number forty, the last possible one. Oh, well. This just means I'll have plenty of gifts to choose from.

"Okay, guys and gals," Commissioner McGuirk announces. "You all know how this works. "Cops only—sorry, dates. When your number is called, you have the option of either picking a gift from our tree there or stealing someone else's gift. If your gift is stolen, you get another turn, and once a gift is stolen three times, it's frozen—the last cop holding it keeps it. So, let's get the fun started—who's number one?"

Number one turns out to be Tunney, and we all get a great laugh when he opens a copy of the chick flick *27 Dresses*. In fact, we all laugh so hard one cop falls off his chair as people open stuff like toys, fondue sets, more DVDs, mixed nuts, socks, and who knows what else. Schmidt even gets stuck with the gift I brought—the soundtrack for *Wicked*. "Well, us being cops, it was either that or *The Evil Dead*," I say when he pegs me as the giver.

Schmidt laughs and steals a narcotics guy's Black & Decker flashlight. Meanwhile, the party goes on until the commissioner—who got stuck with a mirror that laughs at you—says,

“Okay, our last contestant, Detective Maria Keller from homicide, come on up! Are you going to rob a fellow cop blind, or would you like to go shopping?”

I glance at the one gift left under the tree. “Well, my partner says I'm a softy for the little guy, so...” I take the little box and open it to reveal a ring with a huge plastic red stone in the middle. “Ah...” I put it on and flutter my hand in front of my chest. “You shouldn't have!”

“I think I'll steal that,” Carmen DeLuca from patrol says.

“Okay...” I put poor Sergeant Davenport out of his misery and take his copy of *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. Debra Fortney steals it, and I announce,

“Okay, this is revenge for his drinking my tea when I was in Silverton,” and steal the game of Clue Tunney ended up with. At that point, Gil stands up. “I'll take that, ma'am.”

“Hey Theater Boy, weren't you paying attention? Dates just watch,” Tunney says.

“Well, Sergeant, sit back and let me teach you how a civilian shops,” Gil says. He takes my arm and leads me back to my chair. “Maria...” He clears his throat. “Commissioner, may I have your microphone?”

Commissioner McG gives it to him, and Gil faces the crowd. “As some of you might know, I lost my first wife to leukemia about three years ago now. From that point, my children and I were very much alone. I didn't know quite how to handle that, so I threw myself into work and worry and rules, even when it came to my faith in Christ. But then,” he clears his throat again, “something happened. This fiery, outspoken woman in bright red high heels came into my theater, stomped on my foot, and turned my whole life into a mess. I wanted nothing more than for her to catch the murderer terrorizing my business and leave, but the longer she was around, the more she grew on me. She was compassionate and courageous, she had a voice that would knock Simon Cowell's knickers off, and she made me laugh again. Unfortunately, it took me almost losing her—multiple times—to understand what life would be like without her.”

I know what he's gonna do, but I still hear myself gasp when Gil hits one knee. “Maria Magdalena Keller,” he says, “I love you. I've loved you every second of every minute of every day

for the past year and some-odd months. I love everything about you and don't want you to change, ever. So..." He reaches into his pocket and offers me a ring—a ruby set in the center of tiny diamonds winking in the fluorescent lights. "Will you marry me?"

"I...I..." I'm cracking my knuckles like crazy. "Gil, I..."

"Maybe this'll help." Gil grabs me, twirls me around, kisses me, and sets me back down. "You always seemed like the type to need a guy to sweep you off your feet to prove he was crazy about you."

"And you did." I can barely talk. "Yes." Then, through the microphone since Gil was the only one who heard, I repeat it. "Yes!"

Of course, after that, everybody insists we dance, so Tunney makes the other cops clear the floor and somebody pops a CD in the nearby player. I recognize it as one of Schmidt's Irish instrumental CDs—he proudly claims his Irish mom's blood as much as his German—and the number as the one Jack and Rose danced to in *Titanic*. Clearly, everyone wants to see Gil take me for another spin, so I let him. We really kick it up for awhile, until Gil leaves me to put in another CD. "All I Ask of You" from *Phantom of the Opera* fills the room, and Gil and I begin a waltz.

Yeah, that thing I said about not buying the fairytale stuff? Forget about it. I've just found my prince.

STANDING OVATION

CHAPTER 1:

“Alas! Alack! My poor aching back! I spend half my life on my knees!”

-Alas, Alack! Zorro’s Back!

Oh, no. It’s happening.

I’ve been having all kinds of nightmares for weeks, but this one’s different. In it, I’m smaller than my normal size, and it doesn’t take long to figure out that that’s because I’m not a grown-up in this one. Instead, I’m a little girl. A little girl staring up—way up—at...who is that? I can’t see his face, but I can hear his voice.

“You’ll keep quiet, is exactly what you’ll do,” it snarls. “I think you need a little nap.”

The man looms closer, and his hands come down. I get a brief glimpse of them before they lock around my throat and squeeze. There’s a sound like coughing and gurgling, then a thud, and then a scream.

“Ahhhhhh....”

My body jolts awake. It feels like my brain has slammed against my skull. I throw a hand against my mouth and wait. Did I wake up Monique or Meg? No...Meg is snoring, and I can hear Monique punching her pillow. She sleeps like a tornado. I turn my lamp on low and hit the floor in front of the bed. This is way too serious to stay on my knees, so I go facedown, my nose kissing the carpet. I stare at the sleeves of my musical note pajamas for a minute and then hear myself groan.

“C’mon, Jesus. Can’t you give me a little break? I’ve done everything I can. I read the Bible for an hour before bed. I pray. I don’t watch TV. I gave up my after-dinner tea, and you know what a pain in the neck that was. So, you wanna tell me why I’m spending four nights out of seven fighting off my personal demons?”

Of course, I’m being unfair. This isn’t Jesus’ fault. My nightmares have Satan written all over them, but that still doesn’t explain why God is allowing the devil to mess around with me. For a second, I wonder if it’s something I did, but slam the door on that thought. I’m finished with

legalism, worrying, and constantly fearing God's wrath. Romans says I'm safe from it, right? Right, so I've gotta remember that and act like it. But then what...

I shake my head and get up. No use turning my brain into spaghetti over a question I can't answer. I head downstairs, boot up my laptop, and start a round of pyramid solitaire. When the cards start to blur, I go to the kitchen and find the one weapon nightmares don't stand a chance against. The bottle sits in the back of the medicine cabinet, and the label mocks me.

KELLER, MARIA M. TAKE ONE BY MOUTH AS NEEDED. I haven't resorted to these since I finished college, and I hate myself for it now. But...

I unscrew the lid. Just this once.

As usual, the next morning, I'm feeling much better. The pills might have something to do with that, but I'm banking on my morning devotional, cup of tea—and of course, my engagement ring. Gil sent me an email this morning. He signed it "yours always, Gil" and added a P.S.—Wedding countdown: Three months and two weeks!

"Keller? Hey, Keller, have you seen the..."

I sign my latest case report with a flourish and put it in its file. "Just a second, Doyle..." I have to find that next file, the one on the attempted suicide in the middle school basement...poor kid... I sigh and thumb through another stack. "Where is it? Where is it? I wish I could remember..."

"Keller!" Doyle claps his hands in front of my face.

"What, Doyle? I'm trying to find a suicide file here."

"Yeah, and you're also singing again. It's only Tuesday and this is the sixth time you've gone from detective to Broadway diva in two seconds."

"For your information, that's not Broadway, it's Disney. And it's the fairy godmother's song from *Cinderella*, which ended up being cut from the film."

"Whatever. You've been spending too much time with Gil's little girls. Anyway, have you seen my gift certificate to Chang's Café? I'm in the mood for some sweet and sour pork, but I've lost the blasted thing."

I sigh and smile. "You didn't lose it, Doyle. I saw it fall off your bulletin board this morning. It's under your desk next to the computer console."

Doyle gives me a thumbs-up. "Thanks, Keller. You're a honey."

"I have only one 'honey,' and that's Gil, wise guy."

"Okay, okay. You're an angel. Better?"

"Much."

Doyle rushes off to get his Chinese fix, and I finally track down the file on thirteen-year-old Colin Abernathy's attempted suicide. The sight of his age on the report makes my chest ache. What could have happened to this poor little boy to drive him...

"Hey, Keller. Almost ready to hit the street?"

"Depends. Are you?" My partner, Brendan Schmidt, just reentered the force two weeks ago, at the end of May. The bullet he took in the chest didn't do near the damage it could've, but he decided to take a few extra months to de-stress and spend time with his wife and kids. He seems fine, but you can't be too careful. In fact, now he jokes that instead of him hovering over me, I'm mother-henning him.

"Keller." Schmidt laughs and leans against my cubicle wall. "I'm fine, okay? Yes, what happened to me was bad, but police work is what God wants me to do and I love it. I want to get back out there and make a difference again. You with me?"

I stick the file in my bag, smile at my engagement ring, and nod. "Let's do this."

When we reach Cherry Creek Middle School, though, I'm not sure how ready to "do this" I am. Colin's in the hospital for physical and psychiatric care, and his parents have agreed to meet with Schmidt and me because Colin refuses to tell them why he tried to kill himself. They have no idea how to start searching for clues and figure we can help. They especially asked for us because they know I love kids, but more importantly because Schmidt's got kids, three of whom are boys. I look up at the car ceiling and pray. I know my partner's daddy heart has to be breaking even if he has to keep his cop composure strong.

Colin's parents and a couple of his teachers are waiting for us in a conference room. Schmidt sits down with the parents to prepare them for questioning while I focus on the teachers.

“Was Colin having trouble in any of your classes?” I ask. “Grades dropping? Disciplinary problems?”

“No,” the math teacher says. “Colin’s a good student. Mostly A’s. Just a couple B’s, and it was only because pre-algebra was harder than he bargained for.”

“That’s right,” adds the English teacher. “Colin Abernathy has a gift with words. In fact, we just had a poetry unit, and his work was the best I saw.” She rubs her forehead. “I just can’t understand why he’d do this now with barely a week of school to go.”

“Do either of you have a transcript—uh, recent report card? Sorry...I finished a college degree recently and am still pretty used to that lingo.”

“Right here, Detective.” The math teacher hands it to me, and I feel my frown get bigger the more I read. Straight A’s, citizenship awards, glowing praise from all the teachers. This might be a classic case of perfectionist tendencies run amok.

My face must’ve given something away, because the mom glares at me. “We have never, ever pressured Colin,” she says. “The only thing we’ve ever said is that school comes first. If he misinterpreted that as ‘you must be perfect,’ that’s his own fault.”

Schmidt glares right back. “Excuse me, but that’s a pretty snippy attitude for a parent whose child is in a psych ward, Mrs. Abernathy. Your attitude also indicates there’s something you’re not telling us.”

“Did Colin have a lot of friends?” I ask. “Sometimes great students get picked on, and that triggers something like a suicide attempt.”

The parents exchange looks. “We really wouldn’t know,” the dad says. “Colin didn’t mention any of the kids at school, except...” He blinks and nods. “Detective Schmidt, your oldest boy’s in Colin’s science and English classes. Kurt, right? Maybe he’ll know something.”

Schmidt nods, albeit reluctantly. “I’ll get him called in here.”

Kurt, a tall thirteen-year-old who looks exactly like my partner, enters the conference room what seems seconds later. “Hey, Dad.” He gives Schmidt an arm-across-the-shoulder hug and smiles at me. “Hey, Miss Maria. You guys here about Colin?”

“Yes,” Schmidt says. “We need to know everything you know about him. If he was picked on, if he ever seemed sad, that kind of thing. Take your time.”

“Nobody picked on him,” Kurt says, “but he was real quiet. He didn’t even talk to me much. I used to try to get him to hang out with me—come to FCA before school and stuff—but he said no. Said he had to study. Or else he was running around the school track.”

“Colin was in track?” Schmidt asks.

“Nah, but he wanted to be. Said his dad wouldn’t let him.”

“No son of mine is going to throw his education away to chase some dream about being a professional athlete,” Mr. Abernathy says.

“John,” his wife warns. “Forgive him, Detectives. We truly just want the best for our boy.”

Oh, yeah, that sounds familiar. Luke and Jasmine never pushed me that hard, but when it came time for college—wow. And then, thanks to Chandler Halliday, my scum-of-a-rapist-boyfriend, I ended up where Colin is now. The memories make me bite my lip. I push back a sudden urge to run and focus on Kurt. “Kurt, what’s FCA?”

“Fellowship of Christian Athletes, but we’re not all athletes.” He grins. “Rookies.”

“Hey watch it, buddy. I’m coming up on my second year as a Jesus freak and could probably whip your butt in Bible trivia already.”

“And that’s Colin’s other problem,” Mrs. A says. “He’s started in with this Jesus nonsense. Can’t think for himself anymore. We’re worried about him. And before you two ask, no, we did not confiscate his Bible or keep him from church. We just—discourage it as best we can without being abusive.”

I ignore that comment. “Kurt, did Colin...did you tell him about Jesus?” I ask. For a teenager, the kid’s dead serious about Christ.

“Nah, Miss Maria. I wish I had, but that was Colin’s grandma. She was the one taking him to church and all. But...”

“My mother’s heart was bad,” Mrs. A says. “She died two months ago—“ She trails off and stares at Schmidt and me. “Oh, dear God. Do you think...Colin was always very close to his Mimi—that’s what he called her. Do you think...”

"I do," I say, even though what I want to say is, 'duh! And another thing—if you needed me to tell you that, it proves what a lousy couple of parents you and your husband are!' But then God gets to me, and I remember that for all their faults, the Abernathys are sad, confused, and scared. Schmidt looks like he knows it too, because he takes over and says,

"Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Abernathy. It looks as though we have our answer now, and hopefully you guys can start on the road to healing. My partner and I wish you the best. Kurt?"

"Yeah, Dad?"

Schmidt hugs him. "Great job, son. See you at home, okay? Tell Mom I should be early."

"Okay. Is Miss Maria coming?"

Schmidt has his mouth open to invite me, but the connection between Colin Abernathy's suicide attempt and my almost-attempt is still doing a number on my heart. I don't want the Schmidts to notice, so I shake my head. "Not tonight, bud. But definitely Thursday or Friday."

"Cool. We'll play Bible trivia."

"You okay, partner?" Schmidt asks when we're back on the road.

Crumb. I've gotten cocky in the last six months and forgotten that "partner" equals "person who knows everything, even things that are none of his business". I crack my knuckles. "I'm fine. Just a little rattled, I guess. What happened to Colin is way too much like what happened to me."

"No, it's not. You didn't do the deed."

I roll my eyes. Are men always this dense? I smile, remembering Dorothea Schmidt's recent answer: "If it doesn't involve food or sports, then yes, absolutely". I turn toward Schmidt. "I know I didn't, but that's not the point. The point is that, even though they didn't act like Colin's parents, Luke and Jasmine had the same attitude about theater where I was concerned. Or rather, Luke did and Jasmine didn't do much to shut him up unless he really threatened to take it from me. But when I was in college, the basic message I got from Luke was 'I'm disappointed in you.' And then, when Chandler did what he did, and I started failing because I couldn't focus in class, it..."

“Ah.” Schmidt nods. “Keller—Maria—I’m gonna ask you a personal question. Have you tried contacting Luke and Jasmine again? I know last time was a disaster, but...”

“But nothing, Schmidt. Yeah, I call. I’ve called a few times over the past year. I called to try to tell them I met Jesus, that I’d saved your life, that I was engaged. No one answers. I think Luke is doing it on purpose. They didn’t call or send anything for my birthday. They didn’t even send me a lousy Christmas card. Once again, Luke’s message is clear. I’m the one who messed up, and now I have to spend the rest of my life suffering for it.”

Schmidt’s eyes are the definition of sympathetic. “Man, Keller, that’s rough. I am so sorry. But...”

“But?”

“Look, I know the past couple years have been anything but easy for you, and I’m worried. It seems like you’re not giving yourself permission to deal with this stuff. And Keller, it’s like I told you last year. The whole ‘cops don’t cry’ thing? It’s a lie.”

“I know.” He doesn’t know how well I know, especially these days. “And you are right, but I am okay. Despite how tough it’s been, I wouldn’t trade my time in homicide for anything. If Sergeant Davenport hadn’t promoted me, I’d still be the same closed-off, anti-man, so-cheery-it’s fake borderline agnostic who first showed up at your cubicle and said, ‘okay, pal, what do you know about murders that I don’t?’”

“Not much anymore,” my partner says. He consults his BlackBerry. “Okay, next case on the docket—armed robbery, Precious Stone Jewelers. This is us.”

“I’m there.”

I pretend I don’t notice Schmidt’s eyes following me into the store.

“Hey, Maria,” Caleb, the assistant director of the Stage Door, tells me that afternoon. He tips his head to the side. “He’s in the music room waiting for you.”

I head for the music room where I first met Gil—and nearly broke his foot. Since our engagement, we’ve made a habit of not only dating on the weekends, but taking time to help each other with personal hobbies. For example, as much as I hate clocks, I’ve learned my

fiancé—I'll never get over calling him that—loves them. He has at least two dozen in his house and is always collecting more. Right now, I'm helping him restore an old one he won in an Ebay auction. In return, Gil is giving me free voice lessons and songwriting tips because as he says, he knows I'm gonna make it big someday. We'll see.

"Hello, Captain," I say a la Julie Andrews.

"Maria." He gets up, covers the small amount of space between us, and kisses me.

"You're early."

"Yeah, well, the station's dead, so Tunney let me go."

Gil frowns. "Didn't you come home early last week, too?"

"I had a migraine." True, and not true. I'm not trying to hide anything from Gil, but he doesn't need to know that I was also using tea to keep me awake. I'd had another night riddled with awful dreams and hadn't slept more than three hours. Come to think of it, he doesn't know how much the nightmares are getting to me lately, either. Maybe I should—no...

"Poor girl," Gil says. "You up for a voice lesson?"

"Always."

"Okay..." Gil hits a C chord. "Give me an 'oo'. Pianissimo, and crescendo as my hands tell you to."

"Oooooo..." Once again, the music acts like my mama's hand on my forehead—a strong, comforting presence that lets me believe the world is really good, and things really will be okay. It seems like every time I sing, I remember forgetting how much I love it.

Then why do you keep leaving? asks a voice. It's not God. I know that voice, and this one isn't that deep or insistent. This is just me—my inner Maria.

Because I don't have a choice. Practicality comes first, I tell her, and she retreats.

"Steady," coaches Gil. "Don't drop your pitch. Get back on it...good. Okay, release. We'll work your lower register first. I'll go progressively lower, and you hit each note on an "ah". When you start sounding like a blender, I'll stop you."

I make it through the exercise and beam at Gil. "Hey, a half-step lower than last time."

"Good. Ready to flex the higher register?"

“You bet,” I say, and smile when Gil does. It wasn’t too long ago that he would’ve jumped on me for saying something like “I bet” or “good luck.” I’m so glad Jesus got him to loosen up. I’m not sure what I’d do now if I didn’t have Gil to help brighten things up.

“Maria?” Gil stops in the middle of a song. “What’s wrong? You’re pushing out those high notes.”

He’s right. I can hear myself straining, and I know if I don’t back off soon, I’ll start to feel it. The last thing I want right now is a sore throat. “Sorry. I just got...distracted.”

Gil comes out from behind the piano. “Maria, are you still having nightmares?” he asks. I told him a few weeks ago, but only under duress, and I hate the probing look he’s giving me now. It means I can’t lie. I’ve been trying to quit lying about how I feel, but I’d give anything to be able to do it now.

I nod. “But I’ll be fine,” I rush to say.

Gil’s eyes search mine. “I think you should go home and get some sleep.”

“No, really,” I insist. “I’d rather stay here and sing.”

“Well...” Gil thinks about it. “Okay, but we’re gonna switch songs.” He takes the score for the worship song off the piano and puts a new one on. “We’re going to do something light. And after this one we close up shop. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Okay.” Gil plays the introduction for “Anything You Can Do,” and we lose ourselves in a loud, fun duet. At the end, Gil gives me a smacking smooch. “Yes, you can,” he whispers in my ear, his voice full of meaning. “I love you.”

I know. I know you do, Gil. Please God, let that love—his love, your love—be enough. Gil doesn't need another sick wife.

CHAPTER 2:

“Sweeney was smooth, Sweeney was subtle, Sweeney would blink and rats would scuttle...”

-Sweeney Todd

A few days later, the homicide business is still dead—pun intended—so I’m at my desk scribbling score notations and lyric ideas for a new song. It’s a catchy number like the ingénue in a musical would sing during a high moment, in which the speaker tells the audience that she may be small, but nothing can stop her because they don’t know her God. I glare at the floor.

“Nothing, and that means you,” I shoot at the devil. “So you go pick on somebody else.” I throw in a good stomp with my left heel.

“Whoa, Keller, why are you trash-talking a poor little bug?” Greenwood jokes.

I sigh and blow out a breath. “It’s not a bug, Greenwood.”

“Then what—“ He trails off. “Ah. Throwing Satan a little sass?” Greenwood’s not a God guy, but he often acts interested in faith issues. So far I haven’t managed to convince him to take said interest to the next level, but I’m working with what I can get. I give him a sheepish smile. “Yeah. He’s kinda been on my case lately. Besides...” I laugh and change the subject. “If there were a bug in here, you’d be the first to know, and you’d be meaner to it than me. You’d Lysol it to death.”

Greenwood doesn’t respond to that, and I bite my lip. “Oh, crumb. Greenwood, I’m sorry.” My fellow detective has mild OCD, and although it doesn’t happen much, the condition gets to him sometimes. It used to happen a lot back when Rawlings was here, because that jerk would always make Adrian Monk jokes and talk to Greenwood in this childish voice (‘whatsa matter, you got a little mud on your big-boy pants?’) I hated it when Rawlings did that, and I’ve made it my personal mission to be the one person who never razzes Greenwood, even in fun. Well, looks like I just blew that.

Greenwood chuckles. “Ah, it’s okay, Keller. I know what you meant.”

"No. No, it's not...I am so sorry, I..."

"Really, it's okay," Greenwood says. He's almost stern this time. "I know you'd never make fun of me. I'm just having a rough day, that's all."

"Yeah? What's up?" I'd rather hear anything but my own thoughts going over my problems again and again.

Greenwood picks at invisible lint on his blazer. "A number of things. My meds aren't working so good these days. Doc says I oughta go on the stronger stuff, but I don't want to. It just makes me feel like I'm getting worse. Nobody wants to be around a crazy guy."

"Greenwood, you're not crazy."

"You think?" Greenwood shows me his hands, and I notice they're getting cracked and chapped. "Hand-washing scars."

"Ouch. That's awful. But you still aren't crazy."

Greenwood turns wary blue eyes on me. "Even if I'm not, I've still got problems. And what chick wants a guy carrying extra letters around, if you know what I mean?"

"Chick?" I feel myself smile. "Sam Greenwood, you sneaky..."

"Shhh. Not even Adams knows."

"Okay." I lower my voice. "So what's her name?"

Greenwood blushes, picks at more lint, shrugs, and looks up at me. "Diane Rubin."

"From the antique store? The really quiet lady with the long black hair and tortoise-shell glasses?"

"That's her. Keller, she...she's amazing. She's sweet and smart and—did you know we're both crazy about photography? And did you know she loves everything to do with the Civil War, her favorite pizza is extra cheese, and she's a Travel Channel junkie?"

"Sounds like Diane's your perfect match," I say with a wink. But Greenwood just sighs.

"She is," he says, "and that's the problem. We've seen each other a few times already, but she doesn't know I have OCD. She thinks I'm just a neat freak. So I really want a woman's opinion. How do I tell her so she won't scream and run the other way? Should I buy her a gift first? Make jokes about it? Just come out and say it? What?"

“Hmmm.” I think back to when I had to tell Gil about my own dirty little secrets, shoot up a quick wisdom prayer, and then smile. “You should tell Diane the truth,” I say, “but not right away. Don’t spring it on her. Wait for a natural place in a conversation to bring it up, and keep it light. Like if she teases you about the perfect balance of mustard and ketchup on your hot dog, then you do it. And don’t come out and ask if she wants to run screaming once you tell her. If a guy did that to me, I’d think he thought I was pretty heartless. And I don’t think Diane’s like that.”

Greenwood thinks about this and grins. “Thanks, Keller. That helps, it really does. But...you think I could practice on you before I drop the big bomb? I don’t know when that’ll be yet, but...”

“Sure.”

“Thanks. Okay, I’ll let you get back to your songwriting. And remember—” He laughs. “If the devil’s messing with you, I feel sorry for the guy. But if you need to talk, we’re all here. You know that, don’t you?”

Do I? I crack my knuckles. “Yeah, I guess I do. I’ll try to remember.” Emphasis on “try.”

“You do that.” Greenwood leaves after patting my shoulder, and I’m caught between thanking God that I can let him do it and still being confused as to why God continues to let me remember the man who made me terrified of the entire male species, among other things. Oh, well. Like my friends say, God will answer when He’s ready. In the meantime, I’ll keep going.

“Keller?” Schmidt’s voice asks a few minutes later. “Hey...” He taps his ear, and I realize I’ve got the radio a little too loud. I turn it off and remove my headphones. “Yeah?”

He gives me a strange look. “The Silverton candidates are here. Did you forget about the presentation?”

“Oh—oh, crumb! Give me two minutes.” I yank open a desk drawer and grab the folder of notes I prepared before clicking like mad to open one last file I need to print. Once that’s done, I run for the ladies’ room to do a hair and makeup check. I don’t need it, but I’d rather pretend I do than see the concern on my partner’s face.

Since homicide rates have gone up in the past couple years, Tunney’s gotten permission to expand our division. However, that means hiring new detectives, and that means preparing to

bring them in. To help with that, Schmidt and I have been asked to teach a seminar—kind of a “Murder 101” thing. Tunney picked us because as he says, “you two are the best team I’ve ever had—like coffee and doughnuts”. But today, I know the coffee—Schmidt—is picking up my slack. Well, no reason to stand for that. Unlike most kids, I loved presenting in front of the class in school. Time to let that shine again.

“Okay, moving on.” During the presentation, I focus on the PowerPoint in front of me. “Serial killers and their signatures. I’m going to show you a series of potential signatures. You tell me if you think it’s a real one or just a leave-behind. Don’t sweat it. This is low-stakes. Slide number one.” I show the small group in front of me a picture of a dead man with tiny particles of gunshot residue on his coat.

Barbara Rinaldi, a Silverton detective who’s considering moving, raises her hand. “Leave-behind?”

“Right. It’s GSR,” I say, using the abbreviation for gunshot residue. “Came straight from the original weapon, and it’s too scattered to be a signature. Good work, Rinaldi.” I smile at her, and she beams back. I haven’t seen her since I left Silverton last December, but it seems like she’s still got confidence issues. I wonder how Schmidt would feel if, should Rinaldi join our division, I requested a partnership with her for awhile? Ah, well. Cross that bridge if I get to it and all that. I click to the next slide.

The next second, I gasp, turn too quickly, and knock the mouse off the computer table. The mouse hits the floor, and I back up too far and hit the wall. Schmidt grabs the mouse, but I don’t really see him. All I can see is the picture on the screen, in living color. It’s a photo of Tyler West’s body. Tyler West, the sleazy Stage Door vocal coach who hit on me not even thirty minutes before his murder. The guy who was smeared with my Cherry Rose nail polish in a successful effort to frame me. I slam my hand up against my neck where my pulse is. My heart is going in 6/8 time, one of the fastest time signatures in music.

“Keller? Keller?” Schmidt’s voice sounds far away. “Everything okay?”

Wait, where am I? Oh, that’s right—I’m at work, in the middle of a seminar. I’ve got to get it together...to pretend this never happened, and by “this,” I mean everything...

“Oh. Oh, yeah, I’m fine. I just had a clumsy moment. So, back to our exercise...”

The presentation plods on from there. When it finally ends, I can feel Schmidt looking at me, so I slip out the back door and head to the gym across the street. Within fifteen minutes, I’m drowning my sorrows in an intense treadmill session.

“Hey, Maria,” Debra Fortney says from the elliptical next to me. She glances at my machine and laughs. “What are you trying to do, make your wedding dress hang on you like it did the rack?”

I shake my head. “No...I’m just...just...trying...to...g-get...”

Debra frowns. “Maria, slow down. If you can’t talk, you’re overdoing it.”

“Yes...Miss...Fitness...Guru.”

“Maria, I’m serious. Take yourself down to a walk, or at most, a slow jog.”

I know she won’t get off my back until I do it, so I take the machine’s speed down to 2.3 MPH.

“That’s better. Okay, once again, what’s with the speed demon act?”

“Just trying to clear my head, that’s all.” Does that count as a lie?

Debra’s mouth puckers. “Did Tunney criticize your case reports for off-center commas again?”

“No. Actually, he’s been decent lately. I think Schmidt’s and my Christianity is rubbing off on him.” I feel a quick thrill when a memory makes me laugh. “Greenwood heard he’s interested in adopting a pet.”

Debra slows her elliptical down so she can stare at me. “Girl, you are kidding me. Alexander “The Axe” Tunney? If that man got any less nurturing, he’d be...snakes eat their own young, right?”

“Some do. But...” Something about Debra’s joke bothers me. “Go easy on him, okay? I don’t like what he does sometimes, but I think the guy’s lonely.”

Debra laughs. “You got a point. Say, you doing anymore musicals right now?”

“No, not lately.” Although I miss the Stage Door so much sometimes...

“Well,” Debra says, “you might wanna call around and see if anybody’s doing *The Wizard of Oz*. You’d be a perfect Tin Woman.”

“Shut up.”

“No, you would. Your heart’s really something. I’ve been a Jesus gal about as long as you have and I could never be that nice.”

“Nice’ has nothing to do with it. Sometimes I want to strangle...” I cut myself off. Why did I say that? If the wrong person overheard, who knows how they’d take it? My brain knows it’s stupid, but my emotions take over, and I can’t resist letting my eyes dart around the gym.

“Hey, what’s with you all of a sudden? You look like Pete Rawlings just walked in here,” Debra says.

“In a way, he did,” I mutter.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” I start to bump myself back to running speed, but I’m not paying attention to what I’m doing. The next thing I know, the treadmill’s readout is 10.0 MPH.

“Wha—whoa...DEEEEBRAAA!” I make a grab for my friend. My hands hit air, and I end up on the floor next to the machine.

The handful of other cops in the gym rush over. Debra calls them off and helps me up. “Girl, I always suspected it,” she says, “but now I’m sure. You are flippin’ crazy! What is wrong with you?”

I shove sweat-soaked bangs out of my face and glare at her. “There’s nothing wrong with me. Ever heard of an accident?”

“Yeah, but that one wouldn’t have happened if you weren’t so distracted because of who knows what.”

“Maybe I don’t want you to know what. Maybe it’s none of your business.”

Anybody else would’ve been offended and walked off, and the truth is, that’s what I want Debra to do. Not that I want her to be mad at me, but it would be easier if she just left the issue alone. But Debra’s known me too long for that, so she just smiles and tilts her head toward the showers.

“What do you say we both cool off and grab a smoothie?” It’s an order, not a suggestion.

“She’s with me,” Debra tells the smoothie jerk before I can find my cash. “Pomegranate banana for me, cherry orange for her, heavy on the cherry.”

“Comin’ up, gals.”

“Okay,” Debra says when we’ve claimed our drinks and barstools. “I know you, Keller, and when you get like that, something’s eating you alive. So you better fess up before whatever it is strips your bones clean.”

“Well, don’t be prim about it,” I say. “I’m sure it’s nothing. Just a bad reaction to Schmidt coming back.”

“I don’t buy that for a minute,” Debra says. “The words ‘Schmidt’ and ‘bad reaction’ don’t belong in the same sentence, especially where you’re concerned.”

“Well, now they do. See, I’ve been having...it’s been...well...” I crack my knuckles.

“Okay. I will tell you the truth, but you cannot—do you hear me, cannot—tell anyone else.”

“I promise,” Debra says. “So what’s up?”

So I tell her. When I’m done, she chuckles. “Oh, that’s all?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She laughs hard now. “Maria, you’re a cop. Of course you’re gonna go through a stretch or two in your career where you can’t sleep because of what some perp did. I remember this one time, right after I got into forensics. I was at a crime scene and saw a severed head in a dumpster. Plus, the head was in a pizza box. I didn’t sleep for a week and couldn’t touch pizza for three months.”

“Oh, how gross is that?”

“I know, right? But I got through it and you will, too. You’re a redhead after all.”

I can’t help grinning. The redhead thing has been Debra’s and my special joke since my academy days. I knew her from day one, when I walked in as a too-skinny recruit with greasepaint still under her nails, knowing this was her last chance at a decent life and too scared to talk to anybody. Debra marched right up to me and said, “Hey, you got a name or is ‘Recruit Keller’ the one on your birth certificate?” I laughed, and she knew she’d won.

Over the next eighteen weeks, Debra didn't leave my side even when I tried leaving hers. She taught me how to eat real meat, real bread, and cream-based salad dressings again. She coached me through jitters every time we had a written test, and calmed my fears about being separated every time I turned one in. And she forced me to talk about myself—really talk. Once, when I'd finally had it with my life, I locked myself in a broom closet and screamed my head off, hoping it would permanently damage my voice so I wouldn't have to think about singing anymore. Debra found me and, when she got the whole story, said,

"I'm not gonna pretend I understand. I hate it when people do that. But you are gonna get through this. You're a theater chick, and they're even tougher than we are, so you've got a double shot. Plus, you're a redhead."

"Raspberry blonde," I croaked.

"Whatever. But think about it. All the girl power ladies are redheads. Anne of Green Gables, Julia Roberts, Queen Elizabeth, Reba McEntire...you want me to go on?"

"You're right," I tell Debra now. "Although I always wondered how you knew all that stuff about redheads. You're a blonde."

"Caramel blonde," Debra corrects me. "And I know it because I would kill for your hair color." She points to the door. "There. I said the word 'kill,' and did the squad come bursting in?"

"Of course not, you idiot," I laugh. "C'mon, walk me back to work before Tunney calls the flower shop and feeds me to a Venus flytrap."

We laugh all the way back to the station—so much, in fact, that I don't have the heart to tell Debra the truth. Of course she can say the word "kill" when she wants to. She's not under what I know is probably just a test of faith, but feels like a curse.

"Keller? Keller!" Schmidt yells in my ear the next day.

I push my headphones down to my neck. Sorry, Schmidt. I was in the middle of a Sondheim jam session and a case report on that armed robbery at the jewelry store. I was on a roll."

Schmidt studies me. "I bet you were, but I don't think the robbery's all that's on your mind."

"It's not," I say. "I'm planning a wedding, remember? Yesterday alone, I had my shift here, a dress fitting, a trip to the cake bakery—you would not believe how hard it can be to order a simple chocolate cake, and that woman was determined to change my mind so I'd get lemon, just so she could make a sale—and a premarital counseling session with Pastor Ken. But," I assure Schmidt, "I'm not thinking about the wedding now. Like Tunney says, work is for work."

"Yes it is," Schmidt says, "but here's the thing, Keller. Lately, every time I see you, you've got your music cranked up so high I have to burst through a Sondheim or Hammerstein or Lerner and Loewe bubble to talk to you. Now usually, when you do that, it means you want to concentrate hard and not be bothered for any reason. And when you want to focus that much, it's usually so no other thoughts can get through. So what's going on, partner? What are you afraid to let in? What are you trying to forget?"

I aim a meaningful stare at him. "Nothing work can't cure. What's up?"

Schmidt runs a hand through his hair. "Okay, you win this round. We've got a situation."

"Ooh, four of my favorite words. Spill."

He laughs. "Sorry to disappoint you, but this is an easy one. Roommate dispute, Crown Street Condos. Roommates number one and two got into a huge altercation and apparently, a death threat was made. Roommate three called the cops. Uniformed guys need backup. Let's move it."

"Only if I can drive." I can feel good adrenaline pumping. Maybe Debra's right. Maybe I'll be over all this nightmare, bad-flashback, sleeping-pill stuff in no time. Oh, dear Jesus, I hope so. I want to pass your test, I really do, but please—you know I was never good at the long essay ones.

I don't even get through the door of the condo before I see why my former patrol-mates called for backup. In fact, if Schmidt hadn't grabbed me, I'd have gotten a concussion, courtesy of a flying—whoa! Was that a cookie jar? And a curling iron, and a jewelry box...I shake my head. Schmidt was right. This is an easy one. All I'll probably have to do is march in and inform these

girls, who probably aren't much older than eighteen, that middle school called and wants its drama back.

"I know what you're thinking, Keller." The voice belongs to my former supervisor, Sergeant Davenport, who the police grapevine says is up for a promotion to lieutenant. He gives me a dry smile. "I know what you're thinking, but don't underestimate. The situation's already way out of proportion."

"I see that," I tell him. "Don't worry. Have you ever known me to get cocky?"

"Only at the poker table." He steps aside. "Be my guest, Detectives."

Schmidt and I enter the den. At least, I think it used to be a den. The sofa pillows are all over the place, one lamp has been knocked over and sustained a busted bulb, and the floor is covered in magazines, DVDs, shoes, and I don't know what else.

The three girls standing in the center of the mess are going at it like they didn't even notice us walk in. Their language sounds like an Orbit commercial—before the English-accented fairy visits.

"How dare you call the cops in here, Mandy!"

"What else was I supposed to do? You were gonna kill her with that..."

"I'll kill you if you don't back off—" The second girl, a tall one with brittle black hair, a long patchwork skirt, and a dog collar around her neck, brandishes a pool cue. "Good thing Blake left this here last time he came to see his real girlfriend!" She clocks Roommate #3, an anorexic-looking girl wearing enough mascara to supply a three-day revival of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Schmidt's in on it now. "You two break it up right now before I—"

"Get off me before I report you for police brutality," shrieks the dog collar chick.

"Oh, I'd love to see you try." I pull Dog Collar away from Schmidt and study her eyes.

"What are you on, sweetheart?" In no way do I mean "sweetheart" to be comforting.

"You crazy? You think just because you're this big celebrity cop you can push me around?"

"She needs to take a cattle prod to you," says Mascara.

“And you need to go—“ Profanity fills the tiny space. “Stealing Blake like that...how many times did you sleep with him, you...”

“Just the one time! And you deserved it! He wasn’t gonna get in your bed, with your stupid dog pooping all over everything but the freakin’ ceiling...”

A series of barks that I assume must be the stupid dog confirms Mascara’s screaming. Meanwhile, Dog Collar grabs her and tries to pin her to the floor. The pool cue smacks her at least four times.

The next few minutes can only be described as sheer pandemonium. Mandy’s crying in the corner, and one of Davenport’s female officers has to calm her down. Meanwhile, Schmidt books Mascara while I take care of Dog Collar Chick. Sergeant Davenport discovers syringes and heroin in one of the bedrooms, along with the dog, a malnourished, snarling animal that nearly bites his hand off.

“Good work, partner,” I tell Schmidt a few minutes later. “I had no idea you could break a pool cue over your knee.”

He shrugs. “Well, I didn’t meet Jesus until I was in my twenties. Before then, I was something of a pool shark. In fact, that’s what the old crowd called me—Schmidt the Shark. Made so much money at it I bought myself a twenty-inch TV. But that was a lifetime ago.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Mascara, whose real name is Patti, snorts from the backseat. “You and your little partner are such good Christians now—but you don’t have room to talk, ‘specially her.”

Schmidt glares at Patti through the rearview mirror. “Did I tell you to talk?”

“You don’t have to. You know it’s the truth. She killed all those people, including that theater lady. I don’t buy what the news said for a minute. And that teacher—“

“Shut up!” I yell at her before I can think.

“Too bad you’re not in jail,” adds Dog Collar, whose real name is Ginger. “That’s where lousy, cheating, backstabbing...”

“I did not steal him, you...” Patti says.

“Like fish you didn’t,” snarls Ginger. She turns blazing eyes on me. “This whole thing was none of the cops’ business, especially yours. You just got involved ‘cause you thought Patti had a right to steal Blake from me. That’s all you are, you know. That theater lady should’ve had Gil Montgomery, not you. You’re a man-stealing, selfish, greedy pig, and if you ask me, you should be in prison because you did kill the theater chick and that teacher! There’re other people who think so too, you know. Your DNA was all over both scenes, and they say...”

“I say you need to shut your trap,” Schmidt growls. He pulls into the parking lot. “Keller, let’s book Thing One and Thing Two and get on with our lives.”

Okay. I know Schmidt’s right. I know getting on with my life should be easy, and I’m not just talking about right this second. I’m talking about everything that’s been going down with me lately. But the crazy thing is, Patti and Ginger’s catfight is starting to remind me of Sarah Goodson and her motives, and that’s starting to remind me that although the town of Cherry Creek pretty much believes in my innocence, there are a handful of kooks who want nothing more than to see my nightmares come true. And after what happened with Schmidt and Baker, they’ve become more vocal. So getting on with my life is not something I can do right away.

What I end up doing is sitting in my cubicle, putting my headphones on, and calling up YouTube. I type in my name as a search term, and several videos pop up. Some are positive, but others... I make myself click one.

“Thank you, Stan. I’m here outside Silverton College of Christ and His Saints, where just six hours ago, police became involved in a hostage standoff with Music Appreciation teacher Adam Baker...I’m told one of the detectives was shot in the chest and is currently in fair condition...the other is okay, but as noted, there is controversy...now, Detective Maria Keller claims she shot the suspect in self-defense after he turned the gun on her, but given her history...murder charges...dropped, but, some say, with an appalling lack of exonerating evidence...she has been termed “temperamental and potentially violent” by staff...declines comment...one has to wonder if this volatile young cop is overzealous and might find herself behind bars after all. This is Lila Broadbent reporting live...”

I close YouTube when a mechanical voice tells me I have mail—Schmidt's write-up of our confrontation with Thing One and Thing Two. I have to hold the mouse still for a minute, because when I go to click on the message, I see my hands shaking.

CHAPTER 3:

“It’s a whosis! It’s a whasis! Who’s that? Who’s that? Who’s that? Who’s that?”

-The Wizard of Oz

“Maria, what on earth are you still doing here?”

I force out a smile for Gil. “Nothing, sweetie. Just working late.”

“Working la—you clocked in at six this morning, didn’t you?”

“Murder never sleeps.” And neither, it seems, does my personal jitterbug. What Gil doesn’t know is that I don’t really have to work late. I’m mostly doing it to punish myself for getting so worked up over those two girls at the condo.

“True,” Gil says, “but you’re not the only homicide cop in this town. C’mon. You promised to do dinner and a movie with me and the kids, and Mom’s gonna be there. She’s dying to see you.”

The mention of Paige Montgomery makes my smile widen. Ever since she asked forgiveness for treating me like dirt for so long, Paige and I have discovered we actually like each other. In fact, whenever I see Gil these days, he’s usually got a bag or two of tea from her. As for his dad, Laurence Montgomery, well...

“Which reminds me,” I say, “how’s your dad doing? He still think I’m the devil with the red dress on?”

Gil laughs, then sobers. “Unfortunately. What can I say, Gumshoe? He was raised in an autocratic, extremely traditional home, and that doesn’t seem like it’ll change anytime soon.”

“He hasn’t threatened to disinherit you or anything like that, has he?”

Gil frowns for a minute, but then leans down to kiss me. “No. And as I just reminded myself, I don’t need his money.” He pulls me out of my computer chair. “Now, come on, darling. Shut that thing down and let someone else clean up after the local thugs.”

I want to, but the memories of this afternoon make me hesitate. As weird as it is, lately, the station's the only place I feel a hundred percent safe. "I should finish this last little bit. Tunney will want..."

Gil sweeps his hand back in a gallant gesture. "I don't care about Tunney. I don't care about the murderers roaming our fair woods. I don't care about anything but you!" He breaks into a rich rendition of "Metaphor" from *The Fantastiks*.

"Okay, you big flirt," I laugh. "Let me get my blazer and I'll be right out."

"You'd better," Tunney's voice says. He enters from his office in the back. "Take her on home, Gil. Lately she's been finding every excuse to hang around here and it's getting under my skin. No offense, Keller."

"None taken. See you in the morning, same time, same cubicle."

"Actually, Keller..." Tunney looks away for a second. "Sleep in tomorrow. Caseload's light lately and Greenwood and Adams can handle the morning shift."

For some reason, his words make me crack my knuckles. "I appreciate it, sir, but..."

"No, no buts. I won't need you for awhile. Besides, I'm leaving Walker in charge for a couple hours tomorrow. There's something I gotta take care of in town."

I bite my lip. I can't argue there. Walker, Rawlings' replacement, is not only scary smart when it comes to running the division, but also a big old teddy bear. No reason I can't trust things won't be okay even if Tunney's still out when I do get to work. But...

I shake my head, walk out, and buckle myself into Gil's car. What has gotten into me? Why does the smallest change or mishap suddenly have me twitchier than the snake Luke once shot in the master bathroom?

That really makes me twitch. I shake my head again. "Whoa."

Gil looks sidelong at me. "What is it?"

I make myself giggle. "Nothing. I was just thinking about this time when I was a kid. About twelve, I guess. Luke and I had been out to the shooting range—he's the one who taught me about guns." He'd also designated me his shooting buddy for any and all competitions, but I'd rather not mention that. "Anyway," I continue, "when we got back, he went in the master bathroom

to shower, came running out in just a towel, grabbed his shotgun, and the next thing I heard was a gunshot. There was this huge black snake curled up right next to the toilet. I looked at it and said, 'wow, Luke, Jasmine's gonna freak.' Which she did—she called and he told her what happened, and you could hear her through the line. 'You did WHAT?'"

Gil laughs, too. "She's not a snake person, huh?"

"She's terrified of them. Once, she discovered one in the basement when Luke had the night shift. She made me follow her downstairs, carrying one of Luke's fishing poles, while she opened the garage door to release it. She was so scared she cried. So I cut us two of her monster brownies and put in *Aladdin*. Jasmine loves Disney, especially those movies, because the princess has her name."

"She'd fit right in with our dinner and a movie tradition," Gil says. "We're watching *Monsters, Inc.*"

"I haven't seen that one."

"Then you're in for a treat. It's a really cute flick, and there's enough pop culture so you and I won't think we're in a torture chamber...oh. Sorry, hon."

"That's okay. So..." I shoot Gil a grin. "Ready to go make some deli sandwiches?"

Thirty minutes later, Gil, his kids, his mom, and I are all enjoying custom-made sandwiches, fresh fruit, and each other's company. Paige reminds me yet again that she wants to be the one to help me register for wedding gifts, which makes Desi ask,

"How many days is it now until the wedding?"

I smile at my future daughter—wow, future daughter. Who'd have thought? Thank you so much, God. "Sorry, Des," I tell her. "You've still got awhile to go. You'll be in school by the wedding day."

"September fifteenth," Clayton reminds her. "Remember, 'cause it was the last night of Miss Maria's play at the Stage Door, and Dad told everybody he loved her at the cast party. He even had that cool sign on the marquee at the restaurant—GM + MK with the big red heart."

"Oh, yeah," Desi says. "And Miss Maria and Daddy sang together." She sighs.

"September," she

says like she's talking about the next century.

"Hey, cheer up, Desi-girl," I coach her. "I'm not in Silverton anymore, so we'll all have time to do lots of fun things before then. And you'll be so busy you won't even think about counting down days. You'll be in first grade and learning so many new things time will fly."

"That's right," Desi says. "I'll have a real grade, just like the big kids."

"Yeah," Sophie says. "I can't wait. But..." She squeezes my hand. "I'm real excited about the wedding, Miss Maria. You're gonna be a super mommy."

"Thanks, darlin'," I say, thanking God, too. It wasn't long ago that Sophie would've as soon stuck her tongue out at me as said hello, but all that's changed. Sophie's happier and acting out a lot less since Gil started encouraging her to tell and show how she felt when she missed her real mom. Desi's gotten braver too, and is having an easier time making friends. And Clayton...

I sneak a glance at my future son. He's quiet by nature, so it doesn't bother me that he doesn't act all gung-ho about the wedding. Plus, as he's confided in me, "dresses and flowers and that stuff are for *girls*." And I've made it clear to him that I will not try to take his mother's place. But tonight, he looks...

"Clayton?" I ask. "You all right, sport?"

"Oh, sure," he says. "Just...can we talk about something else? All this mushy-gushy love talk is kinda gross—if you don't mind me saying," he says when Gil frowns.

Okay, clearly something beyond a case of the gross-outs is going on here, but I'm not knocking it. Instead, I ask the kids about their summer plans. This is the first year the girls will be old enough to go to Clayton's day camp, and they're both thrilled at the honor. Meanwhile, Clayton says his dad has signed him up for a creative writing class.

"What are you writing?" I ask him.

"Poems," Clayton says. "I wanted to do art too, but the set-painting class at Glass Slipper Theater is full."

"Hmmm," I say. I know the local rec center offers classes for kids, but Clayton has no interest in the crafty stuff they do. "Is the Stage Door doing anything with the kids?" I ask Gil.

He clears his throat. "Just the summer production. The truth is, Maria, I'm afraid I'm losing business. The Glass Slipper's only thirty minutes away, and quite frankly, they're eating our lunch. I'm afraid I created a monster last year when I went over there to help with their youth program."

Paige purses her lips. "Your father and I were afraid of that. What can we do, sugar?"

Gil shrugs. I smile at the way Paige calls everybody "sugar" and turn to my fiancé. "I'm not exactly a businesswoman here, but I'd think this would be easy to fix. What does the other theater have that you don't? What do they do that you haven't tried yet? What can you do to spruce up the old act?"

Gil clears his throat again. "What I could do to spruce up the old act, Maria, is to go back about three years and make those murders never happen."

"Oh. Is that why..."

"Yes. I've lost half my youth theater kids and had to hire new actors in addition to replacements for...you know...and now that you've been in the news because of that choir case, people are buzzing about the theater business being nothing but a hotbed of sin and tragedy."

I can't help rolling my eyes. "Gil, I heard that from the time I could say the word 'theater.' If I had a dollar for every moron who told my parents..."

"I know, honey, but..."

"No. If that's what they think, we've got to prove them wrong. Did you ever invest in a security system like I told you to?"

Gil looks away. "No. I was going to, but I got the sense that...that is, Dad said it showed an appalling lack of faith."

I'd like to tell him what's really appalling, but bite my tongue just in time. "You might want to rethink that," I say instead. "The first thing we've got to do is make sure the citizens of Cherry Creek know your theater is a safe place to work. Publicizing your marriage to me will help, but I'm just one cop. You need to get a top of the line security system, maybe hire some personnel or at least a few volunteers to do security detail, and get in touch with the police department. They can

teach you how to do full background checks on your own so you won't always need me right there whenever you hire somebody."

Gil laughs. "Yes, ma'am."

"No, I'm serious. If you're gonna take care of me, you have to let me return the favor. We're a team, and so now the Stage Door is much my theater as it is yours. I want nothing more than to make it the best."

"I don't think that's going to be possible," Gil says.

"Oh, come on, sweetheart..."

He pecks my cheek. "You're already the best. There isn't room in that category for anything else."

I laugh. "Okay, okay. Just stick with me, then. We'll make sure the Stage Door's all right. Now, will you pass me the water pitcher?"

"You might want a glass of milk," Paige says. "It's almost time for dessert, and I made my famous chocolate fudge Coca-Cola cake."

The kids cheer at that, and I feel myself smile, too. "I've heard about it," I tell Paige, "but I'm sure whatever other people said didn't do it justice."

"Have you ever had a Coca-Cola cake before?" Paige asks.

"A few times. Jasmine made a version of it with diet Coke. The outside was like a pound cake, and the frosting and moisture was inside. Kind of an inverted cake."

"Well, there's nothing diet about this baby," Paige says, setting the dessert itself in the center of the table. "But I shouldn't worry about that with you. If anything, sugar, you've got to get some meat on those bones."

"You have lost a little weight, honey," Gil says. "Are you eating enough?"

I focus on lifting a small slice of cake onto Desi's plate. "Enough," is all I want to say. Lately, every time I try to eat, my stomach turns into a mass of writhing snakes. But maybe I can fix that tonight. I let Paige cut my slice, and it doesn't escape me that she does so with a generous hand. Oh, well. I raise my milk glass toward Gil. "Cheers."

One bite in, I raise my eyebrows at Paige. "Mmmm! This is incredible."

"I hoped you'd think so." Paige looks like a proud mama showing off her baby. "I could teach you to make it if you want. I know Dorothea Schmidt's been teaching you many of her recipes—"

I nod. "We're up to main courses starting next week, and I barely burn things anymore."

"Yes, but with her taking care of Brendan after that unfortunate inci—" Paige breaks off. "I'm sorry, sugar. I didn't mean..."

"That's okay. And he's fine now. A little pain now and then, sure, but..." I shrug and go back to dessert. But suddenly, the cake tastes like metal. Bullet metal.

Desi notices and puts her hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry. Mr. Brendan's okay now, remember? And that man's dead."

I squeeze Desi's hand. "I know, sweetheart. It's just that sometimes, I...well, I wonder if I had let that one person go, would Mr. Brendan have ever gotten shot? And I had to shoot that man to protect both of us. I'm the reason he's dead. I feel like it's my fault."

"But it isn't." Clayton's voice is vehement. "Dad and Mr. Brendan explained it. They said sometimes police officers have to use guns to defend themselves. It's not like you shot that guy for the fun of it."

"That's right," Gil says. "In that position, you did the only thing you could. You did nothing wrong. So now that that's settled, let's finish our food and start the movie."

Gil's right, of course. It should be settled, but for me, it's not, and I don't know if it ever will be. But then I shake my head. *Come on, Keller, snap out of it! Quit acting like a pathetic victim!*

You're not pathetic, and you are not a victim by nature. But right now, you are a victim, and you need to deal with it, one way or the other.

I shake my head again, and then I do something I haven't done in almost three years. I pretend I didn't hear God and follow my future family into the den for the movie.

By the next afternoon, I've forgotten that I ever ignored God (although I did ask forgiveness for that slip-up and begged Him, once again, to heal my burned spirit on His own). Gil and I had a fantastic date, even stealing a few kisses when the kids were engrossed in the movie.

And though the antagonist of *Monsters, Inc.* reminded me a bit too much of Rawlings, I determined that bad memories wouldn't ruin my evening. Now, I'm ready to hit the homicide beat with renewed vigor. What I'm not prepared for is what happens when I clock in.

"Hey, Keller," Tunney says. "Nice to see you took orders for—whoa!"

"Oof!" I exclaim. A huge, furry thing with awful breath just knocked me into the front desk. I look down and recognize the painfully thin dog from the condo. "Sir, what..." I manage as the beast goes at my face with the intensity of a kid with his first ice cream cone.

"He's staying with me for awhile," Tunney says in the tone I know means I better not make anything of it. He claps once. "Hey...hey! Down...good boy," he says when the dog drops to the floor. "Take it easy with this lady, fella," he says with a laugh. "She's spoken for."

"So you...adopted this guy?" I ask.

Tunney kinda shrugs. "For now, at least. Found out those druggie chicks practically starved him to death. And between that and the way Davenport startled him, no wonder the poor fella thought Davenport's hand was a Milk Bone. But the vet checked him out, and he's basically harmless. Unless—you're not as scared of dogs as you used to be of men, are you?"

I have to laugh. "No, not at all. But what's he doing here?" I decide against mentioning that if any of us brought animals in the bureau, Tunney would be the one biting hands off.

"Can't a man introduce his dog around without the third degree?" my supervisor asks—but I catch a twinkle in his eye.

"Right, sir. Sorry. I'll see you later—and you too, um...what's his name?"

"Neither of us knows that yet. And don't go sending me emails full of suggestions."

"Never." I head to my cubicle, biting back an urge to laugh. Tunney got himself a dog. Will wonders never cease? Oh, well. Not my business. Not like the cases on my desk—I pray none of them involve suicide attempts or stolen boyfriends.

A few hours later, I'm at lunch in the lounge, trying for the thirty-sixth time to explain to Greenwood that just because I am from Texas does not mean I have to be a Dallas fan, when our mailroom guy pokes his head in.

"Delivery for Detective Keller," he says.

“Oh—yeah, of course.” I take the package and the penknife one of the guys offers me. “Thanks, Farris. Wow, this is a surprise—it’s definitely not my birthday or...” I feel myself smile when I lift out a box of chocolates. “Gil.”

“Ooh,” my fellow detectives say like we’re in third grade.

“So, you gonna try one or will it blow your diet?” Doyle teases.

“Diet, schmiet,” I shoot back. “But just one,” I admit. I open the box and pick a promising-looking square one from the center. I like the squares best; they somehow make me feel like I’m getting more of my money’s worth. Or Gil’s money’s worth, in this case. Whatever. I bite in and...

“Oh! Oh...” I reach across the table, seize Farris’ napkin, and spit. “Ugh!”

“I hope you’re ready to replace that,” Farris says. “What was in the truffle, spider guts?”

Schmidt eyes the chocolate, swipes it with his finger, and takes a taste of the filling.

“Worse. This is mocha.”

“So? Keller, since when are you a picky eater?” Greenwood asks.

“I’m not. I...” I bite my lip. How do I spill the secret I’ve successfully kept from everybody but Schmidt and Debra Fortney for years? “I, uh...” Better just say it. “I’m allergic to coffee and all its derivatives, okay?”

As I always knew they would, the others stare at me like I just admitted I want a sex change. I wait for the hysterical laughter, but it doesn’t come. Adams reacts first. “K-K-Keller, w-why d-d-didn’t you t-t-tell us?”

“Why do you think?” Schmidt backs me up. “She was the butt of jokes for a whole year, and plus, a cop who doesn’t drink coffee is about as rare as...”

“A diabetic baker,” I finish. “Sorry, y’all. I wasn’t trying to be dishonest, it’s just...”

“Hey, we get it,” Doyle says.

“Thanks,” I tell him, watching the others nod in agreement.

“How’d you find out you were allergic?” Greenwood wants to know. “I mean, allergies to nuts or shellfish I get, but coffee?”

“Beats me.” I hear myself chuckle. “My doctor thinks it’s something to do with the flavoring of the beans. As to how I found out—junior year of high school, my cousins and I had

just gotten permission to drink the stuff, and we went to the local shop for our first espressos. I take a couple sips, my lips start tingling. Eventually, they feel like they're full of needles. My throat closes, and I go into shock. I almost died—no joke.”

“Man,” Greenwood says. “If we'd known, we could've really gotten on Tunney's case. He was the one who always made you brew his coffee.”

“Oh, I can make it,” I assure them. “I just have to be real careful not to inhale too deeply or get any on my skin. If that happens, I get hives. The finished drink itself is what's fatal.”

Greenwood nods. “Well, your secret's safe with us.” He indicates the chocolate box. “Hey, mind if we...”

“Go ahead,” I tell him. “Y'all deserve it.”

“Thanks.” Greenwood picks out a dark one and chews. “Hey, this is coffee, too.”

Schmidt takes one. “Weird. So is this one.”

“They all are,” Farris says.

I don't like where this is going. I know Gil would never send me coffee-filled anything. In fact, he's given me candy before and always checks to make sure nothing is coffee-flavored. But that would mean...

Adams looks like he's reading my mind. “Y-you d-d-don't th-think...”

“If somebody thinks this is a joke, it sure isn't funny,” Doyle says, his tone dark.

“Okay.” Schmidt is standing, closing the box. “Let's not jump to conclusions. Remember, besides us, nobody in the police department knows Keller's secret—or do they?”

“Just Fortney,” I say. “And Davenport.”

“Okay. So that means there are still plenty of cops around here who don't know and probably made an innocent mistake.”

“I don't buy it,” Farris says. “I mean, if one or two were coffee, sure. That kind of thing happens. But every single one?”

“Is there any indication that this was a specialty box?” I ask. “Sometimes you can get boxes with just one kind of filling.”

Almost as one, the group grabs its gloves and studies the box like it's a nuclear weapon. Doyle takes the packaging and turns it over and over in his hands like a Rubix cube while Farris hovers next to his right shoulder.

"No," Schmidt says at last. "It's just a plain white box. No brand name, no nothing."

"Negative on the package," Doyle says. "No return address. Whoever sent this doesn't want Keller knowing who they are."

"B-but w-who w-w-would w-want to h-hurt her?" Adams asks. I have to smile at his concerned face. Even when the others, including Greenwood, saw me as a joke, Adams looked out for me. Still does—he's made it clear that if Gil breaks my heart he'll "kill him and make it look like an accident".

Schmidt's face is granite. "Disgruntled reporters? People who persist in believing she's a murderer, or at the very least, an overzealous pig?" He shoots me an apologetic glance. "Maybe somebody at the Silverton theater who's a little too disappointed she didn't take the internship? You'd be surprised at the motives."

"But the reporters never knew about me and the coffee," I say. "Nobody in Silverton, either. When I want a hot drink, I just ask for tea. Nobody makes it a big deal."

"Maybe, but Keller, you're a detective," Schmidt says. "That means in a lot of situations, you're a target. And as you know, you don't have to say something for it to get around."

"True," I say. "The walls have ears."

That thought has my hands shaking again.

CHAPTER 4:

“And when the light came back, this weird plant was just sitting there...”

-Little Shop of Horrors

“Mocha-filled chocolates?” Gil asks.

“That’s right.” I bend over the half-restored clock and polish harder. “I can’t believe some idiot did that. I mean, sure, it could’ve been a bad joke, but still...” Still, the thought that someone meant to hurt me makes me shudder. “Hey Gil, turn down the A/C, will you?”

I should know better than to think Gil would ever buy such a lame excuse, but to his credit, he nods. “Okay.” He brushes my fingertips. “Your hands are cold.”

“Well, you know what they say. Cold hands...”

“Warm heart. And they had it right.”

Gil turns the A/C down and returns to his place next to me, where he picks up his polishing cloth. “It looks much better already,” he says. “Check out the walnut stain on this baby.”

“Hmmm. And I can’t get over these figurines. When did you say this was made again?”

“1930s. A genuine Swiss cuckoo clock.”

“Wow.” A memory makes me smile, but my voice comes out strained. “Mama had one of these. Not the exact same one, but it was an anniversary gift. It was in our living room.”

Gil seems like he wants to say something, but isn’t sure he should. I think I know what it is, so I laugh at myself. “I’m sorry. I wrecked the mood.”

“That’s not it at all,” he tells me, his voice firm. “It’s just...”

“I know. It’s been over twenty years since they died. Get over it already.”

“Maria Keller, no,” Gil says. “I would never tell you that.” He clears his throat and looks at me. “Honey, what you have to learn, and accept, is that you don’t get over death, especially of someone as close as a parent—or two. You just get on with it. But I think you’ve also sacrificed your right to grieve. For one thing, you never, ever talk about your real parents.”

I shrug and polish. “It hurts.”

“Of course it does. But if something hurts, and you don’t deal with it, the wound just festers.”

God’s earlier words smack me in the back of the head so hard I blink. I’ve got to get the subject off of me. “Yeah. I guess we both know a lot about that. But...how did you handle it when Anne...”

“At first, I didn’t,” Gil says. “I literally couldn’t function. Mom and Dad had to force me to go to the funeral. I couldn’t bear saying goodbye. I considered moving.”

“Where to?”

“As far as I could go. I thought about New England. Somewhere like Boston. Mom and Dad honeymooned there and always said it was a great place. But Brendan and Dorothea, especially Brendan, came alongside me. Brendan dragged me to men’s meetings and grief counseling at church. He encouraged me to cry.” Gil laughs. “My favorite grief outlet was tennis. Brendan and I used to play from the time I fed the kids and got them in bed to three in the morning.”

I laugh, too. “I can see that. So what kept you from pulling up stakes?”

“My kids. As strange as it might sound, they wanted to be where their mom was. And after awhile, they kept asking me if I remembered this or that happy time with Anne. They cried with me. And eventually, we were better.”

I smile, thinking about the kids. Paige took them out to lunch and the zoo so Gil and I could have this time. “They’re terrific,” I say. “Okay, would you take a look at my side? Make sure I didn’t miss a spot?”

Gil looks and shakes his head. “You polish anymore and you’ll rub the wood off the frame. I, on the other hand, have a stubborn stain here. Would you run get me a fresh cloth? Kitchen, third drawer below the counter on the far right.”

“Sure.” I’m back with the cloth in short order, and Gil pins me with a Look. “So, about your parents...”

I sigh. “Look, I got on with it, okay? I learned how to deal. I thought about the good stuff. I cried when I knew it was safe. Music was my saving grace. Oh, I mean—“

"I know what you mean. But why do I get the feeling you... Maria, a part of me will always miss and love Anne. But she has a certain place in my life and heart where she belongs. You're going to be my wife. You're going to be the one I think about, and the one I whose name I whisper at night, because Anne is in a comfortable place where I'm concerned. But your parents—Maria, why are you doing everything you can to keep them out of your heart?"

"Because I can't..." Oh, crumb. How do I explain this? How do I tell Gil what I've always known deep down, but can't share with anybody because the response I always get is "you're nuts and in complete denial"? I get up and move across the room, where I focus on Gil's collection of family photos. Anne is only in a few, but her presence makes me wince. Gil knows how and why she died, but what if he didn't? What if he thought he knew, but no one believed it? What if...

"Maria." Gil puts his hands on my shoulders and kisses me. "It's all right, Gumshoe. You tell me when you're ready."

I have to smile because this is an amazing change. In the beginning of our relationship, Gil would've insisted I tell him everything the second something he didn't know about me came up. More than that, he would never drop the issue because bless his heart, he does like to get his own way. I kiss him back. "Thanks, sweetie. Hey, we've got time before your mom brings the kids home. Want to close up the clock shop for now?"

"Okay. I feel like a snack and a game show marathon. How about you?"

"Break out the TiVo," I agree. For the most part, Gil and I have totally different taste in TV, but we do agree on game shows—and how fun it is to argue with each other over what the correct answer is.

"I'm telling you, Gil," I say several minutes later, "the answer is D. There is no such place as Kalamazoo, except in nursery rhymes."

"Yes, there is. I remember seeing it on a map somewhere. Some website."

"What website is that, lightlyusedbrains.com?"

Gil bursts out laughing. "That's pretty good, but I think that's the website where some of my staff has a blog. Oh—okay, they're back. Let's see what the real answer is."

As it turns out, the host of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* has no pity for me. Gil's guess was right, and as the host informs the audience, Kalamazoo is a real place in Michigan.

"Well, burn my house and steal my car," I mutter.

Gil blinks. "Excuse me?"

I laugh at his stricken face. "It's a Texas-ism. Basically means, 'wow, I didn't know that' or more accurately, 'boy, am I an idiot.'"

"Ah. Well, so long as you didn't mean it literally. Could you pass the ranch dip?"

"Sure, just a sec." I dunk the celery stick I'm holding and hand him the container.

"You know any other Texas-isms?" Gil asks me.

"At least half a dictionary's worth. What do you want to know?"

"Uh...okay, got one. Do you have a special way to say 'don't judge a book by its cover?'"

"Yeah. We would say 'don't call him a cowboy 'til you've seen him ride.' Of course, that also applies to females. Sometimes I think of it as 'don't call a person a cop 'til you've seen their arrest record.'"

"Ah, good one. And Texans call extreme rainstorms 'frog stranglers,' right?"

"Yeah, but that's not exclusively Texan. I've heard people here say it, too."

Gil nods. "Anne's father used to say 'gully-washer,' among other things."

"I've never met your in-laws. Do they ever come here?"

Gil shakes his head and frowns. "No. I take the kids to Tennessee to see them every summer—we'll be going on the Fourth of July weekend. But the Talbots and I always had differences because of...well, because of how my parents, especially Dad, acted, and after she died, they had a reason to stop coming."

"Hmmm," I say because Laurence Montgomery is the last subject I want to discuss—well, besides my parents' death, that is. "Gil, would they like me?"

He puts an arm around me. "Not only would they like you, but they are going to love you. I wasn't going to tell you just yet, but the kids and I want you to come on our trip with us. I've emailed Anne's parents about you and they've been asking when they get to meet you in person."

"So...so they're not...legalistic?"

“No. In fact, Dad always secretly thought the Talbots were lax in their Christianity. The main reason he accepted Anne was because she was a traditional person. She was a stay-at-home mom, enjoyed domestic pursuits, that sort of thing. But what Dad never understood was that her lifestyle was Anne’s choice. No one, including the church, made her be what she was.”

I study Anne’s face in the pictures and see a soft-featured, blue-eyed woman with expertly tamed brown curls, a pink blouse, and pressed jeans. Her face is sunburned and her nose has a smudge of dirt on it, but she looks thrilled to be with her family. *I wish I could talk to you*, I think to the photo. *What do I need to know to make Gil look as happy to be with me as he was with you? What can I do to be a good mama to your kids?*

I turn back to Gil. “Tell me about Anne, please.”

“Of course I will, honey.”

“No, you don’t get it. I want to know everything. I want to know the way she did things around here. I want to do things her way so the kids will remember her.”

“Maria.” Gil hugs me and then holds me in his arms. “They do remember her. They always will. And yes, I’ll tell you some things that the kids still like done the way Anne did them. But the kids and I don’t need or want Anne’s twin. We want Maria. We want, and need, things to be different.”

I absorb what Gil’s said. “Okay. I can go with that. But you will share with me, won’t you?”

Gil clears his throat, cups my face, and looks me in the eye. “Yes. And I hope you’ll share with me about your parents.”

“I will, but Gil, I’m telling you, I’m fine. They’re gone, I’ve accepted that, the end.”

Gil stares at me. “Maria, will you answer another Texas question for me?”

“What?”

“How do Texans say that you can say whatever you want about something, but that doesn’t change the truth?”

“We say, ‘you can put your boots in the oven, but that don’t make ‘em biscuits.’” And my mouth feels drier than the batch of biscuits I once made for a drama club bake sale.

Gil smiles, but his eyes have seriousness in them. “Okay. Think about that, because right now, you’re chewing on boot leather.”

“Chewing on boot leather,’ he says. Is that something or what?” I ask Monique and Meg at dinner that night. For the first time, I’ve cooked the main course, sesame chicken with vegetable stir-fry and cream cheese wontons. But my cousins look like they’d rather chew on a big helping of Maria Keller Psychoanalysis a la Mode.

“Or what,” Monique says, giving me a Look. “He’s right and you know it.”

Meg wipes sesame sauce off her mouth. “This is excellent, Maria.”

“Don’t change the subject,” Monique almost barks at her.

“Thanks, Meg. Nice to know those cooking lessons are paying off.” I make a point of forking a mouthful of stir fry.

“You should’ve made something African,” Monique says. “Because even if your cooking skills have changed since we were kids, one thing hasn’t. You’re still the Queen of Denial.”

“I am not.”

“Yes, you are. Don’t you remember? You came to live with Uncle Luke and Aunt Jasmine when we were all ten, and every year on the anniversary of your parents’ death, Meg and I could never find you. You were always running all over the place doing something—homework, or playing games with the boys, or rehearsing, or...well, anything. You were like a worker bee on steroids. And you wouldn’t talk to anybody, not even Uncle Luke and Aunt Jazz. You’d say you were tired, or later, you’d say you had your period and didn’t feel so hot.” She sighs. “We never said it ‘cause we didn’t want to hurt your feelings, but Meg and I used to get so mad at you. We knew what was up and couldn’t believe you didn’t think we’d figure it out. We were upset that you wouldn’t let us help you.”

Ouch. This is news to me. Or maybe it’s not. I hate thinking back to those summers on what I just called The Day, but they’re right. I can remember Meg and Monique acting distant, or sometimes extra nice. And all I ever did was pretend nothing was happening. I must’ve seemed like I didn’t care that they loved me so much.

"I'm sorry," I say now. "I know it doesn't make up for who knows how many times I've done it, but I am. But I always felt—well, I was in foster care, remember? I knew other orphans, and some were real brats. They were always playing the 'they're not my real parents' card, acting as if that meant they didn't have to do anything they were told. Or they'd use grief as an excuse to get out of school or chores or whatever. And everybody already thought I was so awful because I had theater parents and a big personality, I just...I couldn't...and it hurt. It hurt too much to cry, or talk about it, or anything."

"Even now?" Meg almost whispers.

"Yeah. Especially now. Especially with what's happening at work."

"And that's another thing," Monique says. "While you were out, Brendan called. He says he wants to talk to you. No—he told me he has to talk to you. Maria, the whole homicide division knows you've not been yourself lately, and they're starting to get worried. And when did you intend to tell Meg and me that someone sent you a box of killer chocolates this afternoon, huh?"

I stab a piece of chicken. "I don't know. I knew the minute I opened my mouth, you'd do that, so..."

"Do what?"

"Make it into this big dramatic deal. They weren't killer chocolates."

"Oh, and I suppose that allergic reaction you had when we were in high school was just a cold symptom?" Meg spits a French phrase at me that includes the words 'crazy idiot.'

"Okay, so maybe they were, but even Schmidt said there might not be anything to worry about. Probably what'll happen is that they'll figure out who sent the candy, bring them in on—I don't know, harmful prank charges—and that'll be the end of it."

"But will it be the end of what's going on with you?" Monique asks, her voice gentle this time. "Mia, Meg and I know you're still having nightmares almost every night. We heard you saying 'help' and 'I didn't kill anybody' early this morning. And we saw you dumping your sleeping pills down the sink—almost the whole bottle."

"I don't need the dang things and I don't want the temptation around."

"But if you can't sleep, and it's this bad, what's the harm of taking them for awhile? Dr. Bramwell did prescribe them," Meg says.

"I know that, but..." I drop my head onto the table. "I don't know what to do, girls. I can't even pray anymore. I'm all out of words. My Bible's starting to look like my dog tried to eat it, and I don't even have a dog. And I hate myself for being so selfish, and..."

"You're not," my cousins chorus.

"Thanks, gals," I say after a minute. "Think I'll go play the piano."

"Good idea," Meg says. "Are you taking requests tonight?"

"As many as you want."

"Your own songs, too?"

"Absolutely. Maybe I'll even write a new one. 'Former Inmate Blues.'"

"Keller, you can't keep avoiding this," Schmidt says two days later. "You know it's not fair. We have to talk, and the sooner the better."

"And I have to work. Look, Schmidt. I've been praying about this, and the only conclusion I can come to is that if I can keep working—reminding myself I'm one of the good guys—I'll get better."

"But did God say that, or did you say it?"

"Schmidt, shut up!" I yell before I realize what I've said. "Oh—oh, crumb. Holy crumb. I'm sorry, really. I..."

"I know." He smiles and pats my shoulder. "Maybe you're right. But take some time to cool off, would you?"

So I do. I pray without saying anything and focus on my work until the words start to run together. My lunch break can't come fast enough, but once it does, I don't eat. Instead, I hop in my car and drive until I reach Best Foot Forward, the local shoe store. Maybe I'll feel better if I find myself a new pair of shoes.

"Maria!" the store's owner, Stella, calls when I come in. "How's my favorite customer?"

“Not so hot,” I say. “But my shoe budget’s intact, so I came to see if you could cheer me up.”

“Of course I can,” Stella says. “Retail therapy isn’t a total myth, you know. So, what are you looking for? Flip-flops? Sneakers? Or maybe one of those famous sparkly-yet-kick-butt boots of yours?”

“I’m not much on kicking butt right now. I need more of a…”

But Stella’s nodding. “I see. Come.” She escorts me down aisle nine and holds up a dainty, but durable ballet flat with gold embellishment on the toe and side. “You’re still a five, right? It’s been awhile since I’ve seen you.”

“Five,” I confirm for her. “Your taste is spot on as usual. This is a great shoe.”

A few minutes later, Stella’s ringing up my purchase. “Wrap or wear?” she asks.

“Wrap. Tunney’s gotten easier on me, but he’ll turn up his nose at these beauties.”

“That man has certainly changed for the better,” Stella says. “I saw him walking a dog down the block recently. Nice to see him with a pet again. I don’t know if you knew this, but he used to be quite the softy for God’s creatures. But back in the ‘70s, something changed him. You don’t happen to know—“

“No.” It’s an outright lie. I know what happened to Tunney—he lost his partner and best friend Evelyn Hausten in a drug bust, which is also why he had such a hard time accepting a woman in his division. But he told me if I ever told anybody, even Schmidt, I was fired. And Stella can run her mouth better than she can sell shoes. *Lord, could you look the other way just for a second?*

Maria...

Okay, sorry, my bad. Sin is sin. I crack my knuckles. “I mean, I’ve heard things, but nothing I feel comfortable sharing.” I smile when I hear God’s voice again—***good job, sweetie.***

“Oh.” Stella smiles back. “Well, you have fun arresting those punks. Say hi to Gil and the kids for me, and tell ‘em to drive safe on the way to Tennessee—thunderstorms come up fast this time of year.”

Prime example. “Sure, Stella.”

I'm circling the block, debating if I should eat when I'm not hungry, when my pager goes off. "Keller."

"Keller, are you close to the house?" Schmidt asks, using the cop term for the police station.

"Yeah, about five minutes out. What's up?"

"Uh..." I hear him shuffling around and can picture him running a hand through his hair.

"Let's just say you better get down here."

"Um—you're all still alive, right?" I ask. My teeth come down on my lip and gnaw on it.

"Yeah. Just get down here."

Schmidt's voice puts me in overdrive, literally. I cover the remaining distance to the station in half the time, race upstairs to the homicide division, nearly bowl Greenwood over, hit a file cabinet with my hip, and finally make it to my cubicle, where Schmidt, Tunney, and Walker are hunched over my desk.

Tunney straightens first. "Another special delivery for ya, Keller," he says in that growl-like, but soft voice he uses when he's worried.

I make myself look, but then shake my head. "What? It's just a bouquet of flowers."

Granted, the flower choices are weird—begonias, oleander, yellow carnations, and monkshood—but...

"Not just any bouquet," Schmidt says. "This came with them. Put your gloves on first. It's evidence."

The word makes my heart speed up, but I obey and take the paper Schmidt offers. It's a chart showing flowers and what they mean, with the ones in the bouquet underlined. I feel myself chewing my lip the more I read—

BEGONIA—BEWARE

OLEANDER—CAUTION

YELLOW CARNATION—DISDAIN

MONKSHOOD—A DEADLY ENEMY IS NEAR

"I..." I have to sit down. "I can't...I don't...why would someone send me this?"

"C'mon, Keller, you're a college graduate." Walker's joke falls flat.

"Yeah, Walker, I know why, but...why?"

"That's what I intend to find out," Tunney says. "I guess you don't want these on your desk?"

"You guessed right."

"Okay. Walker, let's you and I get these weeds out of here. Schmidt, you and Keller get back to work."

"You okay?" my partner asks.

"I'm great. All I need is a glass of iced tea with a mint sprig and one of those teeny umbrellas."

"Okay, sorry. Stupid question. I meant, are you able to work? You can go home and..."

"And what? Mope? Crack my knuckles? Give in to fear? Not me."

Schmidt laughs and shakes his head. "What was I thinking? But Keller—if you do want to call it a day, tell me. I'll tell Tunney you needed a breather. He'll understand, I promise."

"Thanks. Now c'mon, let's deal with some deadly enemies."

From that point, the afternoon is pretty normal. But I notice when Schmidt pleads chest pain and suggests we head home. And I know he notices that I don't sit at my desk for the rest of the day.

CHAPTER 5:

“Don’t tell me not to fly—I’ve simply got to. Who told you you’re allowed to rain on my parade?”

-Funny Girl

“Keller, we’re here,” Schmidt says a few days later.

“What? Oh. Right, sorry. I didn’t hear you.”

Schmidt kinda laughs, but he doesn’t sound like he thinks anything’s funny. “That’s obvious. You had the radio up so loud it sounded like Casting Crowns was rocking out in the backseat.”

“Sorry. I do not mean to keep doing that.”

“I know. I just wish I also knew why you keep doing it.”

“I’m not answering that. We’re supposed to be figuring out who knocked off our latest victim, not analyzing me.”

“Keller, come on,” Schmidt says. “Remember last year when you got so upset with me ‘cause I froze you out over that promotion? Well, you’re doing the same thing to me. I don’t know what’s going on, but fair warning. If you don’t tell me soon, I’ll force it out of you, and I won’t be as nice as you were.”

“I wasn’t that nice.” I chuckle. “As I recall, I screamed at you and zinged you with musical lyrics. But I will tell you, as long as you promise you won’t go running to Tunney, trying to get me suspended or forcibly put on leave of absence or whatever. If I lost my job in any context right now it’d kill me.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s what’s keeping me together. It’s my hard proof that I’m still a good cop.”

Schmidt nods, but looks reluctant. “Okay. For now, I promise to keep what you say in confidence. Spill it, lady.”

“Okay. You know those nightmares I’ve been having? I gave Dorothea the nasty details last time I came over for dinner?”

“I remember. I knew something was up then. She made brownie cake, and you took one bite and pushed the rest away.”

“I thought you were too busy playing paper football with Kurt and David to notice. But anyway—they’re worse now. Before, I was just dreaming about the murder accusation and how I thought I was responsible for Adam Baker’s death and you getting shot. But now I’m dreaming about the rape, and the suicide, and Mama and Daddy.”

“How do those all figure together?”

“How should I know? I’m not a shrink. All I can guess is my subconscious thinks that if they hadn’t died, the other two things wouldn’t have happened. And that I could’ve stopped their deaths so they didn’t happen.”

“Keller, how could you have stopped it? You were what, seven?”

“Eight. But that’s not the point. The point is that it’s all connected somehow. But it gets worse. The nightmares are spilling over into daytime, too. Every time I look down at my hands at work, they’re shaking. I’m dropping stuff, bumping into stuff—you know, you’ve seen it. Sometimes I can’t hear what’s going on around me because I’m so far away. If a case even remotely involves something that happened to me, I’m a mess. In fact, that basically sums it up. Schmidt, I’m a mess.”

My partner’s nodding. “And on top of that, some sicko decides to send you fatal candy and a bouquet straight out of one of those asinine vampire movies.”

“Yeah, and that sicko is also starting to scare me. When I pray, I thank God for all the good things—Gil, the kids, your family, the fact that the other guys accept me now—everything. But then I ask why He’s let me go through so much. If this is a faith test, how faithful do I have to prove I am before He stops it?”

Schmidt runs a hand through his hair. “You’re gonna slap me, but I don’t know. I could tell you that all Christians go through rough times, but it wouldn’t help. On the other hand, I can give you a theory. Wanna hear it?”

“I’ll take anything you’ve got. You could tell me to shave my head all except for a pink Mohawk, walk into the station like that, and greet Tunney with, ‘yo, T-Man, where’s my Celestial Seasonings’ and I’d do it.”

Schmidt cracks up. “Okay, okay,” he finally manages. “I’ve prayed about you, and here’s what I think. God has to make your tests a little harder so you’ll be challenged. It’s like a smart kid in an easy class—they get bored. You’re the same way. If your mind and body can’t work hard, you get bored.”

I nod. “Okay. So it wouldn’t be a sufficient test if God, say, allowed me to lose electricity for a week or take a pay cut. He knows I’d just find a creative way to deal.”

“Yes. He’s not being mean. He’ll never be vindictive with or mad at you. He’s just pushing you because He knows you need the challenge, and because He knows your gift for worship. When each test in your life is over, you always come back and praise Him with all you’ve got. Remember just after the accusation? You bragged on Jesus for weeks afterward.”

“That’s right.” I have to smile. “But even God has to know I’ve got limits. I’m not that tough. You ever watch that show *Solitary 3.0*? I’ve seen episodes where I thought, ‘no blankety-blank way, pal.’”

Schmidt chuckles. “You’d be surprised. I think you could do pretty well if you had to. But I know. I know you’ve got limits, and so does God. That’s why I think He’s got another reason for all this, even though I don’t know what it is. But we’ll discuss it later. For now...” He gestures to the building we’re parked in front of—the morgue portion of Our Lady of Mercy Hospital. “You up to going in? You can wait out here.”

I bite my lip and square my shoulders. “No. If God is testing me, it’s a given that the devil wants me to fail. I’ll show him.”

“Okay, but better put on your armor first. Walk and talk. Quote a couple verses for me.”

“Which ones?”

“Give me Ephesians 6:10-18, as much as you can remember, and Philipians 4:6-8. Go.”

So I quote the Scriptures and cheer mentally when I get both spot-on. But five minutes later, when Schmidt and I are bent over a morgue drawer, cheering is the last thing I want to do.

Our latest homicide statistic is a woman, and a redhead at that. From what Schmidt and I found out earlier this week, she was a kindergarten teacher from Asheville who'd moved to Cherry Creek after her dad was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. She hadn't found a job yet and no one in town knew her well enough to want to kill her. But the initial report says somebody slit her throat and dumped her wallet, ID and all, in the sewer. Now the only name she's got is Jane Doe.

"A kindergarten teacher," I breathe. "If that isn't the single most deranged..."

"Don't think about it." Schmidt's tone is short, but still neutral. "What can you tell from looking at her?"

I make myself meet Jane Doe's eyes. By now, they look fake, like a couple of blue marbles in a snowman's face. My own eyes travel down to her nose—normal, but a little squashed-looking where she might've been pressed against something—her mouth open in one last scream...the slit. Bright red blood, bruises...ooh, I think I might...no. No, Keller, don't. You said you could handle this, so handle it. C'mon, be a cop.

"Right-handed," I manage. "The perp was right-handed. And...and he must've done this to her in her sleep. See? She's not injured anywhere else. She didn't struggle."

"Good," Schmidt coaches. "Keep going. You can do it."

A deep breath helps me look at Jane Doe again. "It has to be a small knife. The kind you can stash easily, even keep on your person. The incision's too small for something like a butcher knife. But it's not clean, either. There're these flecks of skin here, like the guy was trying and kept slipping, or didn't quite know what he was doing."

"Right. But think like our victim. Would you sleep through that?"

"No. I mean, some people are pretty heavy sleepers, but that would be ridiculous." I smile. My voice is stronger now. My detective's energy hasn't failed me, and more importantly, neither has God. "He would've had to drug her. Can you move a little so I can get close to her mouth?"

Schmidt steps aside and I continue examining Jane Doe with his help. It seems like it takes forever, but finally, Schmidt says we're done and alerts the officiating doctor to that effect. Once we're back in the car, Schmidt whistles through his teeth. "That, partner," he says, "was

some serious devil butt-kicking you were doing back there. I don't think I've ever seen you get that close to a corpse in a morgue."

A breath zooms out of me. "I thought I was gonna end up right there next to her. I mean, I'm not as scared of death as I used to be now that I have Jesus and I know where I'm going. But the idea of what happens beforehand, and everything associated with death down here, still freaks me out."

"That's probably because of culture," Schmidt says. "We've made death into this dark, frightening, awful thing full of blood, zombies, open graves, and who knows what else. People always forget that death can be good if they die with God on their side."

"Well, sure, but I'm not sure I believe death is good, even now," I say. "Heaven's great, but don't you remember back in Eden, at the beginning? Adam and Eve were supposed to live forever. Death was their punishment for eating the wrong fruit. And even though God made death kind of okay with the cross and redemption and all, don't you think He knows how terrible it feels? He sees people crying and going to funerals and missing their loved ones like crazy. That must make Him remember that death wasn't in the original deal. And doesn't the Bible say God comforts people with broken hearts? Well, death has to be included there—like, number one on the list."

Schmidt laughs, but gently. "Score one for Maria Keller. Never thought I'd see the day you'd take me down in a spiritual debate. But I'm sick of talking about death."

"Took the words right out of my mouth." I flip on the radio, at a much lower volume, and start singing along with the title song from *The Sound of Music*. Midway through, Schmidt cuts me off.

"Hey!" I laugh. "You say you don't wanna talk about death and then you kill my music? What gives? Besides, he who drives controls the wheel. She who rides controls the radio."

"True," Schmidt says. "I just—Keller, listen to me. You are good. Really good. That's not an easy song to sing—most of those Broadway numbers aren't, especially the soprano ones. Even I know that and I never sang a note in my life."

"C'mon, Schmidt, I'm not that great. Okay, I admit I'm good, but..."

“Yes. Yes, you are that great. Keller, usually when people sing along with the radio, you can tell they’re kinda lip-synching. But I could pick you out, and you sound just as good as Julie Andrews, no joke. So I gotta ask—what in the world are you doing chasing perps and cleaning up their messes? And I know—I know your dad gave you the practicality talk and basically made you get into the cop business, but...”

“But nothing,” I cut my partner off. “What Luke gave me was nothing but a hard time. And the longer I’m away from theater, the more evidence I see that he was right.”

“But the evidence is wrong sometimes, as you well know. If you’re perfectly happy doing what you’re doing, then why were you singing just now? Why, every time somebody walks by your cubicle, are you humming, singing, or listening to your iPod while working on your caseload?”

“Because I don’t want to turn into a cop who has no life but her job.”

Schmidt gives me a Look. “Okay, here’s another question. If we didn’t have to go back to work right now, where would you want to go to deal with what just happened at the morgue? Where, with whom, and when, do you feel safest and most comfortable in this town?”

I stare at him and then laugh. “You know what, I am not even going to go there. This is a completely useless conversation. Do you know what would happen if I trekked up to New York, or took my songs to Nashville? I’d just be one more wannabe trying to make it. I’d spend three years in a tiny roach-infested hole somewhere, Gil and I would have to make a few bucks in karaoke money pay the grocery bill, and I’d come right back here to see Tunney waiting and saying, ‘told you so.’”

“Okay,” Schmidt says. “But Keller, you know you’re lying, because if you believed any of that, you’d quit singing and caring about music. Yeah, so there are thousands of wannabes out there trying to make it. But...look at me. But you’re not a wannabe. What if you were the one singer who did?”

“He’s crazy. He’s nuts and that’s all there is to it,” I tell myself later while driving back from work. But then I get the urge to hum a few bars of “Mama, He’s Crazy,” and I can almost

hear Schmidt laughing at me. “Shut up,” I tell my invisible partner. “You are entirely too smug for your own good.”

Maybe, but he’s also someone you’ll listen to.

“Whoa!” I have to pull over. I’ve gotten used to God hitching rides in my car. In fact, we have some of our best talks there. But this tidbit throws me for a loop. “God, wait a minute. Are you saying you were...using Schmidt? That it was you talking, not him?”

I’m not going to spell it out for you.

“Oh, come on. I hate it when you do that. I thought parables went out with first-century Jerusalem.”

I can almost hear God laugh. ***Actually, I still love a good story. But no, I will not give you the answer. I am not requiring you to stay on the force or turn in your badge. That decision is yours. If I forced one on you, you would be obeying me blindly, and that’s not what I want.***

“You know, sometimes free will is seriously overrated.”

As if you, in particular, would survive two seconds without it.

“Ooh, sarcasm. I didn’t know you could do that.”

Whatever works, Maria. Whatever works.

“Okay, cool. And you’re right. Okay, I’ll work on what Schmidt said. For now, I’m going—“ Wait, where am I going? I feel my lips tip up, and I point at the ceiling. “Sneaky, but very clever.” I pick up my cell phone. “Hi, Monique. How’s the design project going? Oh—oh, really? Six kids, and you get to do all the bedrooms? Wow...yeah...yeah, you must be in seventh heaven...listen, I’m headed to the theater for awhile. Yeah...I’m gonna watch an open rehearsal, maybe hang out with the youth theater kids. M-hmmm...okay...no, don’t hold dinner, just leave a plate on the stove. Okay. Love ya...’bye.”

I should feel guilty and head home. Monique told me that Meg is out on a date with Derek Marquette, the doctor she’s been seeing off and on since last fall. Apparently, things are getting increasingly serious between them, which means Monique is the last single cousin standing. She

usually doesn't complain, but she's been down about it more than usual lately. I should go home and support her.

So then why do I have the unshakeable feeling I'm needed at the theater more?

CHAPTER 6:

“You can feed her all day with the Vitamin A and the bromofizz, but the medicine never gets anywhere near where the trouble is...”

-Guys and Dolls

“Okay, everyone, take five,” Gil calls to the actors. They don’t need to be told twice. Most head for the doors, but a few hang around the stage, and one or two find their way into the audience. Soon, I’m talking with a couple other actresses—the fairy godmother and one stepsister from Gil’s production of *Cinderella*.

“How’d we do, Maria? Truth,” says the godmother.

I smile. “Y’all were pretty good. But...”

“What? C’mon, we’ve never known you to be shy,” the stepsister says.

“Okay,” I say. “It’s just that everybody seemed a little bit bored.”

“It was that obvious?” The king must’ve overheard because he joins us. He lowers his voice and points to my engagement ring. “No offense to the boss, Maria, but we’re all bored out of our skulls. We know he’s trying to be family friendly and make up for the bad press the theater world’s gotten, but seriously. We all know this story upside down and backwards, and a few catchy songs aren’t going to revive it.”

“It’s like trying to put ketchup on a rotten cheeseburger,” says the godmother.

“Hmmm.” I think about this. “Have any of you talked to Gil? I’m sure if you went to him with good suggestions, he’d...”

“That’s just it,” says the stepsister. “We would have good suggestions, but we can’t use them. We’ve been doing the same plays over and over for years. *The Sound of Music*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Oklahoma*, *She Loves Me*, *Cinderella*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Odd Couple*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Fences*, *The Glass Menagerie*...we’re just in this big, long cycle. I wish we could do something more—more modern. *Legally Blonde* or *The Producers* or something.”

“Why can’t you?” I ask.

The king shrugs. "Not clean enough."

"Ooh, right. You do have a point," I agree. Gil has done everything to keep his theater clean and family-friendly without giving in to pressure to produce strictly Christian stuff. Unfortunately, as the actors just pointed out, that does tend to limit what he can use. Sometimes, plots that look clean aren't really, often because of the songs. I had to take most of the ones from *Legally Blonde* off my iPod because they had profanity in them. Still...

"There has to be something we can do," I think out loud. "I remember in high school, if a song or dialogue had profanity in it, my director would edit it out." But then, no amount of censoring would satisfy some people in this town, especially a person with the initials L.M., also known as my future father-in-law. Ugh. Jesus, give me the kind of compassion you have for that man, idiot though I may think he is.

"What about this," I finally suggest. "I'll go home and go through my play repertoire. I've been in a ton, and I kept all my scripts. There's got to be something fresh in there. And in the meantime, I want to talk to Gil about a few other ideas."

"Revamp *Cinderella*?" Gil repeats.

"Yes. Think about it, honey. There are so many ways you could take it. Like, think about an academic Cinderella, okay? She's the top student in some class, but then the old teacher retires, and the new one comes in with her two snooty kids. Boom—Cinderella's being forced to do their homework, help them cheat, and do the grunt work on projects. But then word starts going around about this big Knowledge Bowl tournament. Cinderella really wants to go, but she's been given an unjust detention, so her best friend inspires her to go to the principal and explain everything. The principal believes her, she gets a special escort to the contest, she wins, and the snobs look like fools. Plus, she gets the college scholarship one of them was supposed to rip away from her."

Gil's smiling, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "Okay, but how on earth could I write up new scripts, find someone to do new songs—"

“You wouldn’t have to do anything now,” I assure Gil. “You could finish out the season and start preparing for a brand new one. Meanwhile, you and I could brainstorm ideas. Who says we have to stop here? Gil, Cinderellas exist everywhere, and some of them have to do worse than scrub floors. You could have a monologue series that speaks out against horrible things that happen...violence, rape, child abuse, whatever. We could modernize some of the musicals—keep the same songs, but spice up the plot some. You could have productions where the whole thing is singing—you know, like a Gershwin revue or a Sondheim revue or a—the youth theater could do Disney, even. There could be something where a lot of famous play characters get together on the same stage. You don’t have to stick to squeaky clean stuff—you could do productions that needed minor editing. God’s not gonna strike anybody dead for saying ‘darn’ or ‘heck.’ There’s so much...”

“Whoa.” Gil places gentle hands on my shoulders. “Maria, darling, slow down. You have fantastic ideas, but you must realize they’ll take awhile to implement, if I can even manage that.”

“You can. You’ll have me right with you.”

“Yes, and you’ll be a tremendous help. But we’ll need the whole staff behind us, and some of them might well be resistant to change. Besides which, some people, and you know the ones I mean, would not like your ideas at all. My father sees the Stage Door as only a business venture, and if I gave him one hint of bucking the system...”

“What?” I cup his chin in my hands like he sometimes does to me. “Gil, honey, what is it? What are you not telling me?”

Gil clears his throat. “Maria, sit down and listen. In our relationship, I have never been less than honest with you. An idiot, yes, but I’ve never kept things from you—at least, things I thought you needed to know, or the things you wanted me to tell you. I didn’t think I’d have to mention it because the Stage Door’s always been a popular theater, but...”

“What? Gil, is your dad’s name on the deed or something?”

“No, no. This place is 100% mine.”

“Oh, that’s good. You scared me for a second. But then what...”

Gil clears his throat again, louder. “Dad may not be part owner, but he is a serious financial backer. We could get by without his funding, but back when I bought the Stage Door, he set some ground rules as to what would and would not go on in here. It was his money, which at the time I was sunk without, so I agreed. And if he withdrew the funding now, the money isn’t the only thing I’d lose. I’d also lose his respect.”

“Oh, for the love of—excuse me!” I turn my back and grab a lemon Life Saver from my purse. “Gil, I...I don’t...” I suck the awful thing. “I can’t trust myself to say anything. I am so—I’m so angry I could...I’m...I’m furious! I could just...”

“I know, darling. I’m so sorry, I—”

“No! No, Gil, I’m not angry with you. I know what kind of man your dad is. Oooh, yes, I know exactly what he is. And he’s the one I’m mad at. To coerce you into...and then to threaten you with loss of respect, directly or not...as if you ever completely had it! To do what he’s done to you, to the kids...I’m surprised you aren’t in therapy! I wish I had that bull-headed moron here now—I’d...I’d put him through the Chinese water torture, I’d use thumb screws, I’d hang him upside down by his toes in a...I’d...I’d claw his eyes out and eat them!”

Gil is clearly trying not to laugh his head off. “Are you finished?”

I slump in the chair I jumped out of. “I guess. Sorry. I didn’t mean most of that.”

“It’s okay. There’s no sin in venting to me. But please, for your own peace of mind, don’t tell my father what you know. And don’t tell me I have to go over to his house and tell him off. If we need to, I want us to confront the issue together, firmly but calmly.”

I accept the hug he offers. “You’re right. I don’t think it’s a question of “if” we have to deal with it, but you’re right. When we do, I want to be as cool as possible. Like Luke always said, a half-cocked cop is two hundred times more dangerous than the worst criminal on the street.”

“Sounds like he knew plenty about that.”

“Oh, yeah. His temper’s worse than mine. I mean, he never beat me or threw stuff or destroyed my property. But he would get this look on his face, kinda like a timber rattler that’d already warned you, and he’d start talking in this cold, measured voice, and then he’d blow. And when he did, it was a monologue from Hades, let me tell you.”

Gil smiles. "I'm guessing you made him lose it now and then."

"Not really. It was more like we lost it together." I laugh. "I remember this one time, I'd only been living with him and Jasmine for a few months. I'd been late for English, again, and gotten a tardy slip, and the rule was your parents had to sign those. Well, I tried to explain to Luke that I'd been reading and lost track of time and I hated English anyway. He started yelling, saying if I cared about my schoolwork as much as my pleasure reading, I wouldn't have this problem, that being late was disrespectful, that he didn't care if the English teacher was the creature from the black lagoon, and when was I going to grow up and start being responsible? I guess Luke figured he really nailed me with that last line, but then—" I laugh. "I don't know what got into me. I said I didn't mean to be late, my English teacher did happen to be mean, and that if being a responsible grownup meant denying the truth and becoming a complete goody-goody nerd, I'd pass."

My fiancé is laughing like crazy. "I'd have disciplined you for back-talking."

"Oh, Luke did, later. But first, he just stared at me. He didn't grow up around girls, see—just his three brothers. I guess he figured if he yelled at me, I'd cry and he could hug me and tone down the lecture, and I'd never do anything wrong again. He couldn't believe his kid was getting into a verbal wrestling match with him. So we yelled back and forth a little more, he sent me to my room, and he made me read ahead in the English book and do the next day's assignments. But later, I was down in the kitchen making myself some chocolate milk, and I caught him smiling at me. He hugged me and said, 'Maria, what am I gonna do with you?' So I said, 'I guess you've got two choices. Keep me around or die of boredom.' Jasmine came in to see what we were howling about."

"Maria," Gil asks after a minute, "do you think Jasmine would believe you now if you told her again that you never tried to take your own life?"

I shrug. "I really don't know. I'd like to think she would, but I don't know. Besides, let's say we did kiss and make up. I don't want a happily-ever-after reunion with them. Luke, and therefore Jasmine, would assume I'd come to my senses and want to stay on the police force, and I'm not sure I do. And then the fights would start again. You see? If I tried to make up now, Luke might

only take me back because he thought I was towing his line. And Gil..." I stare at him. "God's excluded, and excluding the fact that we're both gonna have to sacrifice to make our marriage work, we are both too old to tow lines."

Gil nods. "So you're considering leaving the force?"

"Slow down, cowboy. I'm not considering anything yet. But I want to keep my options open."

"Well..." His lips come in for a landing. "The option of the Stage Door is always open. You'll have a place right beside me."

"Thanks, Captain."

"You're welcome, Gumshoe." He frowns. "What would I call you if 'Gumshoe' didn't fit anymore?"

I laugh and punch his shoulder. "You can always call me Gumshoe. Gumshoes think up creative ideas, solve problems, and use serious guts, don't they?"

Gil holds me and kisses me again. "That they do."

We kiss a couple more times and stay frozen before I back off. "I've gotta go. Meg and Monique will worry if I'm too late. See you in a couple of days?"

"Yes. First the caterer and florist, and then we clear our heads with...are you sure I should go horseback riding with you?"

"Gil, I promise, it's like riding a bike. Although I've only done it a handful of times since I moved here, so if I fall on my butt, you have permission to laugh like a psychotic hyena."

"Deal. Drive safely, okay?"

"I will."

I'm planning to go home, eat some of Meg's extra-spicy jambalaya (with a tall glass of milk, of course), change into my jammies, and send myself off to visit the sandman with the help of my newest Christian fiction title. But those plans get shot to smithereens when I come in the house and see my cousins. Meg's huddled up in a corner of the couch crying, and Monique is pacing the floor. Meg's date, Derek, is sitting in a chair, looking grim.

"Meg!" I run over to her. I know that crying is the way Meg handles tough stuff, and so I usually ignore it. But something in her eyes makes me think twice. "Meg...Meg, what is it, sweetie? Did Derek dump you?" I turn on the doctor. "Marquette, if you hurt her, I'm gonna..."

"N-no," she stammers. She proceeds to rattle something off in French, and Monique goes to her. "Meg, stop now. We can't help you if you don't speak English."

"Take deep breaths," I advise her. "Like you've seen me do...yeah, that's right...one more. Okay, now what happened?"

"I...I...we...Derek and I..." Meg starts, but then she starts crying again.

"Meg..." Monique pulls her close to comfort her, and I throw my hands in the air. "Will one of you please tell me what's going on, and sooner rather than later?"

Monique looks up. "We just had an up-close-and-personal visit with the slime scourge of the earth," she growls.

"What?" I turn back to Derek. "Marquette, start talking, and now."

"Whoa, whoa, easy," the good doctor tells me. "Meg and I are okay. What, you seriously think I'd hurt her? I love her. And even if I didn't, I haven't forgotten for one minute that she's got a cousin who totes a gun. In fact, I'd say you're gonna need that thing."

"And why would that be?" And why am I giving in to a sudden urge to crack my knuckles?

Meg finally regains some control, stands up, and pulls something out of an end table drawer. "Derek was walking me inside when we found this in the driveway," she says. She hands me a black rose. Wrapped around it are two newspaper clippings. The first is one that came out after Adam Baker's death, from a rag known as *Voice of the Creek*. The photo on the front has my smiling face right next to a copy of the mug shot Rawlings took when I got locked up. The other clipping, from the *Cherry Creek Chronicle*, shows me with Gil. It's our engagement announcement, but there's a huge red X across my face.

My heart goes into metronome mode, but I try not to show it. "Okay," I tell the others. "Okay, let's be calm. This isn't a big deal. It's not like this person wrote 'die, Keller, die' on the newspaper."

"Maria, are you in that much denial?" Meg demands. "They may as well have!"

“She’s right,” Derek says. “Now, I’m not a cop, but even I know this is bad news. Somebody wants you out of this town. Maybe in a real lockup.”

“But that makes no sense.” When did my voice get so breathy? “How are they supposed to...it’s not like that,” I finish, not caring how weak I sound. “How could I get framed again? The homicide division knows better now—they would never fall for it. Not again.”

“No, they wouldn’t,” Monique says. I can barely hear her. “And I think whoever did this knows it. Maria, someone’s out to kill you.”

“No.” I feel the way I did when I first heard my parents died—as if denying it could make the news a lie. “If that’s what this is, why isn’t there a bomb in our mailbox? Evidence that someone broke in the house?”

Derek straightens his clothes. “Maria, where’s your phone? I think I need to call your colleagues.”

I want to protest, but can’t. I also know I can’t make the call myself. “There’s a phone in the kitchen, and the station number is on speed dial—number three.”

“Please tell me you’ve found something.” I hate how desperate my voice sounds, but the longer my fellow detectives are here, the more real this all seems, and I’m not sure how much more I can take.

Schmidt sits next to me. “No. No clues, no prints, no nothing. But we’re not giving up. We’re going to go through the database and see who we know who might have the slightest connection to you. And...” He breathes in. “Some of us are gonna be taking a little trip down to the correctional facilities.”

I crack my knuckles for the fifth time in a row. “You think Rawlings or Sarah Goodson could be doing this?”

“Don’t rule it out,” Walker speaks up.

“But how? Not from inside a prison.”

Tunney chuckles. “Keller, you just gave me one more piece of evidence that you wouldn’t last a minute in one of those places. Do you realize what goes on in there? Guards take bribes,

kid. Inmates help each other out. And most criminals come out worse than they were when they went in.”

I want to moan and fall back onto the couch, but no way will I do it in front of my supervisor. Instead, I go for self-deprecation. “I’m sorry to get you guys out here. It’s probably nothing, I...”

“Oh, no, it’s something,” Greenwood says. “And it’s something we intend to fix.”

“So what do we do now?” Monique asks. She and Meg are sitting on either side of me. Derek went home after repeated assurances that we’d all be okay.

Tunney claps once, a sign that he’s about to take charge. “What we do now is tighten things up. I’m gonna call the patrol division and get surveillance on this house. You two ladies don’t go out alone until an officer gives the okay. Keller, if you’re still up to coming to work...”

“Absolutely, sir.” It’s either that or sit here and go insane.

“Then I’ll pick you up and take you back,” Schmidt volunteers. “And if you want to go somewhere else, leave that to your cousins or Gil.”

Tunney and the others talk a little more, and then they all head out. “It’s gonna be okay, Keller,” Tunney says. His voice is one step from gentle. “See you tomorrow. Try to get some sleep.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. By the way, Spade says hi.”

“Spade who? Oh—oh, the dog. As in, Sam Spade the detective. Clever. Yeah...uh, tell him hi back.”

“Will do. Hang in there, kid.” Tunney leaves, and I make myself face my cousins. “I don’t want to talk,” I tell them. “I just need...”

“Of course,” Meg says. “Take some decaf tea or milk with you.”

“Will do.” I head up to my room.

At 1:00 AM, a dark thought shakes me awake and won’t let go. I promise myself it’s just this once, take a blanket and pillow downstairs, and spend the rest of the night on the couch.

One week later, mid-June has turned up its hot, sticky heat full force. I could kill Rodgers and Hammerstein for making up that idiotic “June is Bustin’ out all Over” song. Oh, wait. They’re already dead. Oh, well.

The truth is, the only thing busting out all over is evidence of my stalker. After the black rose incident, Tunney got me security as promised, but the attacks are still going on—at the Stage Door, Gil’s house, and my house. Once, it was a CD that Gil initially thought was a new musical score, but when he played it, it turned out to be a series of requiems. I found a redheaded doll smeared with fake blood sticking out of my mailbox. And once, Gil and I came back from a date to find a package sitting on his front stoop. Paige had already opened it and was freaking out because it contained several vials of strychnine, a gun, and a heavy piece of rope, all marked with a big red M.

Of course, Paige isn’t the only one freaking out these days. I’ve hidden it from my cousins, my coworkers, and Gil’s kids as best I can, but the whole thing is starting to get to me. It’s reached the point that I’m playing music at top volume because the voice of death is screeching in my ear 24-7.

“What I can’t believe,” Farris says one oppressive Tuesday, “is that UPS is delivering these death packages. Isn’t there some rule that you can’t deliver stuff with no return address?”

“Not necessarily,” I tell him. “As long as they know where it’s going, they’ll deliver it.”

“Well, that is just great,” Farris scoffs. He spears Tunney with his eyes. “Boss, what the heck are we supposed to do? We’ve been interrogating half the town, but nobody’s guilty. What next, we just let this nut...” He looks at me and shuts up.

“Of course not,” Tunney says, but he bangs his fist on the front desk, which gives away his frustration. “We’re gonna have to get the Silverton guys in here. We haven’t seen a stalking case in over a decade, but they have. They’ll know what to do.”

“Thanks, sir,” I tell him. “Listen, I am so sorry about all this.”

“Why? You stalking yourself? Because if you are, I’ll save anybody else the trouble and kill you here and now...relax, Keller, I’m kidding. And for Pete’s sake, stop groveling. None of this

is your fault, and before you say it, we're not 'taking precious time out of our caseloads' to follow this one. Business has been slow as Christmas lately and you know it."

"Right. What I wouldn't give for a good old-fashioned 'kid knocks off Aunt Agnes for the inheritance money' case right now." As if on cue, my phone rings.

"That's Aunt Agnes," Greenwood laughs. "Go for it, sister."

"Cherry Creek Homicide, this is Detective Keller. How can I help you?"

"You can help me," a voice growls, "by dropping dead."

I cover the phone with my hand, mouth "stalker," and wave my colleagues over. Schmidt puts my phone on speaker, and the voice cackles. "Go ahead, let your little buddies hear me. Not like they can do anything. You're obviously not getting the message, so let me make it clear. Your days are numbered, missy. I can get to you in forty-eight hours, and then you'll be gone."

Schmidt snatches the phone. "Listen, you..." He says a few words I never thought I'd hear come out of his mouth. "You come one step near her and you'll be dead within twelve hours, how's that?"

The voice laughs again. "Oh, you must be the little woman's protector. Well, you tell your partner this for me. She's still got time. I'll let her live awhile longer. She should just be careful with what time she has, because she won't know when it's up. And here's another bone for all you hungry dogs in blue. This is about her, no one else. So you people take surveillance off her house, or the next place Maria Keller will get decent sleep is in the morgue." *Click.*

Tunney stalks toward his office. "I'm calling Captain Eatonton. See if we can't trace the call. Greenwood, you're a tech wizard. Disconnect Keller's phone. Schmidt, take her home. Now," he says before I can argue.

"You okay?" Schmidt asks halfway to my place. "Well, wait, that's an incredibly dumb question. Try this one. What can I do to help?"

"I don't know, I..." But then something comes to me. "Pray. I have, but I don't have words for what just happened. Schmidt, that was...it was...horrifying. I..."

"Shhhh. I know. Okay." He pulls over, puts a hand on my shoulder, and leads a long prayer for my protection and peace, among other things. "And Lord," he says, "please help her

understand that she's not trouble or a burden to any of us in the division. She's a cop, yes, but she's our partner and friend first, and gender doesn't change that one iota. Now, you said that if we asked for anything in your name, you would do it, so I—we—are asking. In Jesus' name, amen."

"Thanks." I'm practically croaking. "Um, Schmidt? I'm not ready to go home just yet. Could you drop me off at Gil's? Paige and Laurence are there with the kids, and if I spend time with them, I might feel better."

"I would, but you don't need Laurence's mouth right now. He'll probably negate what I just prayed about you not being trouble. But..." He winks and picks up his cell phone. "Dorothea's got the next few days off. Dorothea? Hey, honey...yes, I'm fine, but unfortunately, Maria's not. Oh...oh, no, physically, she's great. I'll explain later. All you need to know right now is that she needs some serious distractions, some serious food, and...uh-huh. Yeah. Yeah, for a few hours at least, until her cousins get in. Right...we're on our way. Kisses." He hangs up and smiles at me. "Won't be long until you and Gil are doing that."

"I hope so."

"You will. C'mon, I know today's been rough, but you're going to be fine. Let me see some of that optimism you're famous for."

So I smile back and tell Schmidt he's right, but we both know I'm lying.

CHAPTER 7:

“Something’s gotta give, something’s gotta give, something’s gotta give...”

-Daddy Long Legs

A week later, I know it for sure. Something’s gotta give before I end up right back in the psych ward. And this time, it won’t be because somebody thinks I’m crazy. It’ll be because I am crazy.

There haven’t been anymore “gifts” from the stalker, or phone calls either, except one. In that one, he called Gil’s house to let me know that he always knew where I was and there was no way I could avoid him, but keeping me worried about when he’d strike was half the fun. Meanwhile, my colleagues haven’t had any luck tracing the calls or finding the dude, and I’m a wreck.

I’m so ashamed I could die with or without the stalker, but it’s gotten to the point that I’m afraid to go home. Meg and Monique have answered the phone to heavy breathing, as well as assurances that while they’re safe, they better tell me my clock is ticking. Gil and the Schmidts have offered me a place to stay, but just in case the perp shows up, I don’t want to drag them into a major scene, so I’m taking my only other option—sleeping on the couch in the detective bureau.

“Here, drink this,” Schmidt says on my third night sleeping at work. He hands me a cup of chamomile tea. “I heard you walking the floors last night.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s cool. Anybody else would be waking up screaming, sending all units over here. All things considered, you’re doing great.”

“Then I must be a better actress than I ever thought. Schmidt, I can’t take it anymore. I just can’t. The perp’s winning, and I hate it.”

“Hey, quit keeping score. Our first concern is your safety, and if that means camping out here for awhile, fine. Although...” He runs a hand through his hair. “Keller, look. I’ve been sticking up for you with Tunney, but he’s totally against you working right now and to be honest, so am I.

You can barely concentrate on what we're doing. The case reports are—well, I can barely read the chicken scratch you're putting on them these days. You told a crime victim to shut up yesterday. The Keller I know would never so much as raise her voice to a victim. Why are you purposely filling your mind with death?"

"Because like it or not," I say, "work is the one thing I've got to hold onto. If I can work, it means I'm still a strong lady. It means I can beat this. If I walked out now, who knows what'd happen? I'd get locked up again—in a mental hospital. Maybe for good."

"Keller, you're not crazy. You're just scared and edgy, and you have a right to be. But..."

"No. Please, just—give me a little more time."

My partner nods. "Okay, but I offer no guarantees on how much time that is."

I sigh. "Deal. See you in the AM."

"Okay. Tunney, Farris, and Doyle have the night shift, and they're here if you need them."

Schmidt laughs. "At this point, I think they'd all run in with their guns cocked if you sneezed. Try to calm your mind down and sleep, and please, promise me you'll take a pill if you need one." (My doctor gave me another prescription for the darn things—as well as a stern lecture).

"I promise. Now, go. Hug Dorothea and the kids for me."

"Done. Sweet dreams, and I mean it."

As usually happens lately, I'm so tired I fall asleep right in the middle of my nighttime devotion, even though the couch has metal springs and more lumps than a fresh batch of cookie dough. But an hour later, a nightmare shakes me awake. I ward it off with some serious silent prayer and a little mental singing, turn over, and go back to sleep. Around three AM, Greenwood walks in with an arrestee who's screaming his head off, which yanks me out of dreamland again. I sit up and dig in my purse for a couple of headache pills. Once I've taken them, I fold my hands and risk praying out loud, though in a whisper.

"Jesus, please help me. Please end this craziness, and soon. I care too much about these guys to—they should be working, not defending my honor like I'm some pathetic damsel in distress. And my cousins and Gil—I know they're worried sick. Please. Just...please, do something."

I will, but you're going to have to trust me.

I laugh. "Trust you? Ha! How can I trust you with a stalker breathing down my neck? How can I trust you knowing you allowed it?"

Maria, come on now, you know better. The stalker is working for the devil, not me. I have allowed it, yes, but it's to make you stronger, and to prepare you for the blessings ahead. I know it's hard, but that just means you have to let me hold you a little tighter.

So, without picking up my Bible, I go through all the stories I heard as a kid before Mama and Daddy died, about people who had faith in God and yet had it anything but easy. Daniel, who nearly became human Meow Mix just because he wanted to pray. His three buddies, who got out of a furnace unscathed. Esther, who not only handled a bizarre marriage with aplomb, but saved the whole ding-dang-dong Jewish nation. Mary, who agreed to be Jesus' mom even though she knew she'd get accused of premarital sex. Paul—after getting so much faith-related flak, anybody else would've thrown up their hands and become an atheist. Old Testament Joseph, my favorite—also thrown in jail for a crime he didn't commit, also a big dreamer, and for a guy, he sure knew how to dress.

I settle back into a sleeping position and yawn. "Jesus, I know I'm not a saint. I'll never be up there with those guys and gals. I don't expect to be. But thanks for letting them encourage me tonight. I'm gonna need it."

The next day, Gil comes to the station to take me out to lunch, armed with a batch of cheer-up letters from my cousins, the Schmidts, their kids and Gil's (who don't know the details but know I'm having a rough time), and several church friends, including all the Silent Witness gals. He's also brought a notebook because, he says, our song list is due to the disc jockey in two days.

"Of course, 'All I Ask of You' is our signature and first dance," Gil says over an appetizer of jalapeno poppers. We trade a smile, remembering the *Phantom of the Opera* song that became "ours" the day Gil asked me to marry him. "And then, of course," he continues, "I picked an Elvis number or two. But I'm really all thumbs at music choices, so I need a lot of help."

I have to smile. It's true that if we end up dancing to one romantic number and a couple of the King's hits, the guests will all run for the doors. "Okay," I say, "well, let's take the focus off us for a minute. I think we should have several that everybody would have a great time dancing to. So I was thinking, since we both love Jesus, we should have some of these." I write down some catchy Christian songs. "Not worship stuff, but definitely something with a beat."

"I like it," Gil says. "And I want 'I Say a Little Prayer for You', because I pray for you every day." He gives me a quick peck. "Of course, sometimes that gets my focus completely away from God."

I elbow him. "Behave! Okay, so Dionne Warwick it is...and of course we need show tunes."

"Absolutely. How about 'Impossible?' It's one of your favorites."

"Okay. And what if we did a funny duet—something like 'Anything You Can Do?' You know, because we didn't like each other at first. And it's not a show tune, but since you're marrying a cop, how about 'Stop in the Name of Love?'"

"I love it."

Several minutes later, thanks to Gil's gift for organization, we have our song list in almost perfect order, but then Gil throws a curve ball. He clears his throat. "Okay, honey. What about the father-daughter dance?"

I flinch. I debated having one of those at all, but Gil insisted, saying it was a tradition. Schmidt offered to walk me down the aisle and dance with me as a "big brother," but he and Gil have both made it clear he's a backup if, when I call Luke, he doesn't answer or refuses to come to the wedding.

"Maria?" Gil asks.

I focus on the dip. "I haven't called Luke and Jasmine yet. I just can't get up the guts. What if they say no? I couldn't take it. And...and what if I don't even live to see September?"

"You will!" Gil's voice is as fierce as I've ever heard it. "Maria, you are going to live the fullest, richest life of anyone in this whole blasted country, if I have to manhandle every murderer alive to make it happen. So no more talk about if you don't, is that clear?"

I nod. "Yes. Oh, the food's here."

"So?" Gil asks once we've blessed our meals and eaten some. "Will you call them? Tonight?"

I pretend my entrée is fascinating. "I'll start working up the guts now."

"How was lunch?" Schmidt asks me when I get back. His mouth may have asked a simple question, but I'm also reading his eyes, and they're saying, 'please tell me you're okay.' I nod and smile. "Great, thanks. Gil insisted I order dessert, so I had the waitress box up a dozen brownies. They're in the lounge if you or anyone else wants them."

"Hey, you read my mind."

"I try. So, you need me right now? If not, I'm gonna go see if I can find anything else on Jane Doe's killer in the database."

Schmidt thumps my shoulder. "Go get 'em. But don't push yourself too hard."

"I won't. In fact, I was gonna get myself some tea first. I've cut way back, but I miss it."

A few minutes later, I'm in my cubicle, drinking strawberry tea and waiting for my email account to open. I start going through my messages. Most are so mundane I barely scan them. But then I automatically click on one and nearly fall out of my chair.

The email is a blank white screen, but a picture dominates it. That picture shows me, lying in a coffin. And the coffin is in an open grave.

Someone screams. My instinct is to yell at Doyle and Farris, who are in the lounge, to turn the TV down, but then I realize the scream came from me. And worse than that, more screams have followed. I hear, but don't feel, my body thud to the cubicle floor.

"Keller! Keller...Keller...Keller..."

All the other detectives are crushed into the cubicle. They're saying my name, but it sounds like some kind of crazy chant. I feel my head shaking. "No. No, no, no, no...please, God, please, God...no, no..."

A hand flies through the air. I suck in a breath when what happened registers. Tunney slapped me.

I turn on him. “Don’t you ever...don’t you dare...” But I don’t know what to say. I just sit on the floor, sucking in more air. The room starts to blur.

“Oh, Lord...” Schmidt pushes to the front. “Oh, Lord...Keller?” Schmidt puts his hands on my shoulders and lowers his voice to the tone you’d use in a library. “Maria. Maria, shhhh. Listen to me. Do exactly what I say, all right? I want you to focus on the second hand of this watch and take a normal breath. I’m going to count to seven, and you’re going to let it out. Here we go—one...two...three...four...five...six...seven. Good—again. One...two...three...”

Several seconds later, Schmidt releases me, but keeps talking in the library voice. “All right. Now, you’re going to get up and sit in your chair again, with your eyes closed. One of the guys will go and get you some water. You’re going to drink it, and then we’re going to talk.”

I obey without knowing I’m doing it. I feel Adams press a cup of water into my hands, and feel myself drinking it. I can hear all the other detectives muttering to each other, but nothing registers. I finally manage to look at them. “I am so...”

“If you apologize,” Tunney says, “I am gonna...” But Schmidt gives him a look that says “chill,” drops down next to me, and nods. “He’s right, Keller. You don’t need to apologize, and frankly, we are sick of hearing you do it. But let’s concentrate on the big issue here. Now, obviously, this creep could be in Cherry Creek or Silverton, but we need you to try to think. Do you know anyone outside of those places, anyone at all, who would be threatening you this way?”

I do try to think, even though my heart is still thrumming in my ears. Indeed, who might still be so angry with me as to... I can’t think it. And that’s not the only thing I can’t think of. It feels like my mind has totally shut down. I shake my head. “I don’t know. I have no clue.”

“What about those professors at the college?” Farris prompts. “Who was that one man, Showalter? The one who almost flunked you?”

“But she got the real perp,” Doyle says. “Why would Showalter want to come after her now, six months later, ding-dong?”

“Hey, he could. Murderers always stew, you know that. Or at least I thought you did. What, you just get out of the academy yesterday?”

“Shut your pie holes, you two,” Tunney snaps. “We don’t have time for you to act like fifth-graders. Since it was your idea, Doyle, I want you checking up on Showalter. Walker, call the correctional facilities. I want to have a nice long chat with Sarah Goodson and Pete Rawlings.” A shadow crosses his face when he mentions Rawlings’ name, and I feel a stab of sympathy. He and Tunney were good friends back when, but... I shudder.

“Easy, Keller, easy,” Tunney coaches. “Now come on, give me something. Who else?”

I close my eyes and shuffle through my brain. It feels like there’s something or someone way in the back, but I don’t know what it could be. Worse, the harder I try to reach for it, the more scared I feel. “I can’t...I can’t...”

Greenwood puts his hand on my shoulder. “Try, sweetheart. Please try.”

But Greenwood’s words just make me feel worse. His use of “sweetheart” has let us all know the situation is dead serious. In Cherry Creek, male cops will sometimes call females “honey” or “sweetie” in brotherly affection, but the others know I’d sooner punch them than allow it. But this time, I nod. “I don’t know for sure,” I say, “but it feels like there was something, a long time ago...”

“What about your rapist boyfriend?” Walker says.

The thought makes me stop and turn the name over, but I say no. “That’s been almost eight years ago now, and like you said, he was a rapist. He got what he wanted. I haven’t heard from him since.”

“Gil’s father-in-law, then,” Greenwood says. “We know he hates you.”

“But he wouldn’t kill her,” Schmidt says. “Laurence Montgomery is way too concerned about being Mr. Perfect Religious Man.”

“Just the same, I think we better bring him in,” Tunney says. “Schmidt, you handle that. Play it soft and gentle-like. And you tell him if he even breathes a word to Keller after you two talk, I’ll taser his butt off. I want you out of here in ten minutes.”

“Yes, sir.”

“All righty.” Tunney claps and stands up. “Walker, Farris, Doyle, you all get going too. Farris and Doyle, check in with the Silverton cops before you hit the college. Greenwood, Adams,

I want you to tear this email of Keller's apart. Google like there's no tomorrow. If you come up with anything, I want to hear about it, and I'll send you wherever you've gotta go. Keller, I want you in my office. We've got to have a serious talk."

I follow my supervisor back to his office, feeling more condemned than ever. He gestures for me to sit down across from the desk, but doesn't say anything right away. It occurs to me that I've never been in here, so I take a few minutes to let my eyes walk around. The place is Tunney, all right—not one item crooked or misplaced, the desk completely empty except for a blotter and a couple of pens, both of which come from CCPD. No plants, no candy, no nonsense, except... I smile. I always knew the old crust wasn't as hard-nosed as he let on. He's got what looks like a dog's rubber ball in the corner and several photos up. A few are pictures of the homicide division, both before and after I came. One shows Tunney in full uniform and much younger—academy graduation, maybe? One, which must be recent, shows him with Spade, and one... I have to look away. The last picture is of my boss with his arm across the shoulders of another cop—a woman with hazel eyes and mahogany hair in a braid.

Tunney catches me looking. "Evie," he says. "Our captain liked to keep photos of individual teams around. He took that the year before..." He doesn't finish, but I know. The year before Evie was killed in a drug bust gone bad.

"Hmmm," is all I can say.

Tunney gives me an unreadable look. "Evie would've been my wife, you know."

I feel my jaw drop. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Cause it was none of your blasted business. But yeah, we got to where we were more than partners. She...I asked her after we finished our second year." He shakes his head. "Beyond all reason, I loved that woman. And she'd have loved you, if she lived." He kinda chuckles. "She'd have been after me to quit making you do the grunt work and let you get your feet wet."

I can tell where Tunney's going, so I shake my head. "Sir, I'm not Evie."

"I know that, kid. She was different from you in every way possible, including that she loved coffee and knew how to eat a triple bacon burger without worrying over the calories. But as

for ending up like her, face facts, Keller. You're more than halfway down that track." He sighs.

"Keller, you need to get out of here, and do it now."

I blink. "You can't...are you suspending me?"

"Blast it, woman. You must've had some lousy teachers, to think you're in trouble all the time. No, you are not suspended. You are not fired. You're not anything except totally incapacitated in every sense except your body."

"Sir, that's not true, I..."

"Horse hockey it isn't. What was that incident in your cubicle about?" He calms down and looks me in the eye. "Keller, listen to me. You're a great cop. Always have been, even if it took me awhile to admit it. And that's most of the reason why I've listened to Schmidt when he's begged me to give you more time. But this has been coming for weeks. You are no good to us in your current condition and you know it."

"But..."

"No, no buts, woman. I don't want you jeopardizing someone else's work or worse, hurting yourself. You have got to take a break, and by that, I mean a long one. As in, you don't walk through this door again until I call and tell you your little friend is behind bars."

I crack my knuckles. "Well, what on earth am I supposed to do, then? I mean, where am I supposed to go? What am I supposed to do? Good grief, Sarge, how am I supposed to eat?"

"Keller, this is paid leave. That part's easy. As for where to go, I can't make that decision for you, but you can't stay in Cherry Creek. In fact, I recommend getting out of state altogether. Don't you have people in Texas?"

"My...my adoptive parents," I manage. "But we haven't...we don't talk."

Tunney pins me with his eyes. "Then I suggest you start."

Tunney told me to leave right after our meeting. I drove home in my car, with Greenwood in the passenger seat. For two hours, I just sat in my driveway, crying and asking God where I was supposed to go from here. Of course, I knew, but it took that long to make the phone call.

Jesus must've sent an extra couple angels to watch out for me, because when I call, I get Jasmine. "Hello?"

"Jasmine? It's Maria," I answer.

I hear her gasp. "Maria?"

"Yeah."

She takes a few deep breaths. "I miss you so much."

"Well then, why didn't you answer me the first sixty times I called? Why did you forget my birthday?" The words are out before I can stop them.

Jasmine sighs. "Oh, baby, we didn't forget. We didn't shut you out. It's just that since last time you called and you and Luke argued—and since everything that's happened to you...honey, Luke doesn't know how to deal with it all. He's been taking every out of town conference and training opportunity they'll give him. We were all the way up in Tennessee on your birthday. But we have never forgotten you or stopped loving you. Not for one nanosecond. Please believe that."

"Jasmine, I..." Crumb. I'm crying again.

She is, too. "I know, Maria. I know. When you and Luke had that argument—oh, you should've heard it. I took his head off. I wanted to talk to you then, and I...but back to now. Tell me everything. About being a Christian, about the man you met. Everything."

"Jasmine, I will, but that's not why I called." I take a deep breath and explain everything. "And Tunney says I should go to Texas," I finish. "I know Luke won't agree, and I don't want y'all thinking I only think about you when I'm in trouble, but..."

"Of course we don't. And he will agree. He's missed you something awful."

"Are—are you sure?"

Jasmine sniffles and takes another breath, but all she says is,

"Come on home, honey."

CHAPTER 8:

“In the dark of the night, let your heart come home to me”

-A Christmas Carol

Despite Jasmine’s kindness, it still took a lot of wrestling with God before I got on the plane. At first, I planned to go to Tennessee with Gil and the kids like we talked about, but every time I thought about that, Jasmine’s face popped into my head. I argued with God—what if I went to Texas and it somehow happened that I never saw Gil again? Shouldn’t I meet Anne’s parents so I could at least know more about my fiancé’s family? What if the kids think I’m just running out on them? But all God said was,

I’ll take care of everyone else, Maria, but for now, you and I need to take care of you. I want you in Texas, and the discussion is closed.

Let’s be absolutely clear—I’m a Christian. I never said I was perfect. I know I could’ve ignored God, pulled a Jonah, and run the other way. After all, He’d have forgiven me. But one, I don’t take His forgiveness lightly, and two, I kinda wondered if, should I run, I’d end up driving into a lake or something. So on June twenty-first, the first day of a sweltering Texas “super summer,” I’m back in my home state.

Luke and Jasmine offered to pick me up at the airport, but I told them I’d rather drive since it’s been awhile since I had the freedom of being the only one in the car. So that’s why I’m currently cruising down the interstate toward their house on Michigan Street, South Houston. I laugh. Luke used to say living on Michigan Street was the biggest joke he’d ever heard. “Here we are smack in the middle of Texas, and anybody would think we’re from a place famous for its snow, mosquitoes, fudge, and not much else,” he’d say. I bite my lip. Do I want to hear that voice again, up close and personal? I’m not sure. I mean, I’ve forgiven Luke for giving me a hard time during my teenage years, but...

“Don’t think about it,” I tell myself. “You’ve had enough trouble lately.” I switch on the radio in the little tan rental and flip through the stations. Hmmm, no show tunes. I’m going to miss

Cynthia Cranston and WTHR. Oh, well. I set my iPod to shuffle through my Christian list. I'm gonna need some serious faith.

Actually, "serious faith" doesn't cover it, because when I'm half a block away, I get an almost overpowering urge to throw up. I even go so far as to pull over and get out of the car. "Crumb," I mutter at the air. "God, what in the Sam Hill is the matter with me? I'm turning into some kind of pathetic neurotic freak. And now I have to go back to Luke and Jasmine's house and deal with all those repercussions, and I know I'm not a prodigal, at least in the normal sense, but I might as well be one because I feel saturated with pig junk, which is probably how Luke thinks of me even if...well, there I go, talking at you instead of praying and trusting you—again—sorry, it's just..."

But God cuts me off. Not with His voice, like usual, but I suddenly have the strangest feeling that someone is standing right behind me. Of course, when I look, there's nobody there, but I know—absolutely know—there's a hand on my shoulder. That second, a gust of dry, but fresh Texas air braces me, and I'm able to keep driving. All too soon, I make the last turn onto Michigan Street and find myself sitting in front of number 4908. "Here goes," I tell myself. "Okay, girl, relax. You are not a prodigal. You did not rebel against Luke, and you're forgiven for rebelling against God. You are not covered in pig slop. You have every right to walk through the front door. Ready, and...go!"

I knock. I hear footsteps. Luke's or Jasmine's? I'm not sure—Jasmine must not have worn heels today. They're halfway to the door now...three quarters...

It's Luke.

I expect him to stand there, slack-jawed. I expect him to run get Jasmine and cause a major scene. I even expect him to slam the door in my face. What I don't expect is for Luke to take one look, step out, and hug me. I also don't expect it to be so easy to settle into his arms. We stay like that for a few minutes and then step back. I feel my head shake when I look at my adoptive father—same warm brown eyes, same blonde hair, with just a little white at the temples, same jeans, same boots, same crisp white shirt. "You're exactly like I remember."

“Well...” His voice is husky. “You are too, but...well, you’ve certainly grown. And your eyes...there’s something new there. You grew up on me.”

I shrug. “My life couldn’t be more different if I tried.”

“I’m sure. Oh...” He hugs me again, harder, and lets go. “I just...uh...” He coughs. “Um, why don’t you come in and I’ll make you a cup of tea—you still a tea-drinker?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Leave your luggage in the car. I’ll get it later.”

A few minutes later, Luke’s holding a cup of coffee and I’ve got my hands wrapped around a mug of black cherry tea. The mug, a bright red one with cream-colored trim, was always my favorite. Did Luke remember, or is that a coincidence?

“I remembered,” he says like he read my mind. “I...I kept telling myself I knew you’d come back, because there were things in this house you would take with you if you wanted to leave for good.”

Okay. Might as well deal with the big, stinky elephant in the kitchen right now. After all, I am glad to be here, and I do want my father to know I love him. “Luke, I’m sorry about leaving,” I say. “That, and...for making you think I tried to...you know.” Forgiveness or not, I refuse to back down and confess to a suicide attempt I never made.

Luke takes a drag on his coffee. “Maria, I put that behind me years ago. I knew you’d come home. I knew you loved us. So let’s you and me just...pick up where we left off, okay?”

We both know what he doesn’t say, and I can tell from Luke’s eyes that he wonders if I’ll argue. Well, if that’s what he wants, he’s gonna be disappointed. I’m also not going to point out that if we picked up exactly where we left off, it would mean restarting the whole theater vs. “real job” fight that we’d been in for almost ten years already when I left. I let him win and nod. “How much did Jasmine tell you?”

Luke coughs a few times. “Enough. She told me some psychopath is stalking you, threatening to kill you. Is that true?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“A few weeks.” I sum up the horrible litany of gifts and threats. Once I do, Luke gets the thundercloud look on his face that I remember from when I was a kid. “Maria Magdalena, why on earth did you keep trying to work the homicide beat in the middle of that? Why didn’t you call me? I would’ve come up there to help out, I would’ve...you know, I always said your independent streak was going to get you into so much trouble...”

“Luke, don’t,” I cut him off. “You of all people ought to know why I handled it the way I did. You’re a cop, too. If I had run off to hide somewhere, I would’ve given that perp exactly what he wanted.”

Luke studies me and smiles. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. I don’t have room to talk. But honey—a stalker? After all you’ve already been through?”

“Yeah, I know. I’m clutching my faith so hard I’m losing circulation.”

“Your...” Luke blinks. “Jasmine told me, but I was scared to believe it.”

“Well, you can,” I say. “And where is Jasmine? I really want to see her, too.”

Luke rolls his eyes. “She wanted desperately to be here, but the library scheduled a group of kids from the high school to come in and learn about research, and the head librarian called in sick at the last minute. She couldn’t get out of it. But she should be home in the next—”

The front door bangs open. “Where is she? Where’s my girl...oh!” Jasmine races in with all the strength of a Texas tornado and sweeps me into her path of chestnut hair, gray eyes huge with tears, and a body that still smells like lavender soap.

Of course, from that point, I don’t get a single second to think, but somehow that’s okay. It’s good to sit in the kitchen with my adoptive parents again and tell them what’s been going on in my life, even the bad stuff. It’s fun to see their eyes dance when I tell them about Jesus, and even more fun to laugh at Luke’s “he better treat you right or I’ll shoot him” jokes when I bring up Gil.

“I wish y’all could meet him—them,” I say. “Gil is so great, and the kids...I adore those kids. I can’t believe God’s gonna let me be their mom.”

Jasmine kisses my cheek. “You’ll be an excellent mom.”

“You think so?”

“We know so,” Luke says. “But tell us more about Gil. You met him on a case?”

“Yeah. I’m sure you heard about the Stage Door and everything.”

“Yes, we did,” Luke says. “I prayed for you that whole week you were—um, incarcerated. I came this close to driving to Cherry Creek and having a stern word with your boss.”

“He was out of town at the time,” I say. “Don’t worry,” I add when I see Luke’s frown. “God took care of me.”

“Yes, He did,” Luke agrees. “But honey...” He coughs. “It doesn’t always work out so well, getting too attached to the people you’re solving cases for. You should’ve been more careful with your feelings for Gil. Maybe then that Sarah woman wouldn’t have framed you.”

I feel like Luke just threw ice water in my face. I knew it. I knew he’d blame me. I never should’ve told him, I never should’ve come here...

“But then,” he says, “I suppose murderers will be murderers. So, tell us about going back to college. Did you finally get your degree in criminal justice?”

I hide a flinch. I forgot. The news media said that I’d been working on the choir case as a student, but neglected to mention that at the same time, I was working on a belated drama degree. Hearing Luke ask point-blank about criminal justice makes me feel a little sick. I want to lie and say yes in the worst way. Why did God have to put lying in the Ten Commandments, and then make it a deadly sin to boot?

A new thought snaps me out of my panic. I’m thirty years old now. So what if Luke frowns at me over what I studied—over anything? What’s he gonna do, yank me out of drama club? Ground me? I meet his gaze. “No,” I tell him. “I finally got my drama degree.”

Luke sighs. “Drama.”

“Yes.” I smile. “I got my drama degree, and I’m happy to have it.”

“Then we’re happy for you,” Jasmine says, her eyes letting me know she means it. “Now, let’s handle some basics. Do you need to lie down? Are you hungry?”

I feel myself relax because now I can tell the truth without fear. “I’m tired. Would it bother you if I ate later?”

“Absolutely not. Do...” She pauses. “Do you want your old bedroom?”

The question makes a lump form in my throat. “If that’s okay.”

“Sure is, hon. I was hoping you’d say yes. You still know your way around all right?”

“I could walk the whole house in my sleep.” I kiss both my adoptive parents. “I love you. I love you, and I’m happy to be home.”

Aren’t I?

I don’t know how I make it upstairs. My body is so starved for sleep I nearly curl up right on the landing. But once I walk into my old room, I’m wide awake again.

I didn’t expect Jasmine to keep the place the same, but that’s exactly what she did. Everything’s still there, although a few things have been moved around, probably to make cleaning easier. I let my eyes take a walk. My furniture—Monique painted it for me, with staffs and musical notes, and even notations for when to play forte or piano, or hold a note. My desk—ha, I left a college assignment sitting here. I pick it up. An unfinished draft of a paper for Criminal Justice 308, in which I tried to explain the top three improvements I thought needed to be made in the juvenile justice system. My pencils are still here, too, and the pen I got when my high school chorus went to Carnegie Hall senior year. There’re pictures of that on my bulletin board—that, and so many other concerts. So many plays. Photos of me with Luke and Jasmine, Monique and Meg, or even the whole family.

My dresser is still crowded—DVDs of all the plays I was in, a few of my favorite movies, the shoe-shaped knickknacks Meg brought me when her mom took her to Paris for graduation, loose change, an old rehearsal schedule, and...are those bullets? No, just shells. Must be from the last time Luke and I went shooting together. I even have a dog-eared book on the corner of the dresser—ah, an Agatha Christie.

My books are still in the bookcase, except Jasmine did turn them so the spines are all facing forward. I run my hands over each of them like I’m hugging my kids. Mysteries—Agatha Christie, Sherlock Holmes, Jane Castleberry—I even kept all my old Nancy Drews. A select number of classics I actually loved in school—*Jane Eyre*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Les Miserables*, all Shakespeare’s stuff, and a few others. Some Debbie Macomber and Jodi Picoult novels. A select number of the young adult books I loved enough to keep around. A few poetry books. The Bible

Luke gave me before I started college—man, I never even opened it. I look at the ceiling and laugh. I was so mad at God back then, and so stupid. I thought I had Him all figured out, but I was about as clueless as one person with a normal IQ can be.

“Good thing I came home to you before I came back here,” I say to God. “Otherwise, I might’ve thrown that Bible halfway to Dallas—oh, I wouldn’t really. Not now. You know that, right?”

I know He does. In fact, I’m tempted to page through that Bible. But what if Luke came in, saw me, and thought I was just trying to butter him up? I flop back on my bed and have to smile. The mahogany captain’s bed is unmade, the bright red quilt thrown back and revealing fresh sheets. Jasmine must’ve unmade it. Even when I became a legal adult, she couldn’t stand it when I didn’t make my bed. She’d have a heart attack if she knew I still don’t make it. It’s not a big deal, anyway. Just makes it easier to get back in. Ooh, speaking of...

I leave my shoes on the floor, hop in, and arrange myself, but before I close my eyes, I remember two more things. There’s a photograph of Mama and Daddy on the nightstand. I’m with them, at about four years old. We’re all standing in front of the theater, and I’m laughing because Daddy just whispered in my ear that someday, my name will be on the marquee. Mama’s wearing her angel pin—mine now, of course.

Next to the photograph sits another frame. This one has a copy of my adoption certificate. Luke has the original in a safe, but he gave me a copy because he wanted me to know that the adoption was permanent. I was through with foster homes, and more important, through with being sent back because I wasn’t perfect. He loved me no matter what.

“No matter what,” I murmur to myself. Yeah, no matter what. That is, until he figured out I had the drama bug and it wasn’t letting me go.

“Maria? Maria, honey...”

I blink up at Luke. “What?”

He smiles and sits on the bed. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I came up and I heard you talking in your sleep. You were telling someone to leave you alone and stop it, calling them a scumbag. You..." He trails off for a minute. "You said, 'Daddy, help me.'"

I bite my lip. Luke and Jasmine adopted me partly because they couldn't have their own kids, and even though Luke respected my love for my real mom and dad, it always hurt him a little. I remember that we didn't really talk for a week when I asked to keep my real last name instead of becoming Maria Brown.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"Ah, it's all right, darling." Luke strokes my hair. "You've been sweating. These nightmares have been going on a long time, huh?"

"Yeah. I don't know...I was hoping when I came here, they'd go away."

"And maybe they will," Luke says, "but..."

"But?"

He blinks and coughs. "Um, do you feel like you could come down and eat with us? Jasmine made enchilada casserole."

"Okay. Just let me shower and change first."

Several minutes later, I smile at Jasmine. "The casserole's just as good as always. You know, it's near impossible to get really good Mexican food in North Carolina."

"You ask me, it's impossible to get really good anything outside of Texas," Luke says. "You remember that Eastern barbecue I tried when we went to the police conference in Wilmington? I'm telling you, that was..."

"The worst excuse for barbecue ever invented," Jasmine and I finish. "We know, babe," Jasmine says. "But that was the Eastern kind. Maria probably knows where you can get a good Western-style plate."

I shake my head, knowing what Luke's reaction's gonna be. "Actually, I haven't eaten barbecue in several years."

"What?" Luke drops his fork, and an un-chewed mouthful of casserole falls out of his mouth. "And why not, dare I ask?"

“Too fattening. Fat cops can’t chase down suspects.”

“But honey, you were never even close to fat,” Jasmine says. “I don’t know what those cops told you—”

“It was the theater that did it.” Luke’s tone is dark. “Telling her athletic muscle was fat, and that she had to squeeze herself into a size-two costume. You remember when she started high school; it was a good year and a half before she’d touch ice cream.”

“Luke.” I force out a laugh. “Ease up. You know I didn’t eat ice cream because it coats your throat. You eat that stuff and sing, you sound like a power drill with a short in it.”

Luke laughs at that—a real laugh—and I feel my body relax. “Anyway,” I tell him, “I have a few wicked indulgences. I eat chocolate every day whether my boss likes it or not.”

“Hmmm,” Jasmine says. “And have Monique or Meg taught you to like something besides plain chocolate yet?”

“Mo gave up, but Meg keeps trying. She sneaked Reese’s cups into my stash once, but I noticed. Oh—I forgot to tell you. They’re coming down in a couple weeks, after we have some time to catch up.”

“It’ll be great to see them,” Jasmine says. “But we need to make some plans. How about a bookstore date, you and me?”

“That sounds super. I haven’t bought any new books in a month or so.”

“Just keep this weekend free,” Luke says. “I was gonna ask if you’d come shooting with me, and...well...” He looks at Jasmine, clearly begging for support.

“Uh-oh,” I say. “I’ve not been home twenty-four hours, and already I’m in trouble?”

“No.” Luke’s answer is quick and vehement. “It’s just—Jasmine was thinking, and now me, too—this isn’t just a catch-up trip, Maria. You need to recuperate from everything, and by that, I mean everything from the murder accusation on.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I’m gonna get plenty of rest and eat whatever you want me to, and I won’t call home to see how things are at the station.” Why is my heart beating so hard?

“That’s good,” Jasmine says, “but I think we all know it won’t be enough. You need help. We want you to see a counselor.”

I feel myself tensing up and shaking my head before I even think of words. “No,” I finally say. “No. No, absolutely not. You are not doing this to me again. You are not going to take normal feelings and twist them around so it looks like I’m crazy. You are not going to accuse me of being mentally ill—not again!”

“Maria, stop it,” Luke says. “We never accused you of mental illness. You never had mental illness. You were suicidal, yes, but...”

“For the four millionth time, no, I was not!”

“So then why did you write that note, demand release from the hospital, and run?”

“Because I was not going to let myself be locked up like a criminal!” I have to get up. I have to move, so I thrust my chair back and stride across the room, back to my parents. “My brain was fine, and I knew what was being done to me was unfair. So yes, I left. I left because it hurt too much to...”

“Don’t you dare talk to me about hurt. Not after what you did to us.”

Luke’s anger snaps across my heart like a whip. I want to shrink away from it, but I can’t. Instead, I close my eyes. I’m caught up in memories of my short time in the psych unit, and they’re making me mad enough to...to... I spin on my left heel and smack the counter with my open hand. Jasmine’s salad tongs drop to the floor, and I pick them up and jab them toward Luke.

“What do you mean, what I did to you? I said I was sorry. I tried to get back in touch—you were the one who ran off to police conferences every dang time—you always knew where I was. I never disappeared on you. You...”

“*Stop.*”

Jasmine’s voice makes Luke and I both jump. She’s glaring at us like we just tracked mud through the entire house, which in a way I guess we did. She stays like that for a minute, like a teacher who’s waiting for a bunch of rowdy kids to be quiet, and then talks.

“Now you two listen to me,” she says. “I am not going to listen to this conversation every day for as long as Maria’s here. Eventually, you’re going to have to work it out, because whatever did or did not happen eight years ago has already done enough damage to our family. But now is

a grossly inappropriate time. We're not talking about the past anymore. We're talking about what's happening now and how to deal with it."

She turns to me. "Maria, nobody thinks you're crazy, and no one is forcing you into a psych ward. There is nothing wrong with you other than your circumstances have torn you up. As a result, it's like your mind has the flu. You wouldn't lie in bed suffering with the physical flu, and you shouldn't have to suffer from the mental version, either. Luke and I cannot and will not force you, but we think you'd feel a lot better if you just talked to this woman. She's a Christian, and she's had over a decade of experience. She's even dealt with other police cases."

"And what are you gonna do if she decides I should check into an institution?"

"She won't. You're getting psychological help, not psychiatric, and there is a big difference."

I study Jasmine's face then, and after a few seconds, Luke's. I'm looking for the feelings I saw in their eyes last time it was implied that I was having mental problems—fear, disappointment, sadness, and yes, even a touch of anger. But this time, those feelings aren't there. They, especially Jasmine, just look as if all they want is for me to be myself again, which is exactly what I want, too.

I squeeze Jasmine's hand. "I guess a few visits wouldn't hurt."

CHAPTER 9:

“Whenever I feel afraid, I hold my head erect...”

-The King and I

My first appointment is on Friday at nine-thirty AM. I've never been late on purpose, but today, I wanted to be. Darn those forms they always make you come half an hour early for! So here I am, sitting in the waiting room of Healing Hands Clinic, finishing the last of said forms and praying someone won't burst into the room yelling something like, 'Boss, we got a 609 here—a real nut!' and haul me off in a straitjacket.

“Shut up,” I tell myself. “You know that won't happen.” And I do, but I would still rather be anywhere but here, even facing down my stalker. I feel so...so...what, exactly? See, that's why I don't do shrinks. I don't know how to talk about my feelings without sounding like a complete moron. Of course, if this were a play, I could sing about feelings all I wanted to. Let's see, if this were a play, what kind of song would I be singing now? Definitely one of those mournful solos with...

“Miss Keller? Your forms?”

Crumb. I forgot. I hustle over to the receptionist, hand over the forms, and sit down again. I'm alone in the waiting room, which I guess is a good thing, but I would give almost anything to have somebody to talk to right now. Somebody to reassure me I'm not the only Christian who's ever had to do this—heck, that I'm not the only person who's ever had to do it—that I'm normal, that I'll get over this mental flu and be fine again...oh, wait. I do have that person.

I'm still praying when the swish of a skirt tells me I'm not alone anymore. I look up to see a smiling woman in a black skirt, matching ankle boots, a pink sweater, and a glittery scarf.

“Maria?” she says. “Hi, I'm Claire Dawson.”

“Um, nice to meet you.” We shake. When did my hand get so cold?

“Likewise. So, are you ready to start our meeting?”

“Yeah. I mean, yes, ma’am, I mean, doctor, I mean...” Shut up! Why am I babbling? I must be more relieved than I thought that she didn’t call it a “session”. If she had, well...

She laughs. “Just call me Claire. Come on.”

So I follow Claire down the hall and into an office. The first things I notice are the cream-colored walls and the huge red, green, and blue rug in the center of the floor. The curtains pick up those colors, and so do the painted clay pots sitting in a couple of places, holding plants. Paintings dominate all four walls—one of a New England cottage at Christmas, one of the ocean, one of a flower garden, and one of trees in full fall color. “Monique would love it in here,” I say before I realize I spoke out loud.

“Who’s Monique?”

“My cousin. She loves art. She’s an interior designer—even has her own business.”

“Ah. And what about you?”

“Me? I can’t even draw a stick figure. I...” I break off. “Wait, where do you want me to sit?”

“You don’t have to sit. We can stand as long as you want, or you can sit anywhere. On the floor if you prefer.”

Is she kidding me? No one, and I do mean no one, has ever invited me to sit on their floor. One time, one of my foster mothers found me stretched out on the floor in my room, drawing a map for geography, and she freaked out about the mess and how “unladylike” I looked. I think for a minute. I’d better test this chick. So I drop down on her rug, take off my shoes, and put them to the side. Then I watch her face for even the tiniest frown, or one of those big phony smiles that people wear when they want you to think they’ve accepted you, but what they really think is you’re a nut job.

Claire nods, smiles, and mimics me. “You’re the first client of mine who ever did that.”

“Yeah, well, I bet I’m not like most of them,” I say. “Look, let’s just get to the bottom line. I’m a cop, but I’ve also been accused of the same murders I was trying to solve and got thrown in jail for it. I spent almost a week as an inmate, which I probably don’t have to tell you messed me up. I thought I was okay, but then I got called onto a case while I was working on a drama degree

I never finished. While on said case, my favorite professor was murdered, my partner got shot, and I had to kill the man who did it to protect us both, which made some idiots think maybe I was a murderer after all. And now my boss has put me on forced leave because there's a stalker back home who wants me dead. I'm having all kinds of nightmares, my hands shake for no reason, and I hyperventilated at work one time. I don't need to talk about my childhood, or my relationship with my parents, or any of that other shrink shtick. I just want you to help me get better. Ask me the bare minimum of questions, give me meds if you have to, and let me get back to my life."

Claire gives me a look that radiates compassion. "Thank you, Maria. I'm honored you told me all that. It was very brave."

"No, it wasn't. It's called stating the facts."

"Yes," Claire says, "but the facts are still frightening. And that's the first thing I want to tell you. I want you to get back to your life, too. But I'm not just here to fix your hands and your hyperventilation and your nightmares. Those are symptoms of the real problem. You have some heavy issues to deal with, as well as some deep-seated struggles, and they're keeping you from being the woman God created you to be. That's what we need to work together to fix. We need to get you to the point that you're a whole person."

Normally, I'd call what she just said shrink shtick, but the problem is, she's right. I'm not a whole person and I know it. I nod at her. "Now that you mention it, I...a lot of things are wrong. I feel like I've been trying to hold my heart together with spit and chewing gum for years. But," I warn her, "I don't know how much I can talk about."

"Okay," Claire agrees. "How about this? If you promise to stay with me while I pick your brain, I promise not to probe into anything that's not absolutely necessary, and to get you discharged in as few sessions as possible. Deal?"

"Deal." We shake on it. "So, what do you want to talk about first?"

"That's up to you. We can start from the outside and work our way in or vice versa. Or you can just tell me about yourself, and if I hear something I want to delve into, I'll stop you."

"Uh, okay." I think about that. "Okay, why don't we start with why I'm here in the first place? The stalker." I tell Claire about what was going down in Cherry Creek before I left. "I

thought I could beat it," I finish. "I thought I could handle him like I've always handled perps, but I failed."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I did. I got a stupid email, freaked out over it, and ended up in Tunney's office, being told to get out."

Claire frowns. "Maria, that email showed you in a coffin, in an open grave. That would freak anybody out. It gives me shivers just talking about it."

"Sure it does, but that's okay for you. You're not a cop."

"And what makes cops so different from the rest of humanity?" Claire asks, but not as a challenge. It's more like she really doesn't know, so I sigh and say,

"Okay, here's the skinny on the cop game. If you're going to be one of us, you have to understand that there are certain things you can't do. We can't get emotional over stuff because our jobs won't let us. If a crime needs to be dealt with, we—I—have to get in there, go in with both guns blazing, and clean it up. I can't feel guilty about arresting the perp because he's somebody's little boy. I can't cry over a victim, even if said victim is a baby. And I can't ever, ever be scared of what might happen to me, or is happening to me. If I did, I'd never get anything done, and criminals wouldn't take me seriously because I'd be weak."

"Okay. So what about when you go home? Once that badge is off, is it safe for you to admit, 'I was scared? I feel bad for that criminal? I wish that victim were still here? It's not fair?'"

"No. See, I'm not alone when I go home. I'm staying with my adoptive parents while I'm here, and in Cherry Creek, I live with Monique and Meg, my cousins. We've shared a house for eight years now. We love each other, but I can't be open with them about my job, because they'd worry and wring their hands."

"And it's bad if you make people worry."

"Yeah. Because that means I'm giving them grief."

Claire sits back on her heels. "Maria, do you think you give people grief a lot?"

The question makes me crack my knuckles. “Yeah. Yeah, I do. Everybody. Even the people I love. My cousins, my adoptive parents, my partner at work, my fiancé...I’m not good for them. And God...I can’t forget about Him. I give Him the most trouble of all.”

“How?”

“Because I always mess things up. I fail at everything, even being a Christian. I mean, I know I can be myself around God. It used to be that I thought I had to act like a nun, practically, to please Him, and now I know that isn’t true. Still, He must be so disappointed in me. I don’t like a lot of contemporary Christian music, I haven’t found a lot of devotional books I like, I forget to trust Him, I say things I shouldn’t, I...I get so tired sometimes I fall asleep praying or trying to do my quiet time. And since you can’t repeat anything I tell you, can we just clear up the fact that I hate that phrase? ‘Quiet time.’ It is such church-ese, and it reminds me of what you do in kindergarten when you get rowdy. It’s like God is saying, ‘Maria, you haven’t paid enough attention to me today. Stop singing, stop playing the piano, and put that fiction down. It’s time for quiet time.’ Ugh.”

Claire raises her eyebrows. “Okay, so let me see if I’ve got this. You’re a failure as a Christian because you’re not perfect?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No. But do you see what you’re doing? You’re condemning yourself for occasional mistakes that are part of being human. Now, if you were succumbing to temptations to say, drink, do drugs, watch dirty movies, or cuss someone out on a regular basis, then I’d be concerned about your faith’s genuineness. But you’re not. What I’m hearing you say is that you’re not enjoying God. You’re just married to your little Christian habits.”

“What?”

Claire chuckles. “Oswald Chambers said that. Maria, take it from a veteran Christ follower. Being a Christian is not about listening to one type of music, or reading one type of book, or even having a quiet time. Did you know that you can spend time with God without having to sit in a chair, read a devotional blurb, and then sit silently in prayer for ten required minutes?”

“Let’s put it this way.” I have to smile. “Right now, I’m thinking you’re the one who needs the shrink. But you might be right. The truth is, I...” I try to figure out how to say what I want to. “Claire, I...well, I’m not good at this introspection stuff, but I’ve started to notice that sometimes I feel guilty for enjoying anything.”

“Hmmm. Tell me more.”

“Oh, well, it’s not like I don’t do anything I want to do,” I say. “It’s more like—I remember when I was working on the case at the college. It was a choir feud. You might’ve seen a news story about it. But anyway, while I was there, I looked forward to my classes because they were all theater-based, or I got to sing in them. And this theater in Silverton offered me an internship, so I went there one day to check it out. I ended up hanging out with the youth theater actors. Claire, I had so much fun.”

“And yet you didn’t let yourself enjoy it because...you’re a cop first, you had to go back to work, you had to be serious, and that was that?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” Claire pushes her hair back, and I giggle. She must’ve noticed because she asks, “What is it?”

“Nothing,” I tell her. “Just—that thing you just did. It reminds me of Schmidt. He’s my partner. My mentor, kind of. Anyway, when Schmidt’s thinking hard or worried, he runs his hands through his hair. His wife says she doesn’t know how it doesn’t all fall out.” I bite my lip again. “I miss them.”

“Of course you do.”

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean I should...look. Schmidt and Dorothea—that’s his wife’s name, Dorothea. His first name’s Brendan, but we’re supposed to only use last names at work. They would want...they do want me to be here. They want me to get better. Schmidt doesn’t need a useless partner.”

“See, there you go again,” Claire says. “You’re censoring your emotions because you think it doesn’t become a cop to miss someone she cares about. So here’s lesson number one. You ready?”

I laugh. "Should I take notes?"

"No, this isn't school. But if you like, I'll write down what we talked about so you can remember it later."

"Okay."

"Okay. Maria, if we're going to get anywhere, the first thing you must accept is that emotions are part of being human. They are, in fact, God-given, and because humans were created in God's image, that means emotions are good. Now, you're right when you say feelings shouldn't rule you. That's where we tend to get things like crime and confused thinking. But neither should emotions be stuffed down. Because you know what happens when you stuff something into a container that can't hold it?"

"It explodes."

"Right. So you've got to learn to use your emotions appropriately, before you explode."

"Okay, so what do I do?"

Claire smiles. "I love an eager student, but I'm not going to tell you a bunch of things at once. You're going to need to process what we talk about one thing at a time. So first, you need to know how to acknowledge an emotion. Let's take your stalker, for example. I'm going to sit on the couch. I want you to stand up, face me, and say something like, 'Claire, someone is stalking me, and I'm terrified.' You can even add to that if you want."

I feel like I'm in third grade. "Claire, are you serious? I mean, does this really work?"

She winks. "You didn't strike me as a woman who backs down from a challenge. Go on, try."

I still think Claire needs the shrink, but bless her heart, she's been so patient with me. I nod and stand up, but realize I can't look her in the eye. I try the sentence anyway. "Claire, someone is..." But I can't finish, so I try again. "Claire..." Oh, for Pete's sake, Keller, the world's not gonna end! I keep my eyes on a spot above her head. "Claire, someone is stalking me, and I'm terrified. I'm afraid he'll kill me, and even though I know I should be ready to go whenever because of heaven, I do not want to die." There! I did it, and I even looked her in the eye at the end!

Claire's beaming. "Bravo! So, I know you might think of it as shrink shtick, but how did that feel?"

I sit next to her. "I don't know. Um..." I wait for my heart to calm down. "Actually, that felt...good. That was...cool."

"Very cool. And do you feel as terrified now that you've told me?"

I laugh. "Well, don't get me wrong. This whole stalker thing still scares me half to death, which I guess would be okay since it would save him the trouble. But I do feel better."

"Great. So, here's your homework, so to speak. I want you to do three things. One, when you feel fear, or any other negative emotion creeping in on you, stop. Acknowledge it. Say to someone else, or to yourself, that you are scared, or angry, or whatever. Then let yourself take a minute and feel some of the power drain out of that fear. See, that's what acknowledgment does. It makes bad things lose power. Now, after you've done that, I want you to pray. Tell God how you feel, and be honest. Ask Him to help you. You have to do these first two things even if your inner cop screams at you not to."

"Okay," I say slowly. "So what's number three?"

"Number three," Claire says, "is sort of in preparation for next time. I want you to write down the answer to this question: if I weren't a cop, who would I be? Not what, but who. Answer it any way you want. Use a paragraph, use a list, write a poem, write a song, write one word. I don't care. I want you to try to separate the concept of "cop" from your identity."

I crack my knuckles and stand up. "That's not gonna be easy. But I'm willing to give it my best shot."

"Good for you." She checks her watch. "That'll wrap us up for today. Just make your next appointment at the desk, and I'll see you...next week? Two weeks?"

"Better make it next week." Whoa, did I just say that? Yeah, I think I did. And the weird thing is, I'm looking forward to talking to Claire again.

On the drive to the shooting range the next day, Luke wants to know all about my appointment, but I'm not ready to share the personal stuff yet. So I just reassure him that Claire

helped me out, making sure to mention that she said prayer was very important. Luke may have wanted me to get some help, but he tends to be a little suspicious of psychology in general. He says it can become self-centered real quick, and from what I've seen of shrinks, I believe him. But Claire's different. At least, I hope so. Jesus, please let her be different. I need her to make me better, not worse.

"So how are the cops down at your station?" I ask him.

"They're real good, and the ones you remember are anxious to see you. Of course, we've got some new faces, too. Some patrol people, fresh out of training and greener than jealousy. A couple new narcs, Murdock and Feldstein. And one property crimes guy, Waverly. I've got my eye on him. Guy moved down here from NYPD, thinks he knows everything and the rest of us are hillbilly hicks."

"How can y'all be hillbillies? Texas is as flat as they get."

Luke pats my back. "See, that's one reason I missed you. You always brightened up my day. Here we are." He winks at me. "Keller, get your gun."

I grab my gun and the visitors' badge I need to show the cops at Luke's station I have permission to use their range. It's not long before Luke and I are halfway through a round. The relief I feel when I discover I haven't gotten rusty is so powerful, I lose my focus for a minute. The next time I fire the gun, the impact throws me off balance.

Luke glances at me and mouths "okay?" I nod and refocus, but get sidetracked again when I feel another cop sidle up to us. Peripheral vision tells me it's Edward Blackstone, the officer who always had a smile for me and gave me M&Ms if he knew I had a concert or play that night.

"Hey, Captain," Blackstone says when Luke removes his earplugs. "I thought you weren't coming in today."

"I wasn't," Luke says. "Just having a little fun."

"Cool. Hey, who's the gal?"

I grin, knowing what'll happen when I turn around. "You don't even remember me," I say, pretending I'm hurt.

I turn, and Blackstone's eyes bug out so far he looks like one of those "Sesame Street" Muppets. "Maria? Maria Keller? Wow...no, wait. That can't be you."

"It is," I tell him. "In the flesh."

"No way. You are not Maria Keller. You're too tall, and your hair's in a perfectly neat twist. Plus, you don't have all those freckles."

I redden. It's true that when I was a kid, I was known as something of a freckle-face, even though I wasn't covered with them. I've lost most of the darn things since I've grown up, though. I sigh. "Blackstone, it really is me."

"Prove it," he says with a slight grin. "Here's a question only the real Maria Keller could answer. Besides the title character, name three orphans from *Annie*."

"That's easy," I laugh. "Tessie, Kate, and July—pronounced just like the month."

Blackstone laughs and gives me a bear hug, but doesn't appear to notice when I wriggle out of it. "Cap, why didn't you say Maria was back? Or were you just planning to surprise everybody?"

"I guess," Luke says. "There'll be no stopping you from spreading the news." And why does he sound unhappy about that?

But Blackstone slaps Luke on the back. "Naw. I'll let you tell. Meanwhile, I'll just let 'em all think Maria's a brand new lieutenant." He leans close to me. "Your old man's gone through lieutenants like most Texans go through salsa lately."

"Blackstone." Luke glares at the other man. "That's enough. Either shoot or get back to your duties, now."

"See what I mean?" Blackstone whispers before leaving.

"Okay," I tell Luke when we're alone again. "What exactly was that?" I've seen Luke get strict with his officers before, but I don't remember him ever being quite that strict.

"I don't want to discuss it," Luke says. "Finish off that round and reload, and then we'll call it a day."

"Okay, but I was going to go in and visit with..."

"Maria, I don't need you distracting anybody. Just do as I say."

There was never any arguing with Luke when he said “do as I say,” so I do as he says. Actually, focusing on the gun helps a lot. The gun is dependable. It doesn’t love you one minute and snap at you the next. If you tell it to shoot, it shoots. It doesn’t get into a snit just because it doesn’t want to point the way you told it to.

On the other hand, it’s just cold metal.

CHAPTER 10:

“One trick ahead of disaster, they’re quick, but I’m much faster...”

-Aladdin

“So, how was it?” Jasmine wants to know when I get home. “Did you see any of the officers you remember?”

“Yeah, Blackstone,” I tell her, “but we didn’t really talk. Listen, I’m gonna jump in the shower. Get rid of this grit and gun smoke.”

“Okay. And when you’re done, you have some messages. Meg called, and Schmidt, and then I just hung up with Gil a few minutes ago.”

“You did?” I feel myself smile. “What’d you think of him?” I hear the hope in my voice.

Jasmine winks. “He’s a keeper. And he’s crazy about you. You could call back now if you like. I’m used to smelling gun smoke.”

“Thanks.” I grab the cordless.

Soon, I’m curled up on my bed listening to the operator place my collect call. When Gil picks up, I launch into “The Sweetest Sound” from *Cinderella*.

He laughs. “Hey, baby. I was anxious to know if you got to Texas okay.”

“Yeah, I’m here. And a lot has already happened in a few days.”

“Good things, I hope.”

“Well—yes, but some of it’s a little confusing.” I explain about the shrink appointment and what happened at the shooting range. I can almost see Gil nodding.

“I’m proud of you for going to see her,” he says. “She will help, more than you know. As for Luke...I don’t know. I hate to tell you, but men are pretty much morons, as you’ve seen on many occasions.”

“Yeah. I think Henry Higgins got it wrong. It’s not ‘why can’t a woman be more like a man.’ It’s the other way around.”

“Oh, that is low. Women can in fact be exasperating, irritating, vacillating, calculating, agitating, maddening and infuriating people, you know.”

“Oh, please. We’re not complicated. All you have to do is tell us you can’t live without us. Oh, and give us lots of chocolate.”

Gil’s laugh bursts across the phone line. “I definitely can’t live without you, Maria. And if you want chocolate, I will definitely send you some.”

“I’ll get back to you on that. So, how’s the theater?”

“We’re doing better. In fact, I got Dad’s somewhat grudging permission to do a cleaned up version of *Legally Blonde* in the fall.” I hear him chuckle. “You’d make a terrific Elle.”

“Oh!” The news shocks me so much I forget Gil’s comment. “Gil, that’s fantastic! What’d you do? What’d you say?”

“I plied him with logic.” Gil sounds prouder than if he climbed Mount Everest. “I showed him the books so he could see that business was falling off. Then I pointed out that at its core, the musical is lighthearted and fun, and that actions like hitting on a law student or lying about one’s sexuality are never condoned within it. And here’s the coup de grace. I pointed out that modern plays might bring in bigger audiences, and that our clean versions of them might also inspire them to learn more about the God we serve at the Stage Door.”

“Gil, I...you...oh, wow. I...I could kiss you!”

“I wish you were here to do just that, my love. The kids and I talk about you all the time.”

“Yeah, um...how are the kids?” I ask. I pray my sudden departure for Texas didn’t put them through any trauma. Between their first mom’s death and my police work escapades, they’ve had quite enough of that.

“They’re great,” Gil says. “I didn’t tell them exactly why you left, but they know enough to understand that it’s necessary, but not permanent. But they do miss you and can’t wait for us to be a family. Sophie and Desi have been roping Clayton into playing wedding lately. He has to be me, and they trade off being you. The other one gets to be the pastor.”

The image makes me smile. “A woman pastor. You know, maybe your dad will come around sooner than you think.”

"Let's hope so. By the way, how are things with Luke and Jasmine? They didn't give you a hard time, did they?"

"No. They, um...they're thrilled I'm here. I just don't know how thrilled that is. Jasmine seems okay, but Luke...well, we got into it about the suicide note recently, and then today, he jumped down one of his officer's throats and talked to me like I was five. So nothing's wrong, but things are weird. Of course, that's good, right? It means the old place is just like I left it."

"It shouldn't stay that way," Gil says. "I'll pray for you. Don't give up."

"Honey, the words 'give up' are not in my vocabulary."

"I knew that, and I love you for it. Hey, can I call you back tonight so you can talk to the kids, or will the folks be upset about the phone bill?"

"Nah. I have permission to call or take calls from whoever, whenever. It's a lot easier than when I was thirteen."

We hang up soon after that, and I call Meg and Schmidt back. Schmidt says there's no news of the stalker, but they're definitely trying. Schmidt's the last person I call, so I hang up, push back the discouraged feelings his not-news gave me, and hop in the shower. For a minute, the *Psycho* theme plays in my head.

"Yeah, right," I say over the roaring hum of the water. "Like a stalker's actually gonna care enough to fly all the way to Houston and show up in your shower. And then what's he gonna do, stab you with a bar of soap?" The thought makes me laugh so hard I almost fall over.

"I've heard of singing in the shower," Luke says when I enter the kitchen, barefoot with my hair still wrapped in a towel, "but never laughing in it. What was so funny?"

"Uh...nothing. Inside joke. You know, between me and the Cherry Creek cops, kind of."

"Oh. I see. And listen, uh...I'm sorry about that thing with Blackstone." He's focusing on Jasmine, who's making lunch with her back to us. So she talked him into apologizing. I don't know whether to smile or get irritated, so I choose to smile. "It's okay."

"Okay."

I love the bookstore in Cherry Creek, Novel Idea Books. But in eight years, I'd forgotten that nothing, and I mean nothing, beats Page Turner's, the secondhand bookstore tucked between a Domino's and a nail salon in the suburbs. The store has the smell of old books, ink, and dust, but underneath that is something different—vanilla, a dash of orange, and just a hint of water. Yeah, I know it sounds weird, but Page Turner's really does smell like water, the kind you smell in the clouds right before it rains. I think that special smell blows in with the owner, Mrs. Wyndham, who's been around since I moved in with Luke and Jasmine.

"So, Maria," she says after several minutes of gushing over me (honestly, is the whole town gonna do that? If so, my parents should've warned me because it's starting to wear me out), "I guess you're too old to stay downstairs in the children's section now. Would you like me to make some recommendations, or would you rather poke around on your own?"

I know the bookstore owner loves to give recommendations, but after what happened at the shooting range yesterday, I'm anxious for some alone time, so I tell her I'll go upstairs and find her later if I need her.

"I'll be up in a minute, Maria," Jasmine says. "I want a cup of coffee."

I hate complete quiet. I'm not kidding. I absolutely hate it, to the point that I have to have one of those alarm clocks that mimics different sounds, like ocean waves and birds chirping, to help me get to sleep. I used to dread being left home alone, not because I was scared, but because it always felt like I had a bunch of dead air to fill. But once I get to the upstairs section of Page Turner's, something weird happens. Quiet becomes good. Great, actually. For the first time in weeks, I don't feel restless, or edgy, or scared. I feel like I can just sit down, read a book, and not have to worry about anything other than what kind of book that should be.

To be on the safe side, I decide to stay away from mysteries and turn to some contemporary authors, both Christian and the secular ones I know are clean. I've got several great choices, so it takes a few minutes to pick a few that I definitely want to page through before buying. I'm reading the back cover blurb on a book about an adopted woman searching for her birth parents when I hear footsteps behind me.

"Hey, Jasmine," I say over my shoulder. "What kind of coffee did you pick?"

There's no answer, so I look over my shoulder, prepared to apologize. It can be pretty embarrassing to call someone the wrong name in public. But when I look, there's nobody there. I shrug. Maybe those footsteps were just the floor creaking.

A few minutes later, I'm deep into the book's prologue, but look up when a shadow falls across the table. It's just one of the clerks carrying several travel books to the back shelves, but the minute she turns the corner, I'm almost sure I hear those footsteps again. I shake my head and go back to the book. All this stalker business has gotten me completely paranoid. I ought to be ashamed of myself.

"Maria?" Jasmine's voice makes me jump. "Oh, honey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

I give her a reassuring smile. "It's okay, Jazz. That always happened whenever I was deep in a book, remember?"

Jasmine gives me a fond smile. "I do remember. Once you got focused on something, it was hard to get your attention again. Sort of like having an ADD kid, but in reverse. So, did you find a few good books?"

"Yeah. And I saw a couple you might like. Check out the new Julie Klassen."

"Okay. And did you see the first in that new Colleen Coble series?"

I crack my knuckles. "I'm trying to give mysteries a break right now."

Jasmine nods. "Probably not a bad idea, at least for a week or so. Try something comedic. You ever read the Sushi Series?"

Jasmine and I keep discussing books from there, and she leaves to make her own selections. Meanwhile, I decide one of the books I picked is a dud, so I get up to return it to the shelf and look for another one. The book came from one of the end shelves, S-Z, and halfway down the row, I'm almost sure I feel someone walking behind me. No big deal, girl, I tell myself, and keep walking. But within the next few seconds, I feel the other person step closer. In fact, I can now hear breathing.

Easy, girl, easy, I coach myself. This is nothing. They're probably just trying to get to the shelf directly in front of you and don't realize they have to wait their turn. Don't freak out over it. Never mind that my hands are shaking and I can feel sweat forming. I lick my lips and taste salt.

But a minute later, the guy has not backed off, and I can still hear breathing. I pray for protection and prepare to turn around and face him. I may be on forced leave, but I'm still a cop, no matter what my shrink says about separating that from my identity—whatever that means. Sorry, Claire, I think, but this is just not a good time. I have to face this person, and I can take him down if necessary. One, two...

The creep leans closer, his mouth one millimeter from my ear. "Hey, babe, wanna get out of this place and go somewhere we can do something fun with each other?"

I whirl around and realize the guy is just a twenty-something idiot. Anger and relief hit me at the same time, and their punches are so intense that I have to grab a shelf's edge for support before I find myself on the floor. I jab a finger into the kid's chest with my other hand. "Back off, you moron! You wanna pick up chicks, go to a bar!"

"Hey, lady, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were like, thirty."

"Well I am, and I'm also like, completely ticked off. Now you get moving before I rearrange your face!"

"Whoa, babe, chill out. I was just..."

"I don't care." I lower my voice so he won't hear it shaking. "I'm a cop and I could have you arrested for unwanted physical contact. I suggest you leave. Right now. Go on..."

The kid blanches and all but runs for the stairs. I sink down at my table just before Jasmine returns and puts her hand on my shoulder.

"I heard it all," she says. "Do you want to leave, too?"

I make myself take a few deep breaths. "No. No, I do not. I refuse to let that stalker get to me here. I'm safe now and have to remember that."

Jasmine kisses my cheek. "Good girl. Give me a few more minutes, okay?"

About ten minutes later, Jasmine says she's ready to wrap things up, so we head downstairs to pay for our books and grab a sandwich and dessert from the coffee shop. Mrs.

Wyndham is still there, and she makes a big deal out of complimenting my choices and saying “God bless” when she realizes why I chose inspirational books. She’s still asking me all kinds of questions about life in Cherry Creek when I hear her drop my next-to-last paperback and exclaim,

“Oh! Oh, heavenly mercy!”

“What is it?” I ask. “Dog-eared pages?” My laugh is forced and all three of us know it.

Mrs. Wyndham is already seizing the phone. “Yes, hello, I need to speak to Captain Brown right away...”

My appetite runs like a fugitive busting out of San Quentin. Luke? Why would Mrs. Wyndham want to talk to him, unless... I make myself pick up the book she practically threw on the counter. Clipped to the very back page is a typed note—

Tick, tock, goes your clock. Forget the fiction, Maria. Start reading the obits.

“I can’t believe my bookstore is a crime scene,” Mrs. Wyndham says about an hour later. She’s wringing her hands, and a film of tears coats her eyes. Ms. Bishop, the florist from across the street, raced over when she heard the commotion and is now holding Mrs. Wyndham against her chest. Meanwhile, Jasmine watches through blank eyes while Luke and several other officers duck under the glaring yellow police tape to search for evidence.

And me? Well, Jasmine insisted I try to eat, so I’m at the coffee shop’s furthest corner table staring at a cup of asiago bisque soup and half a chicken Caesar wrap. I love both those things, but right now they might as well be lemon meringue pie. But Jasmine will worry if I don’t make a good effort, so I do. Come on, girl, you can do this. Pick up spoon...bring to mouth...chew...swallow. Again...now with the wrap...

“Hey, Maria,” Luke says just then. “Mind if I join you?”

I notice he’s holding a cup of coffee and nod. “Sure, pull up a booth.”

Luke does so and gives me a sympathetic look. “Not exactly what you had in mind for today, was it, Songbird?”

Luke’s use of his old nickname startles me. “I, uh...I wasn’t...I didn’t know you still thought of me as...”

“Of course I do.” Luke squeezes my hand. “You know I was always proud of your theatrical talent.”

No, I actually don't, Luke. At least, I'm not sure. Half the time, you acted proud, and the other half, you acted as if I was a hooker in training. But now is definitely not the right time to get into it, so I nod. “I know. I just wasn't...I...” I force down a mouthful of chicken, lettuce, and Caesar dressing that tastes a bit like nail polish remover. “Yeah. What just happened was, ya know...”

“Yeah. I'll let you know when and if we turn up anything, but I do need to ask you a few things. You up to it?”

“Okay.” I can't help sending God a quick prayer of thanks. Police work is the one thing Luke and I agreed on 100% of the time. As long as we were talking badges, guns, tasers, and bad guys, we were safe. Or rather, I was safe.

Luke nods and pulls out a little black notepad. “Did you see, or even think you saw, someone suspicious upstairs? Did anyone accost you?”

I explain about the slick twenty-something. “I don't think that's connected at all, though,” I say.

Luke frowns. “No, but did you do or say anything to make him think...”

“No! I didn't even know who he was until...for Pete's sake, Luke, what do you think I am?”

His frown deepens. “Maria, don't start that. As a cop, I have to ask. That's for one. For another, I know you'd never do or say anything inappropriate. I was just wondering if you'd seen him and...I don't know, smiled and said hi. Guys like that think a simple gesture means, ‘come on over here.’”

“Well, the answer is still no.” I keep my voice cold.

Luke writes this down. “So you told him off and he left. Okay, anything before or after that?”

"I'm not sure," I say. "Nothing after, but before...I thought I heard someone coming up the stairs. I thought it was Jasmine, but I was wrong. I didn't see anybody, so I told myself it was just a noise. But maybe it wasn't."

"Got it," Luke says. "And other than Casanova Boy, did you notice any of the other customers up there with you?"

"No," I say. "I know there was maybe a handful, but I wasn't looking too closely. I haven't exactly been in an investigative mood lately," I defend myself when Luke starts to open his mouth. I can tell by his face a thinly disguised condemning remark was on his tongue.

Luke sighs. "Okay. Well, we've detained the other customers and will question them. I want you to go home with Jasmine, and I want you both to stay there."

"Okay." Despite Luke's attitude, and despite the fact that I feel as if I'm running home like a scared little kid, taking his advice does sound pretty good. "You...you'll let me know if it's..."

"Don't worry," Luke says. "If this is the guy from Cherry Creek, you'll know, and you'll be fine. He won't get far, and the first time I lay eyes on him, I'll make sure he spends the rest of his life gumming mashed potatoes and watching Barney and Friends."

I have to laugh, hard. "Good one. But you think they show kids' shows on Death Row?"

"I'll have a talk with the administrators." He hugs me, and we both hold on longer than we need to. Once I get home, I bury myself in one of my new books. That's better than dwelling on how much I needed more than a hug.

"I still can't believe you can cook now," Jasmine says. "Will you hand me that mixer attachment?"

I give it to her. "Yeah. Dorothea Schmidt taught me."

"How'd she manage that? Before college, you swore up, down, and sideways you were never going into a kitchen again as long as you lived."

I giggle. "No, what I said was, 'I am never using any kitchen appliance except a microwave again as long as I live.' And you ought to remember why, after that fish and chips incident."

"I'll never forget!" Jasmine is already doubled over. We're talking about the time when I was fifteen. In an effort to make me more domestic, Jasmine had been trying to teach me to cook for a couple of months. I hated the lessons, but I did want to please her and Luke, so one time, I decided to try fish and chips, one of Luke's favorites. I even got the recipe from his favorite seafood place off the Internet. But I left the oven unattended so I could practice a complicated choir song, and the next thing I knew, the stove exploded. Okay, so it didn't actually explode, but the fish were burned beyond all reason and there were potato slices and grease everywhere.

"French fries still make me a little sick," I tell Jasmine.

"Don't worry," she says. "It's funny now. But seriously, how did Dorothea succeed in what I only dreamed of teaching you?"

"I'm not sure," I say. "Maybe it's got something to do with the fact that we always cook at her house when nobody else is home, so I can't get distracted. And...I don't know. She makes food seem creative, like another art form. I once wanted to experiment with her grandma's recipe for strawberry shortcake, and she said, 'go for it.'" I push back the thought that experimenting was not allowed in Jasmine Brown's kitchen. She's worked hard to perfect her recipes, and she's the person they invented the motto 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' for.

Jasmine smiles. "And what did you find out?"

"Well, I always liked the filling best on that cake," I explain. "Whenever Dorothea makes it, I wish the middle was richer. So I added some of the milk and cream she used for the topping to the strawberry part. And I knew that a couple of her kids loved strawberries on their own, so I got her permission to put in pieces of the actual fruit."

"Ah. Maybe I should get that recipe. But..." Jasmine gives me a slightly insecure look. "I still make the best cherry pie, right?"

"I miss it every Christmas," I confirm. And that's true. Jasmine makes cherry pie good enough to tempt you to eat it for breakfast. I saw Luke do that once, but he swore me to secrecy. Of course, he did have to buy me off. He gave me half.

I stir the brownie batter with one hand and tap Jasmine's shoulder with the other. "Jazz—you're not jealous of Dorothea, are you?"

She blinks. “What makes you think...oh. No, Maria, I am not. I was kidding about the pie. If you want the truth, Luke and I are thrilled you have the Schmidts. It was nice to find out someone was looking out for our little girl. Oh—hold on. Watch that you get those dry bits off the side of the bowl.”

“Thanks.” I start scraping. “Yeah, the Schmidts are pretty terrific. Even if Brendan does boss me around constantly. One time, I asked him why I should do something his way, and he said...”

“Oh, let me guess. ‘Because I said so?’”

“Bingo. Of course, he’s better since the case at the college.” I’ve explained to Luke and Jasmine how our relationship changed after Dr. Christine Hastings bit the bullet. I reach for a napkin so I can wipe off a chocolate smear. “But I still missed you and Luke pretty badly sometimes.”

Jasmine gives me an unreadable look. “You could’ve come home anytime, Maria. We wouldn’t have turned you away.”

“I know,” I say, even though I’m not sure I do. “But remember, I didn’t know Jesus then, which means I was downright stupid at times. And even now that I do, I...” I shake my head. “It was never that easy, Jazz, and you know it. I didn’t know if Luke would want me back, and you have got to admit, I had reason to wonder.”

Jasmine turns from where she’s been stirring a second bowl of batter for our double batch of her extra-thick brownie bars. “Maria. Now, listen to me. Luke’s aware he’ll never be your biological dad. But he does love you.”

“I didn’t say he didn’t.”

“I know. And I know you love him. It’s just that your actions that last year...”

“Jasmine, don’t,” I cut her off. “Do not do this to me. I didn’t try to commit suicide. Sure, I thought about it for a few minutes, but I didn’t do it. What happened in the theater that night was an accident. What will I have to do to make you believe me?”

“Maria, please...”

“No, I mean it. I never lied to you and Luke. Not one time. I never disobeyed you—not in big ways. I always tried my best in school, even though I hated every minute of it except music and math. I did not give you one reason to think I was a bad kid. So why did you think I would lie about something so major?”

Jasmine stares at me, and for a minute I wonder if she'll start crying. Oh, crumb, I think. Now I've done it. But instead of crying, Jasmine lets her wooden spoon thump into the bowl, crosses the kitchen, and hugs me.

“Maria,” she says. “Maria, baby girl. I know. You...” She steps back, but still holds me. “Maria, when I found out I couldn't have my own babies, I was devastated, and it was worse because your Aunts Charlotte and Ruby had kids,” she says, referring to her sisters, Meg and Monique's moms respectively. But then we met you, and even though you were ten, convinced we didn't want you and would rather have a baby, we didn't want anybody else. You were the best daughter we—I—could ever ask for. We drank in your love, we were proud of your accomplishments, and we treasured your obedience because we knew how much that obedience sometimes cost you. And when we found that suicide note...that's why we...that's why I, personally, got suspicious.”

Now it's my turn to stare. “Say what?”

Jasmine sighs. “Maria, I'm not blind and deaf. I know at times, Luke has been harsh with you and said or done things that hurt you. You didn't always know, but I scolded him, and good, a couple of those times. But he is a proud man, which means he may not have let on to you. And I know that sometimes, I enabled what was going on. So when Luke found your note, I had to wonder if pressure we unknowingly put on you caused you to write it.”

“NO!” I don't realize I've shouted it until Jasmine jumps. “I mean, no,” I say more calmly. “It wasn't your fault. I didn't do it because of something you or Luke did or didn't do. It was because...”

The door opens, and the expression “speak of the devil” goes through my head. Luke walks in, shrugs out of his jacket, and leaves it on the back of a chair before coming over to kiss Jasmine, then me. “Hey, girls. A little late-night baking?”

I look at the stove clock and realize it's almost eleven PM. "Yeah," I say. "We've been trying to keep our mind off the bookstore investigation since this afternoon. We did some stuff on our own and then watched a couple movies together, but we got fidgety just sitting on our butts, so Jasmine said we might as well do this."

"Oh. Can I have the spoon?"

"Both of them," Jasmine says. "We're making a double order." She hands over both utensils.

"Mmmm. Delicious as always, sweet cakes. And...do I taste coconut on one spoon?"

"You do," she says. "Maria's idea. She wanted to put coconut in half the bars because she remembered you love Mounds."

"Since when do you..." Luke begins, but I shrug. "Long story. So, uh, not to wreck the mood, but what'd you find out?"

Luke's cop face replaces his smile, and he pulls out three chairs. "Okay, y'all, sit down." He waits until we do and then takes a breath. "Maria, I called Sergeant Tunney. Based on what he told me and what we found at the scene, we are 99% sure that the man who left that note is your stalker."

"Oh, God." Jasmine clearly isn't swearing. "He followed her here?"

"Worse." Luke's voice is absolutely stony. "Evidence indicates that he was operating from Texas the whole time."

"What!" I come up out of my chair before I realize I've done it. "But how can that be? How would he have gotten those packages to me so fast?"

"We don't know, but there are a number of ways," Luke says. "He could've had them prepared far ahead of time. He could've bypassed the postal service and had an inside connection deliver them. Anything might have happened. What's important now is finding out who he is and stopping him."

"Is there any physical evidence at all?" Jasmine's voice has started to crack, and she has a protective arm around me.

“Not yet,” Luke says. “But we are combing the database to see if any of our known perps would have a reason to go after Maria.”

As if on cue, Luke’s pager goes off, and he grabs it. “Brown here—oh, hey, Palmer. Yeah, thanks for calling back so quick. Yeah? Oh...uh-huh. I see...yeah...yeah, he better hope he ‘disappeared.’ What? I don’t...Palmer, no, I...okay. Okay. I really don’t think it could be her, but I’ll ask. Okay. Yeah, have a good night. Thanks.” Luke hangs up and turns to me, and immediately, I know my situation just got fifty times worse.

“Maria,” Luke says, “that was Detective Palmer. His database turned up a guy name of Chandler Halliday. Serial rapist known for targeting young women and completely disappearing not only from the scene, but from the entire location of the victim at the time. Palmer found an old report that said one of his more recent victims was attacked about eight years ago at Texas A&M. A witness claimed to have seen a student, approximately five-seven, in the 120-130 pound range, fleeing from his dorm. Someone later found a jacket of Halliday’s stashed in a dumpster about five miles from campus, bearing strands of raspberry-blond hair, smeared red lipstick, teeth marks, and flaked off red nail polish.” He stares at me. “You know anything about this?”

CHAPTER 11:

“Ah, the children of the night who hide themselves from light, can you not hear their secret music?”

-Dracula

“He raped you?”

“Yes, he did.” And why am I the one who feels like a criminal?

Luke is up now, stomping around the kitchen so hard I’m afraid he’s gonna knock the baking stuff right off the counter, so I get up too and get them to safety. Luke faces me just as I’m sliding a bowl to the back of the counter, almost rubbing noses with the spice rack. “Maria Magdalena Keller,” he demands, “how could you...how dare you keep something like that from us!”

“I had no choice,” I say. Relief hits when I realize the words are strong, even though I’m feeling anything but. Because I didn’t have a choice, did I? Not after how Luke always...

“Don’t give me that. Do you know how many perps I’ve heard tell me they had no choice? You always have a choice.”

“Oh, so now I’m one of your perps, is that it? Nice to hear you finally admit what you’ve thought all this time.”

Luke actually cusses—at me. “Stop your dramatics! It didn’t work when you were a kid and it won’t work now! Again, how dare you...”

“Luke.” Jasmine plants herself in front of him. “Luke, you stop this right now. Maria’s right. You’re acting as if this was her fault, and it wasn’t. She was raped. You ought to know by now what that means. And she probably didn’t tell us because she was afraid you’d think she asked for it.”

“Well, if that’s what she thought, maybe she needs a shrink more than I imagined she did.”

“Of course it’s what I think,” I tell him. “And don’t tell me I don’t have reason for it. What about what happened at the bookstore today, huh?”

That takes Luke by surprise, and after a minute, he visibly calms down. “All right. All right, I’m sorry,” he says. “I suppose with what had happened between us, you...and I have seen other girls come in to report rapes. It’s difficult for them to open up, especially to a male officer. But...Maria, why on earth did you date that boy to begin with?”

“It’s not as if I knew he was a rapist.” I’m feeling calmer now too, but I’m still rattled. “You think he would’ve told me?”

“No. No, of course not. But why...”

Why, indeed. Why had I dated Chandler Halliday? Why did I stay with him, even when my intuition told me to run and not stop until I was back in my adoptive daddy’s arms? And come to think of it, Luke’s right in a way. I could’ve told him, so why didn’t I? I pray for a few minutes and then look back at my parents.

“First of all,” I tell them, “you two need to know, before that night, nothing happened. I didn’t move in with him or sleep with him or anything. He wanted me to, but I always said no. I guess it was...I guess I just couldn’t turn Christianity off, as much as I wanted to. He kept saying he’d wait until I was ready, but he got more and more impatient. He...he wanted what he wanted, and he was gonna get it. He was a spoiled brat in a college varsity jacket.”

“One who needed a doozy of a spanking,” Jasmine says. “Did he say he loved you?” she asks in a voice that lets me know she’ll understand if I say yes. For a minute, I wonder if Jasmine ever had a jerk tell her he loved her. Why didn’t I ask that question when I was growing up?

“Yeah,” I tell her. “Yeah, Chandler did say that. At first. He did everything he could to win me over, but eventually, it started getting ugly. It was all about him.” I share a couple of stories of times Chandler expected me to go on dates or show up at baseball games even when I was sick, or how he always chose what we did together, or how he constantly criticized me, like when he thought I talked too much. When that happened, he would snap his fingers at me as if correcting a dog.

“And he couldn’t get enough, physically,” I finish. “He used to kiss me really hard, hard enough to leave bruises, or hug me like he was trying to squeeze out my air. Or he’d pinch or hit me and say he was just kidding around. Nothing major—stuff like a punch in the arm. But it still hurt. And sometimes he’d nibble on me—you know, kinda play-bite my neck or my ear. I used to call him Dracula when he did that, and I was only half-kidding. I had to beg him to quit, and sometimes I had to physically push him away.”

Luke looks ready to bite something, too. In fact, he looks like he could chew up a whole box of nails. “Maria,” he asks, his tone telling me I better shoot straight with him, “did this...this...Neanderthal ever seriously hit you?”

I crack my knuckles at the memory. “No. No, I promise. He threatened to a lot, but he never actually did it.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. There was just...I guess there was something about me that told Chandler he better not try it. Now that I know I’m not the first girl he went after, I’m sure he’s beaten up on other ones. But with me, I...I don’t know, Luke. Maybe—maybe Jesus was looking out for me,” I say, because the thought just occurred to me, not because I’m trying to be pious. I know Jesus was with me when I was raped because I didn’t end up pregnant or sick. And I know He used the rape’s evil to get me back to Him in the end. But it just never occurred to me that He had that much control over Chandler back then—that He could’ve had protection around me already, like an invisible force field that prevented Chandler from touching me. And I know Jesus hadn’t wanted me to get raped, so when Chandler broke that force field...ooh, he’s gonna be in big trouble when God gets hold of him. The thought almost makes me smile.

Luke does smile, but it’s a saddened one. “I know He was, baby. And you...you got a doctor to check you out? That Halliday punk didn’t give you anything?”

“I was really scared of that,” I say, “so I went to a doctor the next day, but I told her I was just there for my routine checkup. It killed me to let her touch me, and when she found out, I begged her not to tell. She promised she wouldn’t, and she called later to say my results were normal.”

“Good,” Luke almost barks, “because if he had, I would kill him. Not that I like his chances of living much longer as it is.”

“Thanks, Luke.” I hug him. “And listen, I really am sorry that I didn’t tell.”

“That’s all right, honey. I forgive you.”

“Okay. And...” May as well go for broke here. “Luke, before you came home—” I explain what Jasmine and I were talking about, minus her assertion that he’d been too rough on me. “She asked me why I wrote the note,” I tell him. “That was why. I felt so stupid, and dirty, and I couldn’t tell anybody—I couldn’t focus on my work, so I started failing, and I got kicked out of the musical. I’m sorry, but by then, I just...I just couldn’t take it anymore. I didn’t know what to do or where to go, and I just felt—I couldn’t see one reason I should go on living. I didn’t think anybody would want me or love me again, and I’m not just talking about romantic love. I thought I was a mistake, and the world didn’t need mistakes.”

I don’t know how I get through that speech without crying, especially since Jasmine’s already started sobbing her eyes out. She comes over at the same time Luke opens his arms, and in two seconds, they’re both hugging me as if they’ll take out anyone who makes them let go.

“Oh, Maria,” Jasmine squeaks. “Oh, Maria. My poor little girl...”

“It’s okay, Jasmine. It’s really okay. Don’t cry.” I’m begging her more than soothing her. “I’m okay now. Chandler’s long gone. He got what he wanted. I don’t think he’s the stalker. And no matter who is, just look! I didn’t commit suicide. I’m doing better than I ever thought I would. I’m a detective. I’ve got a college degree. I’m saved. I found a guy who really loves me, and I’m gonna be a mama. And I came back. See?”

Jasmine gradually stops crying and steps back. “You’re right.” She grabs a napkin and blows her nose. “You’re right, Maria. We should all be praising God for your life. You’re a miracle.”

“Uh...” I blush. I never thought of myself as a miracle before. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Yes,” Luke says. “And we do praise God. But God also expects us to use common sense, and like it or not, you still have a price on your head.”

“So what should I do?” I ask him.

“Be safe,” Luke says. “Handle this the way you did at home—don’t be out alone, and keep in close touch with the police. In the meantime, my officers and I are gonna form a team to track down Halliday and bring him in. I want to hear what he’s got to say about this stalking business, and even if by some chance he proves innocent in that, he’s got some time to serve for what he did to you and who knows how many other girls. And you...” He smiles at me. “You keep on recuperating, starting with those counseling appointments.” He strokes my cheek. “I understand, sweetheart. Something like what you just told us—that would make any sane individual consider popping themselves off.”

“But...” I sigh when Luke turns to go. Well, I guess that’s what I’ve got a shrink for.

“And now he thinks I made a confession,” I tell Claire a couple days later. “He thinks I confessed to a suicide attempt. And I just don’t know what to do. I couldn’t even do my homework for you, I was so upset.”

“That’s all right,” Claire says, and I can tell she means it. “But let’s still talk about the homework. I have a question. Do you think Luke is one reason you couldn’t complete it?”

Something in her words makes me tense up, and I feel my temper starting to simmer. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Is it supposed to mean anything?”

“Oh, no you don’t,” I tell her. “No shrink shtick, remember? And don’t ask me that question. Luke may not be the perfect dad, but he’s good. He’s a truly good guy. I am not gonna let you sucker me into thinking I’ve been abused or misunderstood or whatever so I’ll start blaming Luke and Jasmine for everything and you can decide I have all kinds of problems that I really don’t have.”

Claire sits back on her heels (we’re on the floor again). “Maria,” she says, “hold on. I want to talk to you about what you just said.”

“Why? Did I break some rule?”

“No. But you do sound very defensive right now, and I want to help you find out why.”

“Is this one of those “anger is a sin” speeches? Because I got plenty of those from foster parents who shall remain nameless.”

“No,” Claire says, her tone still neutral. “Anger is not a sin. What you choose to do with it can become sin, but anger in itself is good. Emotions in themselves are good, remember? No—I just want to talk. Let me delve a little. You did promise to let me.”

I bite my lip. “That’s right, I did. Okay, delve on in.”

“Okay. Let’s take the word “defensive” out of it for a minute. I asked you about Luke, and you had a strong reaction. I heard your words, but I also heard the subtext in them. I heard you say, ‘I love my dad, and he’s always been good to me. But this woman is hinting that maybe he hasn’t been good all the time, and that’s bad, because to me, there is no gray area. A person, especially a parent, is either completely good or completely bad. If I admit that Luke did or said something he shouldn’t have, it means I’m saying he’s bad. I cannot do that because number one, it will be disloyal, and two, it will cause my counselor to believe I’m a lot more messed up than I really am. And that’s bad because my counselor kinda scares me, thanks to the time I spent in a psych ward due to something Luke thinks I did, and now thinks I confessed to.’ Does that basically cover it?”

I have to blush. “Yeah, you got it. Stupid, huh?”

“No. Natural. You love Luke and Jasmine, and so your natural instinct is to defend them. But...Maria, listen to me now...but, that does not mean you have to say, think, or believe that they are perfect. There is no such thing as a perfect parent.”

I shake my head. “There is such a thing. I had two of them.”

Claire laughs, but it’s a gentle laugh. “Maria, no. If your parents were human, which they were, then they were not perfect.”

“Okay, yeah, they weren’t literally perfect,” I say. “For one thing, they would get so busy running the Thousand Stars sometimes—that was their theater—that I barely ever got to see them. I hated summer because that was the big play season, and if I did get to see them, it was because I was performing. I felt like the only time I spent with them, they were directing me or, in Mama’s case, teaching me. I was homeschooled, you see. And for another thing, Mama

was...well, she was such a sweetheart. She was quiet and sweet and—you know, a real Texas belle, to the point that sometimes she didn't understand how I was feeling."

"As in..." Claire asks, looking confused.

"Okay," I say. "Example. In the neighborhood where I grew up—it's down toward Austin, in the suburbs—there were a lot of other kids, so I always had somebody to play with, but one of those kids was a girl named Laurie Mayhew. Laurie's mom was single because her husband ran out on them, and she spoiled Laurie because of it. She literally let that girl have anything she wanted, and she'd pressure Mama into giving her good parts in plays. But if I got a good part, it was always, 'Maria just got that role because she's your daughter.' Both Laurie and her mom constantly called me names—said I was spoiled, unladylike, a brat, you name it. Anyhow, some of the stuff Laurie said really hurt my feelings. Usually, I could ignore it or tell her off, but this one time when we were both about five, she said something—I no longer remember what—that made me cry. So I went home and told Mama, and Mama told me Laurie only did what she did because her daddy was gone and she was jealous that I still had my daddy. It...it felt like Mama was sticking up for Laurie."

"Which was a betrayal in your mind," Claire says.

"Well, sure. I was her kid. She was supposed to be on my side. She was supposed to march down to the Mayhews' house and tell Mrs. Mayhew and Laurie who the real brat was. And..." I gulp. "And I told her that. I got mad and told Mama how unfair she was being. I stormed up to my room and slammed the door in her face when she came after me. She..." I breathe deeply because suddenly, my nose is burning. "She didn't even punish me. She told me she was sorry. I felt so bad."

"Of course you did," Claire says, "but Maria, you were a little girl. You were a child. Children are self-centered. It's not bad. It's how they're made. Of course you wanted your mom to stick up for you before she worried about Laurie. But because she didn't, did that mean she was abusing you?"

"No! That whole thing—now that I'm an adult, I understand what she was trying to teach me. And it was my fault for getting mad."

“Okay,” Claire says. “So maybe that one doesn’t count. Can you think of a time that either Mama or Daddy did something you didn’t like, that was in no way your fault?”

I try to do what she says and nod. “I saw Daddy less than Mama because he was the director of the theater, so he had to be away more. And there was a stretch of time when I was about five that it felt like I hardly saw him at all. He knew it was hard on me, so once, he promised that he and I were going to spend the next weekend together, just the two of us. We both planned it all out, and then, that Friday, he had to go to Atlanta at the last minute. I was so disappointed I couldn’t even talk. Couldn’t even cry. But once Daddy got home, I barely left his side for three days. He got upset with me because I hid his pager so he couldn’t answer business calls. He asked me why I did that, and all I remember is hanging onto him, crying and saying, ‘You could’ve told them no! Why didn’t you say no? You’re allowed to, you know—you’re a grownup!’”

Claire gives me a look I can only call sympathetic. “That must have been horrible for you.”

“Well, not horrible. I mean, it wasn’t like he broke the promise on purpose. But it was pretty awful.”

“Right,” Claire says. “Your biological parents were not perfect. You don’t have to think of them as perfect to prove they were good or honor their memory. And you don’t have to think of Luke and Jasmine as perfect in order to prove their goodness.”

When Claire says that, I have what Clayton sometimes calls a “duh” moment. In fact, the realization makes me laugh. “I guess not. Gee, thanks, Claire.”

“That’s why I’m here. I’m not here to teach you to blame your parents for everything. That’s one of secular psychology’s biggest lies. But I am here to help you deal with the roles both sets of parents have played in your life, how that has shaped you, and how you can use it for good. So, back to the original question. Do you think Luke was part of the reason you couldn’t complete the homework?”

“Why, because I was upset at what he said? Sure.”

“Yes, but go deeper,” Claire encourages. “Luke’s a cop, and so are you. And you told me that the only time you feel totally safe talking to him these days is when you’re discussing police work. So think. Anything odd going on there?”

“As Gil’s son would say, duh,” I laugh. “You see...” And the next thing I know, I’m spilling some of the details of our weird relationship, most of all the detail that involves Luke thinking of me half as a daughter and half as a perp. “I am not even kidding you,” I say. “When I was in high school, he’d come home from his shift with these stories about how some kid got hauled in for smoking dope or DUI or something, and he would say, direct quote, ‘I better never catch you pulling a stunt like that.’ And he was suspicious of the theater kids I hung out with, too. Never mind that only one of ‘em smoked, that was just cigarettes, and she put them out around me. She never even asked me if I wanted to try it because she knew I’d say no.”

Claire and I keep talking from there, and at the end of our session, she gives me a sage nod. “I’m beginning to see how this all fits together,” she says. “You became a cop for three reasons. One, with the rape and the accident, you needed a refuge. Not only that, but a completely different world. Two, you wanted to prove to the people who called you a mistake that you were in fact capable of doing things right. And three, like all little girls, you craved your daddy’s approval, although by that time, you weren’t so little. Being a police officer just like Daddy Luke was a way to get what you craved.”

“Yeah.” I’m nodding with her. “But Luke still doesn’t approve. He still thinks I did the unthinkable. And I can’t take it anymore.”

“Especially now that you’re being threatened and need Luke more than ever? As your dad, not a cop?”

“Yes!”

“Okay,” Claire says. “So here’s your next assignment. Keep thinking about the first one, but try this one, too. I want you to spend time with Luke this week. The catch is, you have to do it as civilians. That means the shooting range is off-limits, and neither of you can bring up work. If he starts to bring it up, you tell him about your first homework assignment, and explain that you’re re-training yourself to think ‘I am Maria,’ not, ‘I am a cop named Maria.’ Also, neither of you can

bring up the suicide issue. The goal here is for you to relate to Luke as your dad. That will build trust, and eventually, we'll work you up to where you can talk about the negative things he's done or said in a way that allows you both to learn from them."

"Okay," I agree. "I can do that."

I pray Luke will let me.

That night, I decide to give Claire's assignment a shot. With that in mind, I curl up on the couch with a cup of decaf tea and an episode of *Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader*. It's Gil's and my favorite, and we made a deal to watch it at the same time every week while I'm in Texas. I can just picture him and the kids tuning in with a big bowl of popcorn, bickering over answers and laughing. They would already be in Tennessee with Gil's in-laws, the Talbots, by now. Oh, well. No use thinking about where I can't be. But...oh, please, Jesus, give Schmidt and the others wisdom and courage. Let them find the idiot who's after me soon. I'm homesick, and Texas is supposed to be my real home. Boy, wouldn't Claire have a field day with that one?

"Hi, Maria." Luke has come home without my knowing it. He sits next to me and puts his chin in his hand. "I'd pick third grade science," he says.

"Nah," I say. "This contestant's a wimp. He's been picking first grade questions and taking forever at that."

Luke chuckles, but then gives me a concerned look. "Maria, have you been crying?"

I realize too late that I was blinking the whole time I was talking to Luke. I crack my knuckles. "I'm just really stressed about the stalker," I say. "And..." Since I'm trying to relate to him as a civilian, might as well say it. "I miss Gil."

"Your wedding's coming up soon, isn't it?"

"Yeah. September fifteenth." *Maybe*, insists a nasty voice.

"I'm glad you found him," Luke tells me. He coughs a few times, and I feel myself tense up at the danger signal. "Luke, what's wrong? Did you..." Gulp. "Do you know where Chandler is?"

“No.” Luke puts his arm around me and pulls me into his chest, like he used to when I was little. “But honey...the police station was faxed another note from the stalker today. They know whose daughter you are, and they also know about Gil. The note basically says that you will never see him again, that I can’t save you, and when you see what he’ll do to you, you’ll think your parents got off easy.”

CHAPTER 12:

“Little bird...I don’t understand what’s happening today...”

-Fiddler on the Roof

The first thing I do after spending several more minutes with Luke is go upstairs and call Gil. Once he has the story, he’s silent for a few minutes and asks,

“Honey, do you want me there? The kids can stay with their grandparents and I can come down for a few days. A week. As long as you need me.”

I’m about as tempted as a starving woman would be to snatch a hamburger and eat the whole thing in one bite, but I make myself say no. “That might scare the kids,” I explain. “That’s the last thing they need. You’ve got to stay.”

Gil sighs. “I hate this. And I hate that man for what he’s doing to you. To us.”

I sigh right back. “Gil, don’t hate him. That’s what he wants.” I’m not sure where that came from, but I know it’s true. I dart a look at the ceiling and smile when I feel a deep reassurance in my chest.

But Gil seems unmoved. “I don’t care,” he says, and I can tell by his tone his jaw is clenched so tight it’s ready to pop. “I do hate him. I’m so angry with him I could...and God. I’m angry with God. For the first time in my life, I wish I could get hold of the Almighty and shake Him. You’ve already been through the wringer. What is He trying to do, treat you like an experiment in torture?”

I’m not sure what to say for a minute. As if it’s not shocking enough to hear Gil put what I’ve started wondering into words, I’m absolutely floored that Gil Montgomery, the strongest Christian I’ve ever met, who’s taught me so much about living as a Christian, is mad at God. And really, what is he supposed to do about that? I ask God now. What am I supposed to do, for that matter? Being mad at you isn’t like being mad at a human. You get mad at somebody else, you at least have the assurance that you’ve probably got the right to be. If you’re mad at something another person did, it’s most likely because both of you are right. But to be mad at you...God,

you're perfect, and that means Gil and I are totally wrong. And frankly, it's not fair. It stinks a big one, if you want to know. Not that I particularly care if you want to know, 'cause I already said it.

"Holy crumb," I hear myself groan.

"Amen," Gil says.

"I just wish I knew what to do about this thing," I tell him. "If God would just give me some kind of clue...I hate not knowing what to do. I hate not doing anything."

"How well I know," Gil laughs. "So I guess we're both in a tough spot, honey. You hate not knowing what to do, and I hate that I don't know why it's happening. When Anne got cancer, I knew why. I could explain to the kids that a disease had gotten inside her body, and it was no one's fault because that was just how bodies worked sometimes. But now I don't know why."

I think about this, and a stray thought makes me laugh. "You know, we'd both make lousy journalists."

I crack up, and after a minute, so does Gil. We laugh our heads off for a long time, more out of frustration and borderline hysteria than anything else. Gil calms down first and clears his throat.

"Maria? Maria, sweetie...Gumshoe, take a deep breath for me. We need to handle this now. I've got an idea. Why don't we pray? I'll pray that God reveal why He's allowing you to be hurt, and you pray that you'll know what to do about it. And...and I guess we both need to pray to be able to see past the anger."

I take that breath and feel myself smile. "Sounds like a plan. Okay, do you go first or do I?"

"I will. Dear Father..." Gil begins a prayer in his usual style—devout and formal, but not showy or fake. The sound of his voice comforts me almost more than his words do, soothing my sore soul the way a hot bath soothes sore muscles. Once he says "amen," I have to sit for a second before starting my own prayer.

"Okay, God, here we go. I'm not gonna give you the skinny on the stalker situation because you already have it. And I'm not gonna ask you why you're letting it happen to me because Gil already did that. But what I am gonna say is—well, a few things. First, I'm thankful to

still be alive. You could've made it so somebody just broke into my house one night and slit my throat, but you didn't. I'm here, and that's a huge deal for me. And I'm thankful that my life is full. Tunney told me once that I was lucky because I had people who loved me to see me through the tough times, and I know he was right. I have you, and Gil and his family—well, except Laurence, but I guess you'll keep working on that, won't you—and so many others, and I'm asking you now to keep a watchful eye on every one of 'em.”

“And more than that, God, I know my life is full because of what I've been able to do with it. Not just finding you, although that was a major point. I'm talking about the eight fantastic years I had with Mama and Daddy, and how I got adopted even though I was supposed to be too old. I'm talking about getting a second chance at a college degree, and the chance to help so many people on the police force. I'm talking about the chances I've still had to be around the theater world. But that's just it. Someone's trying to end my life, and if I don't do something, they'll succeed. So please, Jesus—Gil asked for “why,” and I'm asking for “what”. Please show me what to do so I can help the people who are trying so hard to help me. Thanks in advance. In Jesus' name—and I really do mean that, 'cause I need Him to give me what I ask in His name this time—amen.”

“Amen,” Gil echoes. “Maria, I love your prayers so much.”

“Thanks. I...I know I'm not Miss Churchy.”

“That's okay. I for one would love to be a fly on the wall in your prayer closet. And God will answer our prayers. You remember that.”

“I promise. So, did you watch *Fifth Grader* tonight?”

“Wouldn't miss it. Clayton's getting more and more of the answers right. Can you believe he'll be in fourth grade in just two months?”

“Yeah, June is really booking it out of here. I'm hoping Luke can help the Cherry Creek force get this case solved soon so I can have the rest of the summer with you guys. By the way, I was wondering—since I can't be in Tennessee, could I speak to your in-laws for a minute?”

“Sure. Do you want Kipp or Susan first?”

“Uh—who wants to meet me more?”

Gil laughs. “Relax, darlin’. Here, Kipp’s closer, so I’ll put him on.”

If there’s one thing I learned as a music and theater expert, it’s that voices never lie, and judging from Kipp and Susan Talbot’s voices, they honestly like me. Kipp has a voice that hovers between tenor and bass, with just the slightest hint of a Southern accent, which he blames on being originally from Pennsylvania, meaning that he never picked it up.

“Are you sure you’re a real Texan?” he teases me. “You don’t have much of a twang, and believe me, I know my accents.”

I laugh. “Yeah, but twangs aren’t allowed onstage, so mine just makes an appearance now and then. Sometimes it slips into my voice lessons, and Gil tells me to quit singing like Reba McEntire.”

“I might have known he was giving you a hard time. He can be a real perfectionist when he wants to, but we love him around here. And he certainly has gone on about you—the kids have, too. Sophie said something about you helping a school learn how to love Jesus again?”

I have to smile at her interpretation. “Well, not really, but...” I explain the details of my last case.

“Well, you did help them learn to love Jesus again, then,” Kipp says. “You know, I used to teach middle-grade Bible courses at a Christian academy—are you familiar yet with apologetics?”

“Um, that’s where Christians defend their beliefs to non-Christians, right?”

That’s all the encouragement Kipp needs. Soon, he’s throwing names like Oswald Chambers, C.S. Lewis, Ravi Zacharias, and Lee Strobel at me, and I can’t get another word in. Finally, I have to cut him off with,

“Whoa—whoa, Mr. Talbot...back way up here. I love how passionate you are about all this, but that road’s a little too curvy for my Christianity car. I’d never be smart enough to get into a debate with a hardcore atheist and kick his butt.”

Kipp laughs like I just said the funniest thing on the planet. “It’s Kipp, Maria, and I quite disagree. I can hear in your voice that you are a brilliant woman. But I understand if you’re not quite ready for the big apologetics games yet. Drive that car only as fast as you need to. And speaking of cars, Clayton tells me you know a lot about them. What do you drive?”

"It's a bright blue 1998 Toyota Camry. Got it used from a fellow cop after the brakes on my old one nearly went out in the middle of the interstate. But," I feel comfortable telling Kipp, "what I'd really like to have is something from the '50s or '60s. In candy apple red at that. When I was a little girl, I loved *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego*, and even though Carmen was the bad guy, I kinda got this idea that real detectives should be associated with red. And since I love red anyway, well, I was covered."

"You don't say. Any particular model you like?"

"I love DeSotos. And, well, don't mention this to Gil because he doesn't get it, but I sometimes have this fantasy about driving around in a red Edsel. I know everybody else thinks they're hideous, but I like 'em. They're...charming."

"Ha! A girl after my own heart. I love Edsels."

Kipp and I talk some more after that, until I hear a woman laughing and demanding her turn in the background. Seconds later, Susan Talbot is on the line, and I'm soaking up the contrast in her laugh-laced, country colatura.

"It sounded like you were having fun with that car talk," she says, "but I just had to rescue you before Kipp kept you on the line all night, which I'm sure you really don't need. We go to church with a couple of officers, and I know they don't get enough sleep. But tell me about yourself. I've been aching to meet you, and I could take a rolling pin to that—" she lowers her voice—"S-T-A-L-K-E-R, for keeping you away. Why, I had plans to show you everything around here—even take you down to Nashville for a shopping trip, lunch at Atlanta Bread Company, and a complete tour of Music Row. Is it true what Gil says about you writing songs?"

"Uh, yes, ma'am."

"Oh, well, if you ever wanna turn in that badge and let that voice of yours take wing, I've got a friend in the business. Well, not in the business, exactly. He's the morning personality for our Christian station. But he'd be more than willing to—"

"No," I cut her off, politely but quickly. I don't think I'm good enough for Nashville—really, good enough for anywhere as far as music is concerned—and the last thing I want to do is shake

somebody's hand and, with the other, shove one of my songs at them. "Your friend would probably take one look at my stuff and say, 'who do you think would sing this—Raffi?'"

"Hmmm. You don't write about cute little bugs and brushing your teeth, do you?"

"No."

"Then I doubt that'd happen. He'd give you an honest opinion, though. Of course, if it was negative, I'm sure you'd be just fine. Gil says you're the queen of resilience."

"I try."

"I'm sure. So, tell me all about this wedding you're planning. Of course, Kipp and I will be there, but I've got a weakness for weddings, and I want my details way ahead so I can picture it."

In the next several minutes, I learn that Susan is like a huge brownie smothered in hot fudge—absolutely irresistible. We talk and laugh so much I almost lose track of time, until I hear Gil insist he needs the phone back. He comes on and laughs.

"See?" he asks. "They're not so scary."

"Not at all. I can't wait to meet them for real."

"You will. So...I'd better make sure the kids are down for the night. I don't want summer vacation disrupting their routine too much. I'll give them each a kiss for you."

Like all of them, I find our phone conversation has ended way too soon, but rather than mope about it, I decide to get myself "down" for the night, too. It's still kind of early, though, so I pop in a DVD of one of my high school plays—sophomore year, *Fiddler on the Roof*, in which I played middle daughter Hodel, sweetheart of a revolutionary. The minute my character steps onstage, I'm back in the halls of Sam Houston High, reliving every minute of that spring. Musical auditions on the first day of March—my director, Ms. Shanahan, always planned it that way because she had some weird thing about the alliteration. I sang "Far From the Home I Love," Hodel's solo, and it must've paid off.

Rehearsals—the easy ones after school, the longer ones in April, and then the two dress rehearsals we all called the Big Berthas, because they ran from 3:30 until Ms. Shanahan said we were done, which could be eleven o' clock that night. I didn't mind, though. I can remember sitting in the library doing homework when it wasn't my scene, or taking a break to read a mystery or

play pyramid solitaire. Sometimes, I'd walk down the hall, pretending I needed a restroom break or drink, just so I could soak up the thrill of being in an almost-empty school.

Opening night—well, there are no words. To be on that stage and know that all my hard work had led up to another incredible performance...to know that all the late nights, irritated throats, and hot costumes were worth it...to be able to become someone else for awhile...

That thought makes me slam on my mental brakes. Was that why I always loved theater so much? Because I didn't like who I was and therefore took every opportunity to "play pretend?" Well, if so, I reason, that would make sense, considering my history and all. My high school teachers never said anything much, but they knew all about my time in foster care, and I think some of them suspected things weren't all sunshine and lollipops between me and Luke. One time, I walked by the teacher's lounge and heard some of them talking about me, because they'd left the door open. Ms. Shanahan was in there, and she said something about how she knew I was going to have an excellent future because I had such a gift for the stage. A lot of people dreamed about making it big, she said, but she wouldn't encourage most of them because she knew what a gritty business theater was. But, she said, she would encourage me in a heartbeat.

"Why, so she could go live at the YWCA and spend six years behind a cash register?" asked my history teacher, sounding just like Luke. It was all I could do not to go in there and give him a piece of my mind right then.

But Ms. Shanahan did it for me. "No," she said. "That's not always how it goes, and it wouldn't be that way for Maria. One, that girl will not take "no" for an answer. If she had to work her way up to get what she wanted, she'd do it, and you all know that. Two, I don't know what it is exactly, but there's something inside Maria that separates her from all the rest of the Broadway hopefuls. And three, I don't have to tell you, Maria's not in the choir or the drama department just for fun, or just because she's talented. She needs it, desperately. Her life has already been one of the tougher ones out there, and from talking to her, I can sense adoption hasn't made it that much easier."

"I'd believe it," my English teacher said. "Luke Brown's a good dad, but he's a tough customer. To tell the truth, when I met Maria this year and saw who her guardians were, I just

couldn't see it. She just turned in a paper on *Pride and Prejudice*, and she chose to argue that Lizzie Bennett's relationship with her father heavily influenced the way she handled Darcy and Wickham. There's something going on there. I think you're right, Charity. Theater is filling a need in that girl that none of the rest of our classes ever will."

That was all I heard of that conversation, and until tonight I hadn't thought of it in over ten years. But now it's all I can think about. Were those teachers right? Was I in theater because it filled a need? Well, sure I was, but was I just involved in choir and drama and all that because I was upset with Luke and it was a healthier thing to do than go around playing the rebel? Was Claire wrong? Was I always meant to be a cop, and did that mean my love of theater was just a waste?

Why don't you stop analyzing yourself and ask me that?

I think about it, but smile and shake my head. "Sorry, God. I'm just chasing a bunny trail. Hmmm...I seem to be doing that a lot lately. But bunny trails never got anyone anywhere, including me. Just having dreams and regrets, I guess. Better get rid of those right now." I snap off the movie, snuggle deeper under my covers, and turn the light off. "Love ya—good night."

I don't remember having any nightmares. But it does take me awhile to get to sleep, because I have the strangest feeling I walked out on God while He was still talking to me.

A couple days later, June twenty-ninth, is my first Sunday back in Texas. At first, I was reluctant to go back to Luke and Jasmine's church because I knew our whole town had the story of what supposedly happened, but the service turned out okay, partly because a lot of things had changed. For one, the church got a new pastor, Pastor Johansen, who didn't sweat and scream like the one I remembered. Two, the church potluck committee had learned to break free of fried chicken—they served lasagna. And three, people were actually happy to see me. I left the church feeling as if maybe, just maybe, Tunney was right and that in Texas, I could finally get some peace.

I'm sitting on the porch writing about all this in the journal Gil gave me for my birthday last year when Luke comes out dressed in boots and a Stetson. Jasmine follows and sits down next to me. "Hey," she says, "when you're done there, are you up for some riding?"

"Sure, if you think my old boots still fit."

"Well..." Jasmine winks, and I notice she's got something under her arm. She kisses my forehead. "We were hoping we could ride together when you came home. Call it a late birthday present."

"Jasmine, I...you guys...you didn't have to, but..." I slip my left foot into one of the black, faux-ruby-studded boots. "Oh, they're perfect. And they're gorgeous. Thank you both."

"Well, are you gonna stare at them or use them?" Luke laughs, and I get up to go hug him. "Use them, definitely," I tell him, hoping this will be a good time to try doing what Claire suggested.

Half an hour later, my adoptive parents and I are headed out on one of the local stables' advanced trails, making small talk about the Cherry Creek news, Meg and Monique, and of course, my wedding. I laugh so hard I almost fall off my horse when Luke and Jasmine get into a good-natured argument about whether the bridesmaids' dresses absolutely must match.

"I'll have to side with Luke on this one," I tell them. "I'm not having many bridesmaids at all—just Meg and Monique, and Rose Shippensberg, and Schmidt's daughter Isabella. I told them they could each wear whatever kind of dress they wanted."

"You're not going to make them do a theater theme and dress like Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady*?" Luke asks.

Was that a dig? And why, as usual, is it impossible to tell? I shake off the question. "Hey, you guys want to do what we used to and race to the end of the trail?"

Luke flashes me a grin. "I'm always up for that. Jazz?"

"I'm in if you are. Ready..."

And we're off. I'm ahead for the first few feet, but Luke charges in front of me, laughing and calling,

"Extra points for the old guy!"

“Oh, yeah? C’mon, girl...” I give Midnight a gentle nudge and lean in, focusing on passing Luke. But then Jasmine catches up, and we’re literally neck to neck. Okay, that’s it. I press my knees in tighter and pick up enough momentum to pass Jasmine. Now for Luke...one, two...

A gunshot rattles the woods. Midnight lets loose with a terrified whinny and rears up. I grab the reins and lean into her. “Steady, girl, steady...” What idiot would be firing off a gun around here? I’ve barely finished the question when the gun goes off again. Midnight’s fear is even stronger, and this time, her bucking makes it impossible for me to stay in the saddle. The last thing I see is the ground opening its arms, and then giving me a rough, rocky kiss. I hear Luke shout, and then feel him pull me away from the horse just seconds before her hooves come down again.

“Are you all right?” he asks me, his voice tight with worry.

I test my limbs and check for blood. “Yeah. Yeah, I think so. I landed on my back, but I think all I’ve got is a bunch of colossal bruises.”

Luke nods and expels a breath. “I’m going to find the loon who fired that gun. If you ask me, your being here at the same time is entirely too coincidental. Are you okay to ride back?”

“I think so.”

“All right. Here...” Luke helps me back into the saddle. “Just take it real slow, okay?”

“You be careful too, Luke.” Jasmine’s voice is almost a whisper. They exchange a look of pure love before Luke smiles, promises, and heads into the woods.

“Yeah, that just doesn’t make any sense,” the stable owner says once Jasmine and I are back. He’s escorted us into his office and given us drinks—coffee for Jasmine, diet Mountain Dew for me. “I get a renegade hunter or two around sometimes, but that’s usually in the fall. Whoever pulled this stunt’s a bad apple for sure. You ladies care for some trail mix? It’s got M&Ms, Maria—those still your favorites?”

I laugh. “I haven’t changed that much.”

But a few minutes later, laughing is the exact opposite of what I feel like doing. Luke slams through the stable office, his face looking like the eye of a hurricane. “I was close,” he informs us. “Too close.” He cusses a few times, looks at Jasmine and me, apologizes, and goes

on. "I caught a glimpse of a man," he says, "running down toward the ravine. Smallish, but a lot of muscle. Gray hair, dark jeans, one of those red cowboy shirts with pearl snaps and a silver snake on the collar. He didn't have a gun, but I knew he had one on him. But he faked left, and I lost him down in the ravine."

"Did you see his face?" I ask.

"No. But there's something you should see," Luke says. "I think this might be our biggest clue yet."

He takes something out of his pocket and pushes it toward me. I don't realize I've cried out until Jasmine puts an arm around me.

I'm looking at a photo of my parents—from the obituary section of my old hometown's paper, the *Daily Register*. Written across it is **TWO DOWN, ONE TO GO. THE LAST OF THE KELLERS WILL PAY FOR HER PARENTS' WRONGS!**

CHAPTER 13:

“Catch me, I’m falling, before it’s too late...”

-Next to Normal

“My parents? What in the ever-lovin’ world do they have to do with this?” I ask. I’ve been asking myself variations of the same question for half an hour, ever since Luke drove us home from the stables. But this is the first time I’ve forced it out of my mouth.

Luke coughs. “I don’t know, but that’s what we have to find out.” He sits back in his favorite brown leather easy chair. “Maria, I know you don’t like to, but can we talk about your mom and dad?”

“Right now?”

“The sooner the better.”

I take a deep breath and barely resist the urge to crack my knuckles. “I...I think I’ll need some tea for that. Strong, heavily iced tea.”

Jasmine kisses me and gets up. “I made a fresh pot this morning. I’ll get you a glass. Luke?”

“Sure, babe, but bring me plenty of Equal. I can’t slam it down straight like some people.” I can tell he’s forcing his smile, and I force one back.

“Hey, at least it’s not wine coolers or gin,” I say.

“You got that right. Although I wouldn’t be above it right now if I drank,” Luke says. He waits until Jasmine delivers our glasses and sets down one of her own before he begins. “Maria, I need you to think as far back as you can. To your knowledge, did your parents ever do anything that would incite a former employee or cast member to seek this kind of revenge?”

“Nothing illegal,” I say immediately. “But...” I close my eyes. Most of the Thousand Stars employees I remembered respected Mama and Daddy, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t have gotten a little disgruntled from time to time. Didn’t everybody? I take small, but bracing sips of tea, letting the crushed ice melt in my mouth.

“There were a few times,” I say at last. “We had an actress once who was a real stage mother. She brought her kids to rehearsals with her, and she was constantly grooming them to perform. I once heard her yelling at the youngest one because she couldn’t fit into her costume, telling her no dessert for a month. This woman—her name was Sonia Dellums—she used to argue with Mama because she thought I was being raised too liberally, whatever that meant. But Mama stood up to her—said she was gonna raise her kids her way, and that was it.”

“Hmmm,” Jasmine says. “And despite what you hear about those crazy cheerleader mothers in the news, I hardly think Sonia Dellums would stalk you because she thought you’d been hitting the M&Ms too hard.”

I have to chuckle at that one. “No. Okay, let’s see...there was the time my parents got into it with our janitor about letting roaches run loose in the basement, but...and I think there were disputes on and off with a competing theater, the Royal Crown Playhouse.”

“Friendly rivalry gone wrong?” Luke asks.

I keep drinking. “I’m not sure. Remember, I was still kind of little when all this was happening. My life was basically school, music, and running around climbing trees and turning myself into one giant scrape. But I had a problem with eavesdropping that Mama and Daddy were always trying to teach or discipline out of me.”

“Must’ve been what made you a great detective,” Jasmine says. “So you heard your dad talking to the other director?”

“Yeah. I was never a doll person, of course, but I had one favorite that Mama gave me for my fifth birthday. Anyway, I was playing with her, and I heard Daddy talking to Mr. Ostermann—he was the Royal Crown director. From what I understood, Mr. Ostermann was ridiculing Daddy for not making as much money as he did, and he was saying that if the actors at the Thousand Stars would perform these certain plays, the theater would do better—all in this real smug tone, you know? So he named a bunch of titles, and Daddy said, ‘thanks, but no thanks, Frank. We’ve got a little girl, and we want to set the right standards for her. What kind of example would I be setting if I let my actors perform plays covered in drug usage, sexual humor, and who knows what else, touting the philosophy that those things are okay?’”

“Sounds like Eric Keller was a smart man,” Luke says. “So what did Frank...Ostermann, was it? What did he say?”

“He kind of snorted and said if Daddy wanted to spend his life producing morality plays, be his guest, but not to be surprised when he had to buy us out.”

Luke sits up straight. “That sounds threatening to me. Can you remember any other instances when Ostermann stuck his nose in your parents’ business—literally?”

I’m quickly running out of tea. I bite my lip, and Jasmine passes me a tube of cherry lip balm. “Slather, hon,” she says.

I do and keep talking. “That same year,” I begin, “my parents held a Christmas party for their theater and the people at Royal Crown. I was allowed to stay until my bedtime around eight-thirty. Daddy even asked me to sing for the guests—Mama had taught me “The Virgin’s Lullaby,” and I was so proud, because the song was tough. But I could see Ostermann and his wife kinda snickering in the background, and later, I noticed them arguing with Mama and Daddy. Whatever they were saying must’ve been pretty nasty, because Daddy kept threatening to make them leave. They finally did, but...” I shake my head. “No, the Ostermanns couldn’t be behind the stalking. That spring, Daddy heard they had sold the Royal Crown and moved away. I think it had something to do with the fact that the Thousand Stars was on the upswing. We were getting great reviews for being clean and family-friendly.”

“Where did they move to?” Jasmine asks.

“I don’t know.”

Luke coughs a few times. “Okay. I believe you, Maria. If these people are even still around, I don’t see a reason for them to be after you. Not if they were able to start a new business fairly easily in another state.” He sighs. “I still say that rapist has something to do with it, but I have no idea what connection he has with your parents.”

“Neither do I,” I admit. “Are your detectives still looking for him?”

“Yeah,” Luke says. “And as soon as we find him, it’s gonna get ugly. I can’t even think about that kid without wanting to take his head and...”

“Luke...” Jasmine warns.

Luke pats Jasmine's arm, coughs again, and turns to me. "Is there anyone else in that theater who would want to hurt you, Maria? Anyone at all? Please try to think, honey."

I sigh and rub my forehead. I'm so tired of trying to think. But it looks like my memory is the only thing that's going to get me out of this, so I know I've got to try. I drain my tea and shoot Jasmine a grateful look when she heads to the kitchen with my glass for a refill. I close my eyes, praying for help. Just like at the Cherry Creek detectives' bureau, it seems as if I'm missing something...as if there's someone in the back of my mind...

For one second, a memory zooms into my brain. No face, but a definite voice. "*You say one word about this, you little piece of trash, and I'll make you sorry!*" And hands—grabbing me, shaking me. Hitting me.

"Oh! Oh, no!"

"Maria, what is it?" Luke is holding my hand. "What is it? Who is it?"

But the memory's already gone, and I shake my head. Guilt seizes my stomach like a severe menstrual cramp. "...I remember, but I can't." I take a deep breath, force my voice to stay steady, and explain.

"Well, that sounds like something a guy related to a rapist would do," Luke growls. His voice gentles. "Maria, are you sure you don't have a face? A name?"

"No. No...at least not yet."

"You may have repressed it," Jasmine suggests.

I almost laugh. "What? Is that what they call it?"

"Yeah," Luke confirms, and I laugh again.

"No," I say. "I've read about that stuff so I could be a bigger help to sex crime victims. That only happens with sexual abuse, and I absolutely know that whoever this man was, he didn't touch me like that. I remember how, right after Daddy fired him, Mama asked me, but I said no."

"So this man worked for your parents," Luke says. "As a what?"

"As...as..." Good question. What was he? Maybe if I remember that, I can remember who he was. An actor? No—no, that's wrong. I never saw that terrifying face onstage. So that leaves staff. Where had I heard that grating, threatening voice? Where in the theater was he? I

twist my brain all kinds of ways trying to figure out the answer, but my brain refuses to let me have it.

“I’m sorry,” I say at last. “I can’t come up with it.”

Luke nods and stands up. “I think that’s enough probing for now.”

“Amen,” Jasmine says. “Maria, I was going to clean out the attic. Why don’t you come with me? There might be some things you want to take home with you.”

“Okay,” I agree. “I’ll be there as soon as I change shoes.”

“I’m gonna go practice my shots,” Luke says, and I hear an edge in his voice. Once we’re alone, I ask Jasmine about it. She shrugs. “Don’t worry, sweetie,” she says. “Luke is just...well, he’s still figuring out how to deal with your being back here, and he’s confided in me that he’s kind of hoping you’re here to stay. He wants this to be your home.”

I bat at a cobweb with a broom Jasmine gave me. “And in a way, it still is,” I tell her. “I haven’t forgotten how you two took me in, or how great that felt. But I’m a woman now, and I have my own life. Cherry Creek is home, and I wish Luke would accept that. Why would he want me back here, anyway? Half the time, he acts like we’re best friends, and then the other half, it’s like I can’t do anything right. That’s the way it always was, even when I was a kid.”

Jasmine sighs. “Maria, he never meant to come across that way.”

“Well, mean to or not, he did. Does. I wish...I wish you’d tell him that. Make him see that he’s made mistakes, too.” At that, I purposely turn my back and get busy going through the boxes on my side of the attic. I’m not sure I can trust myself to look at my adoptive mom’s face.

Jasmine’s thumping stacks of old books against the floor. “Mistakes were made on both sides, honey.”

“I understand that. But I’ve repented of mine. I’ve spent the last three years feeling like I’ve been ground under somebody’s boot because of them. If I have to admit what I’ve done and face the consequences, then so does he.”

Thump, thump, goes a box of old silverware. “Luke can’t fix what’s already been done, Maria.”

Swish, swish, goes a pile of scarves and skirts I move out of my way. “Or maybe he can.”

“Well...” Jasmine shrugs. “Your father—”

“Adoptive father.”

“Your father is an extremely proud man.” She gets up and dusts off her hands. “Well, I pulled together quite a bit for the next garage sale. What about you?”

I make myself answer. “Yeah, there’s a lot over here. Where’d y’all get this hideous thing, anyway? I mean, who makes a vase shaped like a cow? A purple one, at that?”

Jasmine laughs and shakes her head. “Oh, I’ve had that for years. A first grade teacher had it made for me as a thank-you gift for letting her class come in every month for a puppet show. It’s based on a poem about a purple cow.”

“Go figure,” I mutter. “So do you want to keep it? Sentimental value and all that?”

“Ah, no. That teacher has long since moved to Maine.” Jasmine gives me a fond look. “It’s too bad I didn’t know you when you were little. Did your mom ever take you to a library?”

“Oh, all the time. She had a homeschooling curriculum from the state of Texas, but she added her own stuff to it. We used to have one field trip a week. She took me to public gardens, the library, the zoo—she even took me to restaurants and got permission for me to go into their kitchen and watch the chefs work so I could learn a little about where food comes from and how to measure for recipes. We went to the fire and police stations, too.”

Jasmine chuckles. “I’ll bet those cops got a kick out of you.”

“They sure did. I remember meeting one female officer—I looked up at her and said, ‘Mama told me girls could be police officers, but I didn’t believe it. So, do you get to chase after bad guys, or do the boys just make you sit at your desk all day?’ She kinda became my escort that day. Her name was...oh, what...Rachel, I think. She used to see me around town and say, ‘how’s my favorite junior detective?’” The memory makes me smile, but then I remember something that pricks my heart.

Jasmine notices. “What is it?”

“I just remembered,” I explain. “The night it happened...the night Mama and Daddy died...two cops came to the house with the coroner, and Rachel was one. She put me on her lap and everything—I guess the guys figured a woman would have an easier time breaking the news

to a kid. She...she was crying, and it scared me. I thought people like firefighters and police officers weren't supposed to cry."

"Thought, or think?" Jasmine's obviously trying to lighten the mood, so I let her.

"I'm working on it," I say. "Not quite there yet, but really trying."

"Good." Jasmine thinks for a minute. "Maria, I have an idea," she finally says. "I don't know if those officers would still be around, but do you think if you went back to your hometown's station, the police there could tell you anything that could lead you to the former employer you're trying to remember?"

It's been hours since Jasmine made that suggestion. In fact, it's almost midnight, and once again, I can't sleep. I've tiptoed down to the kitchen and made myself some tea—chamomile decaf—hoping that'll help me think it through.

On the one hand, I'm appalled that Jasmine would even think of that idea. Going back to where I grew up now would make the old wounds I've had to deal with since I returned to Texas that much worse. It would be like ripping open a cut that needed over a hundred stitches and sitting back, waiting for fever and gangrene to set in. And besides that, what if the cops there have heard about me somehow? What if they remember me as Eric and Audrey's poor little girl who just couldn't deal with their death? What if they don't have any answers for me, or won't give them to me? Or what if I find something I wish I hadn't? Good grief, if that happened, I might as well check myself into therapy for the rest of my life. Claire could buy a condo in Honolulu!

But on the other hand, I do want to find out who's stalking me, get him put away, and get my life back. And as I've learned from over twenty years of watching it happen in various ways—foster care, jail, the fiasco with Adam Baker—I'm sick of having my life stolen. It's mine, and I want the chance to use it the way God wants me to—the right way.

On the other hand...

I laugh. "God," I whisper, "I sound like Tevye. But this is a much bigger decision than trying to figure out who my kids should marry. Oh, man—when Clayton and the girls get that age, I'll be a real wreck. Little Desi on a date? Clayton shaving and taking a girl to the movies? I so do

not wanna go there. But I don't want to go here, either. I mean, I don't want to go back to Angel's Crossing," I say, referring to my old neighborhood. Who knows what trouble that might stir up?"

Maria, Maria. Since when are you afraid of a little trouble?

"Ha, ha, very funny, Lord. You know what I mean."

Yes, I do. And I also know you've still got some healing to do.

I think this over. Healing...and of course, where better to do it than where I got hurt in the first place? Gil's words come back to me. Could he be right? Is it true that I've been in so much pain I've done everything I can to keep Mama and Daddy out of my heart? I let them go years ago, at least in the sense of thinking about them all the time and wishing for what wasn't gonna happen. Could this be a way, not to let my parents go, but to let them back in?

I look up and nod. "Okay, Lord. You've got a deal. But please—I know you're going to be with me, but this is much more serious than anything I've ever done. I'm asking you, please don't leave my side, and by that I mean, don't go a step further than my elbow." I rub my angel pin, which I haven't taken off except in the shower since the day Schmidt gave it back to me, in the interrogation room when I didn't know if I'd ever see a room without bars again.

"Mama?" I whisper. "If...I don't know how it works once you're in heaven. If God lets you see me, then—I'm going home soon. And I've got Him on my side, which you always told me was the most important. But...I was kinda wondering, since human saints are higher up than angels—could you and Daddy make sure some of the best come with me? Thanks. And...and I love you."

Actually, maybe I should've changed that request. The way I'm feeling right now, I could need a whole angel army.

CHAPTER 14:

“You can’t get away from me. You can climb the tallest tree, I’ll be there somehow...”

-Gypsy

“How you feeling, baby?”

Luke has just pulled out of an Arby’s parking lot halfway through our trip to Austin. I’ve spent the morning trying to tell myself it’s just a drive, but the mixture of anticipation and dread in my stomach is so potent I almost throw up. In fact, I made Luke pull over one time.

I shrug. “I’m starting to feel better. Prayed a little.”

“Good, but you could probably still use some help.” Luke hands me a sweating paper cup. “It’s a Coke. And don’t you say one word about the calories.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I tell him, even though on a normal day, I’d resent that remark. After all, an almost-thirty-one-year-old woman should be able to drink whatever she wants, and if it’s healthy, then so much the better. I feel my lips turn up when Gil crosses my mind. How did we both end up with such authoritarian fathers?

“Want some?” Luke offers me his container of fries. When I shake my head, he changes the subject. “How’s Gil?”

“He’s great. Took the kids to Dollywood yesterday.” I laugh. “I don’t think he’s really an amusement park kind of guy. They’ll be headed back in a couple more days. He says the kids are starting to miss me pretty badly.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. They’re holding up all right, though?”

“Sure. They basically think I’m here on vacation because Tunney said I was working too hard. Which is partially true.”

“Hmmm. Now, remind me, there’s Clayton, and Sophie, and who’s the little one? Darcy?”

“Desi. Short for Desiree. I need to get back especially for her sake. She had the roughest time of any of ‘em after Anne died.” I smile just thinking about holding her. “She’s a great little girl. Always coming up and hugging me, letting me hold her. She likes to play with my hair—says

she's never seen that color on anybody's head before. And she's just so...so sweet. Sensitive. Plays by herself for hours, and she's perfectly happy. Talks to her toys as if they answer her all the time."

"And Sophie?" Luke asks. "She was the one you helped learn about anger, right?"

"Yeah. Sophie...I don't have favorites, but she's easiest for me to deal with because she's a lot like I was at that age. Independent, curious about everything, says anything that pops into her brain. And she'll try anything, but you'll always know when she doesn't like a food or an activity. If she has to, she'll yell." I sober. "I worry about the twins because they're little and have already had a major loss to handle. Sophie's told Gil that sometimes she can't remember Anne at all. But it's Clayton on my mind these days."

"Why?" Luke wants to know. He flips on his turn signal, turns right, and shifts gears before offering the fries again. "Come on, Maria. You barely ate breakfast, and you wouldn't let me buy you a sandwich."

I give in and pop a few of the heavily doctored potatoes into my mouth. "Well," I say around a mouthful, "there's nothing wrong, per se. But when I was in Cherry Creek, Clayton sometimes seemed like he didn't want to talk about the wedding. He kept saying that was because weddings were for girls and the kissy-kissy stuff was gross, which I can believe. Hello? He's a nine-year-old boy. Lately, though..." I think about it, trying to figure out how to say what I want to. "Lately," I pick back up, "when I talk to him on the phone, he starts out enthusiastic. He trips over words, he's so eager to tell me about everything they saw and did. And he tells me all the time how much he loves and misses me. But then, about midway through the conversation, he kinda clams up. Quiets down and almost stops talking, as if he's distracted or I've said something wrong."

"And that's it?" Luke asks.

"Yeah. I don't know. I kinda thought since Clay's a boy, you might be able to help. Is it like a male thing?"

Luke bursts out laughing and pats my knee. "No. It's a child-who's-lost-one-parent-getting-another-parent thing. Don't you remember when you first came to live with us?"

“Sort of. I mostly remember that I was so relieved to be out of the foster care system, I didn’t have many words, so it was hard to talk for awhile. And I kinda turned into a doormat because I was afraid you’d change your mind and send me away.” Actually, the doormat part hasn’t changed much.

“Yeah, I remember that,” Luke says. “But there was something else. I remember—you’d been with us, oh, about a week—and Jasmine offered to help you with your language arts homework. You two were going along just fine, laughing and talking about school, and suddenly, you said, ‘uh, that’s okay, Jasmine. I can finish now.’ Or there was the time I offered to take you to pick out new piano music. You were excited at first, but then you drew back.”

“That’s Clayton,” I agree. “So what’s up?”

“The same thing that was up with you,” Luke says. “Maria, you were afraid of betraying your parents by loving us more. And Clayton’s afraid he’ll love you more than he did Anne.”

“Oh. Oh, crumb,” I mutter. “Why am I always the last to figure out this stuff?”

“Because you love these kids so much, and want to fix their problems so badly, that sometimes you don’t slow down long enough to figure out where the problem’s root is,” Luke says. “Not that you’re the only one.”

Yeah, and he should know. But rather than get into the past again, I nod. “You think I should talk to Clayton about it?”

“Not on the phone. Wait until you can see him in person.” Luke gives me a few more fries. “Don’t worry. That won’t be long.”

The rest of the trip into Angel’s Crossing is mostly quiet. When Luke tops the last hill, though, he breaks the silence with a whistle through his teeth. “I see why they named this town after angels.”

He’s right. Most of the buildings are Spanish style, adobe with sloping roofs whose sides look a lot like wings. Those buildings are set on brick sidewalks that look like they were dropped out of an 1800s movie set, and a lot of the businesses have a mom-and-pop feel—hand-painted signs and picture windows. Of course, Angel’s Crossing has grown over the years—it’s now

home to a Starbucks, a Lowe's Hardware, a Books-a-Million, several chain restaurants, and other "big city" additions. Yet, the "old neighborhood" feel still saturates this place.

Luke smiles at me. "Is it coming back?"

"Yeah. Look..." I motion out the window when we turn a corner. "That was our church. And Daddy used to go to that bakery over there every Friday and bring home chocolate chip scones."

Luke nods. "But...where's the theater?"

"Oh—that was a little bit north of town. About a twenty-minute commute. Mama and I used to joke that for us, going to town was an event, just like in *Little House on the Prairie*. I never liked that show or the books, though. She tried to get me to read them, and I would—if I was having trouble getting to sleep."

Luke chuckles. "Sounds like you. Oh—Angel's Crossing PD." He turns to me. "You ready?"

"As ready as I'm gonna be, I guess."

For the first time in years, I walk into a police station with shaking hands and a dry mouth. I don't have my badge or gun with me today, and without them, I feel as flimsy and weak as a paper target. I never thought I'd be glad to sit on the other side of the shift supervisor's desk and wait while Luke explains the situation.

Said supervisor rises and gives me a serious, up-and-down look. "So you're Eric and Audrey's little girl."

Gulp. "Uh...yes, sir. I'm Maria Keller."

He pumps my hand. "Nice to meet you. And so sorry about what happened to your parents. But let me assure you, the officers here follow procedure as closely as any you'll find, and if they say something's an accident, it probably is."

"I...I..." I give myself a mental slap. Why am I letting him intimidate me? I straighten up. "I understand, Officer...what was your name?"

"Platt. Lieutenant Richard Platt."

“Lieutenant Platt,” I continue. “But see, I’m a cop, too. Detective Maria Keller, Cherry Creek, North Carolina PD. This August will be my ninth year with a badge. And so I know that as closely as procedure is followed, sometimes things get misinterpreted or just missed. And since Eric and Audrey were my parents, I’d appreciate it if you’d let me do a little snooping into their case.”

I’ve heard of people’s jaws dropping, but until this second, I’ve never seen it happen. Platt’s jaw comes within a centimeter of smacking his desk. He visibly splutters. “Uh...um...what can I do for you, Detective?”

“Just Maria,” I reassure him. “If I could see the case file? And if you could get hold of anyone at all who was working here in the late ‘80s?”

Platt gets up. “I’m on it. Just wait here.”

Luke squeezes my hand. “That’s my girl—a true cop.”

“Hmmm,” I say, because I have enough to worry about without confirming or denying whether or not I really belong in the cop world. Luke looks at me like he wants to ask something, but fortunately, Lieutenant Platt reappears, a folder under his arm.

He hands it to me. “Here you go. The lounge is down the hall, third door on the left, if you want some privacy.”

“Do you want me to go with you?” Luke asks, as if I’m a little kid afraid of the dentist.

As silly as it is, I’m tempted, but I shake my head. “No, I’m fine. Why don’t you hang out here and tell some cop stories?”

“Okay, but find me if you need me.”

Once in the lounge, I make myself sit down and open the file. The information reads just like I expected it to:

INITIAL CASE REPORT:

At 11:37 PM on 7-19-87, ACPD officers responded to a call about an accident on Tillingham Road, 5 miles outside the Angel’s Crossing city limits. Officers arrived at 11:41

PM, where they discovered a 1977 black Ford Escort, license plate EAM-1733, that had crashed into a telephone pole. The vehicle had caught fire and the driver, identified as Eric Keller of Angel's Crossing, had been killed—possible head trauma from contact with the steering wheel. A rescue team was able to remove the passenger, identified as Mrs. Audrey Lisette Channing Keller, from the vehicle. She had suffered second- and third-degree burns over 50% of her body. She also sustained several cuts, bruises, and lesions. Keller was in shock and unable to respond to inquiries from officers. She was airlifted to Angel's Crossing Community Hospital, but was unconscious on arrival and died less than 48 hours later.

Officers were unable to locate evidence of another driver. Because of the remote location, there were no witnesses to the events. However, officers were able to determine that Keller's brakes were damaged, probably as a result of the car's age. Due to the wear on the brakes and the heavy rain on the night in question, the death was ruled an accident.

"Typical." I promised myself I wouldn't even think about crying, but tears are pressing hard on the backs of my eyelids. That's what I was told when it happened—that my parents had an accident. I knew the cops were wrong—that they'd been murdered. But no one would believe me. And why should I expect them to now, when I can't even remember who the supposed murderer was?

I start to shove the file away, but then I notice that there's another page. I turn to it and read a brief note:

-Eric and Audrey Keller are survived by their daughter, Maria Magdalena, age 8. Upon being told of her parents' death, the child screamed repetitively and insisted Eric and Audrey were murdered. Possible grief reaction?

"Possible grief reaction my Aunt Agnes," I say to the empty room. Despite the fact that I can't remember the perp, I know with every inch of my being that Mama and Daddy were murdered. Not that I'm ever gonna get the chance to prove it, I think. I look up. "God, I've got a big question. Okay, so maybe it's my fault for not being able to let go or whatever, but if my

parents really died in a car accident, wouldn't you have given me peace about it by now? Isn't that what you're supposed to do?"

God doesn't answer, but at the same time, I get an urge to look at the note again. This time, my eyes zero in on the question mark. Question mark equals uncertainty. Does that mean one cop around here believed me? And if so, can I find them? Well, that's an irrelevant question. I'm gonna try.

I backtrack to the front room and find Luke deep in conversation with Lieutenant Platt. They both look up when they hear me come in, and Luke gives me an encouraging look. "Find anything?"

"Yes." I unclip the note from the case file. "Lieutenant Platt, do you know who wrote this?"

He reads it once, twice, and again. "I have no idea," he finally says, "but I know someone who will. Let me make a phone call. Captain Brown, you and Maria make yourselves comfortable. We just got in some new magazines."

"Yeah, *Southern Living*, *People*, and *Field and Stream*. Some things about police departments are pretty universal," Luke says when we're alone. He picks up a copy of *Field and Stream* anyway, but after paging through it, he stares at me. "Maria, why didn't you ever tell me you thought your mom and dad were murdered?"

For the second time since I came back, I'm struck with the question of whether I should've told Luke more. But like with the rape, I have a good reason for withholding this information. "Be honest, Luke. Would you have believed me, or would you have thought it was just out of control grief?"

"Is that what everybody else said?"

"Yeah. Cops, foster parents, teachers, school counselors, you name it. After awhile, I started to think I was nuts. That I hadn't seen or heard things I really had seen or heard. Even now, I don't know what's real and what isn't."

"Which equals repression," Luke finishes. "You didn't trust yourself, so you shoved it out of your head."

"What do I need Claire for?" I laugh.

“Hey, you don’t have to be a counselor to know your own kid. And...Maria, I hope you consider yourself my daughter. I mean...” He coughs. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I just...I know I can’t replace them, and I always felt like...well, when you asked to keep your own name, for one, I...”

“Oh, Luke. That wasn’t about who were or weren’t my real folks,” I tell him. “I love you and Jasmine, and yes, I am your daughter. But one, I was your daughter second. I’ve got to keep their memory alive somehow. And two, I—well, about my name—I have very little of Mama and Daddy left. Nothing to hold onto, anyway. That’s why I needed my name. Not because I loved you less.”

He hugs me. “I think I always knew that. But it was difficult at times. Especially with you doing so much theater...I thought...”

“I would’ve been in theater anyway,” I say, because it’s true. “It had nothing to do with trying to be my parents.” And if we’d had this talk many years earlier, would Luke have let up with his noises about my quitting drama?

Luke doesn’t get a chance to answer because Lieutenant Platt reenters, his face unreadable. “Okay,” he says. “Captain McCready’s on the way, along with a former officer, one Rachel Weisberg.”

The first shock I get is that even though she’s years older, Officer Rachel, as I knew her then, looks pretty much the same. Sure, her hair’s gray, she’s got wrinkles, and she’s wearing glasses, but she also still has the same inviting blue eyes and soft smile I remember. And when she hugs me, I know for sure it’s the same woman who used to call me her favorite junior detective.

The second shock is that Captain McCready is a woman. “Yup,” she says when she sees my face. “Captain Gwendolyn McCready, at your service. Not exactly what you were expecting, huh?”

“No,” I rush to tell her. “I mean, yes—I mean...it’s just that, I’m the only woman in my division at home, and my supervisor’s kinda old school. I guess I’ve been the exception to his rule so long, I just...”

“Hey, I hear you,” she says. “Unfortunately, the police force is like the rest of the world. It will never be perfect. But we girls in blue keep trying. So...” She sits down. “I heard Officer Weisberg has an inside connection to the death of your parents. I came down here with her to talk, and to see if we need to consider reopening a cold case.”

I send her a grateful smile. “Thanks for believing me, Captain. You’re a rarity in that. But...” I take a deep breath. “Look, Captain—Officer Weisberg. I know I was only eight years old at the time, and kids don’t always remember things right, especially traumatic situations like being told their parents are dead. But deep down in my gut, I know it wasn’t an accident, what happened to Mama and Daddy. And if the three of us have to pick at my brain for weeks, I want to prove that. And before you ask, no, it’s not a revenge deal. See...” I explain about the stalker and what Luke and I know so far.

Weisberg pats my knee. “You can call me Rachel,” she says. “As for your stalker, plus your parents’ case, it does sound like there’s a connection.”

“A big one,” McCready agrees. “So Maria, let’s take a trip down memory lane. Tell us everything you remember about your parents’ death. I realize it’s gonna hurt, but no matter what, keep talking.”

I give in to a sudden urge to grab Luke’s hand. I squeeze for a minute and then get up because I know this will be easier if I move around. I start by standing at the left side of my chair. “My parents ran a theater, as you know,” I begin. “I knew most of the employees there, and they were—at the risk of sounding cheesy, they were my family. I was an only child, so you can see how that happened. Anyway, most of the actors, techies, staff—I loved them, and the feeling was mutual. But when I was about five, something happened.” I walk forward a few steps, crack my knuckles, and think. “That’s right. Somebody new showed up.”

“Who?” Rachel asks.

“That’s what I’m having trouble remembering,” I say. “It was a man—“ I close my eyes, and pieces start coming into focus, as if I’m waking up from anesthesia. Well, maybe I am. “A short guy, kind of compact, if that makes sense. Sandy blonde hair, and his eyes—I thought it was cool when I first saw it. One was blue, the other was brown.”

“That really narrows it down.” Luke gives me a thumbs-up. “Keep going, sweetie. Who was this man? What was his name?”

His name... I reach back, as far as I can. I keep moving because I hope that somehow, the blood feeding my muscles will somehow travel up to my mind. “I can’t remember his name,” I say at last. “But I used to call him something in private, because I didn’t like him. He scared me.”

“What did he do?” McCready asks.

“He—“ My brain flashes one clear image in front of me before slamming that particular memory drawer again. “Yeah, that’s right. He hated kids, and he especially hated me. He called me names—‘brat,’ ‘maggot,’ ‘piece of trash,’—and he used to hit me.”

“Oh, really.” Luke has that thundercloud look in his eye again.

“Yeah.” That memory is becoming clearer. “You know, I always thought the rape was why I couldn’t let men touch me, but this guy—he used to hit me for no reason. I remember this one time, I was running downstairs because I didn’t want to be late for a voice lesson. He told me to get out of his blankety-blank way, smacked me, and shoved me the rest of the way. I told Mama I tripped. Seemed like every time I saw the jerk, he would shove me, or smack me, or something. A few times, he...” I’m nodding, even as I’m flinching. “I said things to him, trying to stick up for myself, I guess. He used to drag me into the ladies’ room, pull my pants or skirt off, and repeatedly hit me with his belt. I got the buckle now and then.”

Rachel looks appalled, and Luke has jumped out of his chair like he just saw a gunman. To his credit, though, he recovers and gestures that I should keep talking. “Anything else? Did you tell anyone what this man did to you?”

“I told Mama the first time it happened,” I say, “and she confronted him, but he denied it. He even denied it when Daddy came into the picture. He told them he’d knocked into me by accident, and then he made a big show of being nice to me for a few weeks. I remind you that

most of what he did was behind my parents' backs anyway. Plus, I tended to exaggerate stuff sometimes. I don't know. It's been so long ago, maybe I'm exaggerating this."

"I don't think so," Rachel says. "Why else can't you remember the moron's name?"

"Good point," I agree.

"Maria," Luke asks, "is there some reason you can't remember his name? Did he ever tell you not to talk about him, or else? Could it have been a fake name? This sounds like a guy who was used to criminal activity, particularly violent activity."

"I..." I cross the room and work my way back. "I don't know. It's just..."

"Can you remember what you called him in private?" prompts McCready. "Often, when a child gives an adult a nickname, it's alliterative."

I nod. "Yeah. Gil's twin girls—Gil's my fiancé—they call me Maria the Music Lady sometimes. Let's see..." What nickname would I have given somebody I didn't like? I had a bigger vocabulary than most kids my age because of growing up mostly around adults, so I knew words like "evil" or "abomination" or "disgrace". But none of those are right. "Bad" isn't right, either, or "wicked"...

"No! Wicked!" The nickname floats through my brain, and I grab it. "Willis! His name was Willis Portman...I used to call him..."

"Wicked Willis," everybody else says. Luke nods. "I can guess why. But what did he do that would lead you to believe he murdered your mom and dad?" He takes my hand and gives me a compassionate look. "Honey, you were still very impressionable. Is it remotely possible that you could've blamed him because of what he did to you, or suspected him of something because..."

"No," I interrupt, but without anger. "Something did happen. I just can't remember what it was."

Rachel gives me another hug. "We believe you. The truth is, I always wondered if I should've believed you back then." She turns to Luke and explains what happened the night she came to the theater. "My partner said Maria was just upset, and that seemed reasonable. But I knew that kid, and she didn't lie. And there was always something in the back of my

mind...something that seemed wrong with the Keller case. I mean, why were they on Tillingham Road that night to begin with? It's a back road—taking it in a thunderstorm makes no sense.”

“No, it doesn't,” Luke says. He smiles down at me. “I—we—just need to find out what really happened and what the connection is to the stalker so my girl can get her life back.”

“We'll do our best,” Captain McCready says. “Just leave a number where we can get in touch with you. And Maria...” She hands me a card. “Here's my number if you remember anything else. Call me here or at home, day or night.”

“I will,” I promise her.

A few minutes later, Luke and I are back on the road. He looks like he wants to ask me something, but is afraid to. In fact, he looks so uncertain I have to laugh. “Luke, what is it?” I ask.

“I...” He coughs a few times. “Maria, I was wondering if...it might give us some clues, and...did you want to go to your parents' theater?”

The idea is tempting, especially considering what Luke said about clues. If I'm ever gonna get home, we need all the clues we can get. But...

“No,” I tell him. “No, I can't. Not after today.” I put my hand against my forehead. The thought of seeing that building again, knowing that Mama, Daddy, and my theater family won't be there, physically hurts. I look up. “Jesus, I...” But I don't know what to say.

Luke squeezes my hand, opens the glove compartment, and hands me an aspirin. “He knows, sweetheart.”

Luke and I don't talk on the way home, which is fine with me because I can't think of a single thing to say about what happened. In fact, I don't say a word to anyone until Jasmine comes to my room to say Gil is on the phone several hours later.

“It's nuts,” I tell him after explaining the situation. “I feel like I've been dropped into an episode of *The Twilight Zone* and can't get out. And to think I used to love that show.”

“I know,” Gil says. “But just remember, God is with you, even in the twilight zone.”

“So...so you're not mad at Him anymore?”

Gil chuckles. “No. I had a “duh” moment recently. I realized it was Satan who scripted this situation, not God, so I should get mad at him. And that brought me closer to Jesus. How about you—you and Jesus on good footing?”

“Sort of. I mean, I’m praying and reading the Bible and all, but the only thing He’ll tell me to do is wait and trust Him. And frankly, that’s frustrating to me.”

“No, really?” Gil laughs outright. “Hang in there, Gumshoe. I don’t usually put too much stock in gut feelings, but I’ve got a big one where you’re concerned. God’s up to something big.”

“I hope so,” I say. “Because if He asks me to trust Him one more time, I just might fall apart.”

“You won’t fall apart. If you did, I’d help Jesus put you back together again.” Gil pauses for a minute. “Do you remember the time you almost got run over by a piano at the Stage Door?”

I smile, happy to be remembering something good. “Yeah. I said I was a hard egg to crack. And that’s still true.”

“Yes, but now you’re my egg, and you’re as valuable to me as a Faberge.”

“Gil...”

We whisper sweet nothings to each other for a little while longer, but then I catch myself yawning. “Gil, this egg’s beat. Let me talk to the kids, and then I’ve got to hit the sack.”

I must be more tired than I thought, because I barely remember hanging up the phone before I fall asleep. I wake up several hours later to several thumps, bangs, and crashes downstairs, and Jasmine’s voice rasping,

“Luke, quiet! You’ll wake Maria.”

“Too late,” I say from the top of the stairs. “But seriously, Luke, what the heck...” It’s then that I notice he’s dressed for the station. “What happened?”

Luke won’t look me in the eye, and his voice is so strained you could feed it to a baby. “Your little friend called,” he manages. “He says he’s gonna make you wish you could forget ever being born.”

CHAPTER 15:

“We’re disturbed, we’re disturbed, we’re the most disturbed, like we’re psychologic’ly disturbed!”

-West Side Story

I have an appointment with Claire a few days later, but she calls to say she has a cold and ask if we can reschedule. Fortunately, she’s got an opening the next day, so I take it. Meanwhile, I keep working on the homework assignment she’s given me since what I call the “Luke session”—thinking of, and looking up, ways in which theater is good and can have a positive impact on the world. In between spurts of that, I hang out with Luke and Jasmine, as well as my cousins’ parents, who are preparing for the party they’ll give when Monique and Meg arrive on Saturday.

“Now, remind me again,” Luke says. “Monique’s favorite colors?”

“White, gold, and lavender.”

“Great. Then I got the right blouse.”

“And I just have a few finishing touches to put on the model boat for Meg,” Jasmine says. She’s a fan of model boats, and she’s always made them for Meg because the family joke is that my cousin’s half fish. Once, when we were twelve, her dad, Uncle Pierre, took us all out on a boat he’d rented. Meg had a high old time while Monique and I got violently seasick.

“So, Meg’s still seeing Dr. Marquette,” Aunt Charlotte says. “She’s told us so much about him. He sounds *magnifique*.”

I laugh. Being with Aunt Charlotte is like being with an older Meg. They both have the same deep gray eyes, glossy, impossibly black hair, and obsession with all things French. “He’s pretty cool,” I affirm. “But no hint of wedding bells yet. Meg’s waited a long time for her Prince Charming, and I think now she’s found him, she wants to make sure he’s in it for the long haul,

especially since he's a doctor. She wants to know that she and their family would come before work if the relationship got that far."

Uncle Pierre nods. "Good girl. Just like I taught her."

"And me, too." Aunt Charlotte gives him a playful smack with a dishtowel.

"How about Monique?" asks her dad, Uncle Allen. "Has she found someone?" I catch the concern in his voice. Monique never even had a date in high school and is convinced she knows why. Uncle Allen and Aunt Ruby know she's lonely, but they don't know how lonely. I shake my head, even though it hurts to say no.

"She's having a hard time," I say. "We're cool now, but we've had arguments now and then since Gil asked me to marry him. She's argued with Meg, too. She doesn't understand why God has let us have special people and told her to wait. She's afraid He's saying no, and I'm telling you, that would kill her."

"But if I know you," Aunt Ruby says, "you've played matchmaker, haven't you?"

"Just one time," I say. "I tried setting her up with one of the Stage Door actors, and it was a catastrophe. How was I to know he was a bug collector who thought cancer was going to wipe us all out and insects would be the only living thing left? Monique came home, slammed things around for about three hours, and informed me that if I ever set her up again, she'd sit on me and pour lemonade down my throat."

"Well, not to dump on your or Meg's happiness," Luke says, "but I'd say this waiting means Monique might get the best marriage of all."

"Would you tell that to her?" I ask. "She's thinking about joining an Internet dating site. Don't tell her I told you, but pray for her." I bite my lip when I realize I sound like one of those snobby Christians I always despised. "I mean, I'm sure that works for some people, but I worry on principle. Those places can be so dangerous."

"Humph. You're not just whistling Dixie," Uncle Allen says. "You'd think she'd know better, what with..." He breaks off. "So, Maria, uh, you picked out your wedding cake yet?"

That becomes one of many times that afternoon when someone stops talking because they're afraid they'll say something to upset me. I know it's partly the date's fault. It's July

eleventh, which means The Day is a week from now. Well, eight days, but who's counting? But I know it's mostly the stalker's fault, and that makes me want to scream, throw my shoes around, and tear my hair out, all at once.

Eventually, the family leaves, but the longer I'm in the house, the more claustrophobic I start to feel. I try to smother the feeling with books, piano playing, and other ways of keeping busy, but by ten PM, I just feel edgier than I did this afternoon. Luke and Jasmine tell me they're heading up, but I'm nowhere near ready yet. I don't even have on pajamas.

"Okay," I tell them. "Good night. I'll see you in the morning. I'm going to make some tea. Decaf," I specify when I see Luke's face.

He kisses the top of my head. "Love you, darlin'. See you in the morning." Jasmine echoes his words and they leave.

Meanwhile, I make myself a cup of my favorite tea, black cherry, and head for the porch. But even the fresh air doesn't take away the heavy feeling cloaking my whole body, so I make my way down the stairs. As I do so, I look up. "God? It's me. I..."

Bzzzzttt!

The teacup falls and thunks against the ground just one second before I feel my knees buckle. That's when I realize I can't move. What in the Sam Hill...

Then I get it. Holy crumb, I've been tasered.

Two large, masculine shapes penetrate my vision. I have the crazy thought that if I were in Cherry Creek, this might be two of my coworkers playing a joke on me. But we've all been through taser tests, and they'd know it wasn't funny.

"Sorry to interrupt your quiet time," a gritty voice says. "But don't worry. You'll be getting plenty of it later."

"Oh, is that so?" I may not be able to move, but the stalker—because I know without a doubt that's who this is—is going to get an earful. "Well, it's now, not later, and I want to know, who exactly are you and why..."

I can't identify it in the darkness, but I know Gritty Voice just shoved a gun into my temple. "Shut up," he orders. "I'm sick of your questions, and soon, you won't be able to ask any."

Now..." He laughs and yanks me up so fast I hear muscles popping. "Come along, Cinderella. Your chariot awaits."

The next few minutes happen too fast for me to register much. All I know is that before I can finish a thought, Gritty Voice and his sidekick have carried me away from the house, plunked me onto what feels like a car hood, tied my wrists and ankles so tight my right hand goes numb, and thrown me into the trunk of their car.

Yeah. So not funny.

THUNK! THUMP! SHROOM, SHROOM!

Not only are Gritty Voice and his sidekick doing at least twenty over the speed limit, they drive like maniacs. They've hit what I think is the twenty-third bump in a row, but I've spent so much time rattling around this trunk like the last M&M in the bag, I've lost count. I know I've got so many bruises by now, I'll be surprised if my whole body isn't purple—that is, if I get to check, which I may not. This horror of a car ride alone might kill me. On the heels of that thought, the car rocks side to side, and I come up a bit before thumping back down.

Where are we going, anyway? I can almost laugh. This is the one time I wish I had done what Tunney always said I should and worn a watch. But I know wherever we are, it's far from Luke and Jasmine's house, at least an hour down the road. Or is that up the road? And why the Sam Hill do I care? Relax, girl, relax, I coach myself. They can't get away with driving like this, especially not in a big city. Any minute now, a cop is gonna pull them over, and he'll check the trunk, because Luke or Jasmine probably realized something was up and have already...

Oh, who am I kidding? Number one, I'm an adult now. It's not as if one of them was gonna come tiptoeing in to say good night. Two, Luke and Jasmine are both ridiculously heavy sleepers. Once, as a joke, I sneaked into their room on Saturday morning and sang a few bars of "Shy" from *Once Upon a Mattress* right in Luke's ear. He just rolled over and snored.

Three, Luke and I are doing better, but our relationship is still kinda weird. Who's to say if he finds out, he won't find some way to blame me for this? He'll say I should've gone to bed at a

decent hour, should have... Oh, what does it matter what I should've done, or for that matter, what he should've done? I've got to figure out a way to handle this.

But what if handling it means lying low—huh, not that I can do much else—and praying that Gritty Voice and his companion are quick-killing, body-in-the-river types?

Don't give up. But yes, praying would be very good.

I look up. I don't dare risk talking for fear Gritty Voice will pull over and shoot me right there, but I do answer. *Right-o, God. Okay, prayer number one, coming at ya...*

I get so busy praying that I barely notice when whoever's driving finally stops the car. I hear footsteps, the trunk opening, and then Gritty Voice again.

"Well, what are you waiting for? We've got to get this going."

"What, you want me to pick her up? Not on your life."

Gritty Voice rolls his eyes. "What are you afraid of? She obviously can't touch you. And I for one am not touching that bag of filth until I absolutely have to."

I have to admit, they sound like a couple of kindergartners. "Hey, you two," I tell them, "knock it off. If you'd just untie me, you wouldn't have to stand here arguing."

"Like I'm really gonna fall for that," Gritty Voice's friend says. "I hate killing moving targets. Besides..." His tone gets a hint of evil amusement in it. "This might be fun. Heave-ho..."

I don't know what it is, but even though the voice hasn't quite registered until now, being in the owner's grip does. There's something about those arms...the scent of that cologne...that chuckle...

Oh, God!

"Chandler Halliday," I spit at him.

I should be thankful I can say it. I'm not on the edge of a cliff or a riverbank. Instead, Chandler, his friend, and I are in a dilapidated three-story building set way back from the road and hidden even more than that, thanks to an overgrown lawn, a garden of dead flowers, and an old fence. Plus, I have use of my limbs back, but that's only because all the doors are locked. And alive or not, I'd still rather be anywhere but here. Chandler's friend has disappeared, and we're

alone in what I guess used to be a living room. There's a fireplace and a couple of chairs, but no other furniture, no rugs, and darn it, not even a fireplace poker I could use to knock out the moron.

Chandler laughs. "I can't take all the credit," he says, "but yeah, that was me, Toots. You were obviously as dumb as I always knew you were, not being able to figure it out."

"I didn't think of you, that's for sure," I tell him. "Why would you even bother? I mean, were you that bored? You got what you wanted. What's your deal?"

Chandler slaps me with one hand and grabs my hair in the other. "My deal—look at me, you..." He spits out a few names. "My deal is that I got what I wanted in the short term. But not the long term. You see, sweetheart, you're not the first girl I've been with, but you were the first to tell me no. And let's be clear on something. Nobody tells me no. You did, and you got away with it. But you won't now. You're gonna learn what happens to people who tell me no, and I'll make sure you're sorry you ever did."

His grip is too strong for me to twist out of, but I still glare at him even though my eyes are tearing up. "Is that so? Well, here's a news flash for you. I am sorry. Sorry that being with you cost me my virginity and temporarily, self-respect. Sorry that I ever fell for your twisted lies. Sorry that it took me so long to recover from what you did to me. But most of all, sorry that you, a grown man, had to act like a spoiled toddler all your life!"

At that, Chandler rips my angel pin off my lapel with such force the cloth rips with it. He takes the back off the pin, throws it across the room, and then slashes the pin across my left cheek in a straight, burning line. "This is just the beginning, Maria," he says. "But if you say anything like that to me again, it'll go a lot worse for you than we've already planned. You understand that?" He slashes a matching line down the other cheek, and shakes me. "I said, do you understand that, girl?"

"I understand," I hiss at him.

"Good. Now..." He pockets the pin. "I think I'll keep that just in case I need it again." He studies me. "This is real nice, Maria. Just like old times. Only a little better."

If I wanted to answer, which I'm not sure I do, I wouldn't have gotten the chance.

Chandler's friend enters, one hand behind his back. I should be afraid of what he has in that hand, but what scares me more is the face itself. Lean, with a sunburned nose and cheeks. Silver-blond hair, kind of like the hair Chandler would have if he were in his sixties or seventies. And his eyes—cold, dead. Like a snake's. But wait a minute...

I study those eyes. One's blue, the other is brown.

No. No, no, no...

I don't realize I've screamed until Willis throws his hand over my mouth and spits out something that makes my ears burn.

"I thought my grandson made it clear, girl. You don't talk. You don't do anything unless we say you can."

Whoa, hold the phone. Rewind and freeze! His *what?* No. No way, he's bluffing.

"You're bluffing."

"I didn't bluff then, and I don't bluff now. Your parents ruined my life once, and you've got the power to do it, too, unless I get rid of you. But I'd be doing humanity a favor. We don't need mistakes."

"You think I have power over you? What are you, a complete psycho?"

Willis laughs, the kind of laugh I've heard comes from demons. "You could say that, yeah. And you oughta know better than to mess with psychos. But since you never learned, we're gonna help out a little bit. Call it a..." He chuckles. "Call it a welcome-to-your-final-stop gift." He turns to my ex-boyfriend—his grandson? I'm still processing that. "Chandler, take her blouse off and get her skirt up where you can see her full legs, and put her facedown."

The last thing I see before I hit the floor is Willis loosening his belt.

Oh...holy...flippin' crumb...

I didn't think a person could be in this much pain and still be breathing. Thankfully, I don't think I have a concussion, but I do have a massive, unbelievable headache. I can feel bruises, and I can smell and feel blood. Besides that, my skirt is ruined—why was I stupid enough to wear

a skirt? These idiots even clocked me over the head with my own shoes. And they were heels! Thank goodness that, one, Chandler and Willis seem to have gotten it out of their system, and two, the one place they didn't touch was my throat, which means my voice is still intact. In fact, even though I was mostly focused on staying silent during my stint as a human piñata, I remember feeling, at times, as if there was a shield across my body. As if they were hitting, kicking, pinching, and smacking as hard as they could, but couldn't do the damage they wanted to. Not that that means much, because they did plenty of damage. How long were they at it? For the first time, I notice a clock on the far wall. I can't see too well, but it looks like an old-fashioned wooden one with some kind of scrollwork and Roman numerals for numbers. I try to remember how to translate Roman numerals. An hour, maybe two...maybe...

"Ahhhh!" It's hard to believe that groan came from me, but I know it had to. Schmidt always says I'm the only person he's ever met whose groans sound like a long soprano note. Schmidt—I'd give anything to have him here to do to these punks what they just did to me. Or Luke, or Gil... My lips don't even finish forming his name before the pain smacks another home run. I have to keep my lips closed. "Mmmm..."

Chandler kneels next to me, his lips forming an ironic smile. "How you feeling, honey?"

"Oh, well, you know..." It takes all my effort to force out the words. I take a deep breath and choke on something before spitting it out. It takes a few seconds before I understand I'm staring at one of my own teeth. Oh, so that would explain why my entire mouth is throbbing. I let the tooth drop next to Willis' shoe, put one hand against my jaw, flinch, pull it back, and wordlessly glare up at him.

"You're lucky that wasn't your brains," Willis says. "In fact, if we weren't gonna kill you, we'd have kept this up and made you a retarded vegetable."

I make myself sit up. "So why don't you just do it, then?"

He shakes his head. "Because I'm not what you think I am, Maria. I'm not a heartless man, and neither is my grandson here." He puts something on the floor next to me. "See, we know you're a life-loving woman. We know death won't be easy for you. So we'll make it easier. We're gonna make it so you want to die."

“Oh. Well, you’re off to a great start.” I hate closing my eyes, but I have to. The light in here is killing me.

“Oh, no, no, no,” Willis says. “That little beating? That was just the pre-game show. You endure the pain for a few hours, we’ll even fix you up a little. We don’t want this to be too easy. No, this game’s gonna get a lot harder. But how hard it gets is up to you. First of all, you’ve got to figure out how long we’re playing.”

“Excuse me?” I think I might puke. Why won’t the room stop spinning?

Willis hands me a hard cube-shaped object. “You’re holding a die. Not dice, just one die. First thing you’ve gotta do is roll. The number you get determines how long you live. One equals one day and so on up to six.”

“Oh, really? How do I...” Breath, breath. Now try talking again. “How do I...know it’s...not weighted? And how do...I...” Breath—ouch! Okay, take another one, but not so deep this time. “How do I know you’ll tell me the...right number?” And why am I agreeing to this? Well, that’s easy. To buy myself time.

“She’s got a point,” Chandler says. “It might stick in her brain more if she sees the number.”

“Okay, then,” Willis says. “Open those lovely...black...eyes of yours and roll. And pray to whatever god you have it’s a low number.”

A lot they’d know about God, I think. And speaking of, dear God...dear God...

I hear you, Maria. Just roll. Even the die is in my hands.

The die clatters on the floor. It ends up on four.

“Nice,” Willis says. “Plenty of time for fun.”

Chandler nudges him. “Wait a sec here, Gramps. Four days gives somebody enough time to figure out she’s gone and call the cops on us.”

“As if they’d find us up here. This place has been empty for decades. Besides, I’ll leave a nice little false trail for ‘em. And even if they do find their way up here, all we have to do is shoot the girl and dump the corpse.”

I close my eyes again. I cannot believe this. I know these two are talking about me, but the whole thing is too surreal to understand. I feel like I'm watching a horror movie, not playing the lead character in one.

"Okay, Maria." It's Chandler talking now. "So you got a four. Lucky you. Means you've got almost a week left. But you'll want it to end much sooner." He moves closer. "So here are the rules. You're gonna be staying in a lovely little room upstairs, and by that, I do mean little. This isn't a New York hotel, baby. And forget about trying to sneak out of it, because when the door's locked, so are the windows, and don't get any stupid ideas about secret passageways."

Willis takes over. "Rule number two. As I'm sure you've heard, the human body can go three weeks without food, and three days without water. Therefore, as long as you're staying with us, you don't eat, and until day number three, you don't drink. Makes it less likely that you'll fight us off when the big day comes, you understand. And rule number three, you don't make a sound unless we're in that room, which we will be. I hear you screaming, crying, or breathing even one syllable, you get a warning." He holds up his fist. "If it happens again, Chandler has my full permission to come up there, rip off your skirt, and do what he pleases."

I feel like I'm in some kind of twisted version of first grade. "I...ah...I..." I force breaths past the squeezing, burning pain in my chest. "I'd rather you just...I..." I can't even say it. Number one, if I try to move one more muscle, I think I might break in half. Two, I can't believe I'm asking these freaks to kill me.

"No can do," Chandler says. "I mean, yeah, normally we would, but you're a special little trophy." He has the gall to chuck me under the chin. "Like I said, you told me no, and you never paid for it. Half the fun is going to be punishing you."

"Welcome to your suite," Chandler says. "Sorry there's no mint on the pillow. We're fresh out of mints, and pillows, come to think of it."

I cannot believe that way back when, I used to laugh at this guy's jokes. I glare at him and study the "suite". They weren't kidding when they said it was little. Miniscule is more like it. I think I'm in some kind of attic, because although I have no idea how I managed it, I've walked up

three flights of stairs, and the room is built so I almost can't turn around without hitting a wall. There's no furniture, just a bed with a couple of sheets stretched over a mattress and a metal folding chair with one of those leather "cushions." Set against the fourth wall is a bucket and a roll of toilet paper.

"The facilities," Chandler explains. "You always seemed so happy at those stupid Madrigal Dinners, I figured you'd enjoy spending your last few days in the Middle Ages. Of course, since you won't be eating or drinking much, I doubt you'll need it." There's that laugh again.

"Okay, you've made your point," I shoot at him. "Why don't you go back downstairs already?"

Chandler runs the back of my pin across my hand for a minute, although where he found a clear space, I'll never know. "You want me to leave, you ask nicely. You say 'please leave me alone.'"

"Fine." I get right in his face. "Please...leave...me...alone."

"That's better." He crosses to the door. "Good night, sweetheart."

The door locks behind him, and I hear the one window in the room follow suit. Once I'm sure he's out of earshot, I cross the room and sit on the edge of the bed. No way am I obeying their "no talking" rule, but I will whisper, just in case. I shake my head at the ceiling. "Dear Jesus, how do I get myself into these messes?"

You didn't. Satan scripted this whole thing. But I'm going to turn things around and use them for good.

"Well, I didn't plan on being a Christian martyr, but okay, if that's what you want, sure."

I didn't say that. Now, listen to me. You're a fighter, Maria, especially where Satan is concerned. So fight back. And as you know, the greatest weapon you have is Scripture.

"Right. Right. Um...." I put a hand to my forehead. "I'm sorry, God. I hurt so much I can't think of even one Bible verse. Little help here?"

Okay, I'll get you started. Remember this one? The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.

I nod. "Love the tower metaphor. You're good."

Yes, I am, and in that goodness, I love you more than words can say. Now you try.

"Okay, um..." I latch onto a verse. "The Lord is faithful and will strengthen and protect you from the evil one."

Good one! Keep going.

I quote verses for a few more minutes, but then God interrupts me. ***That'll get you through tonight. No need to use all your bullets at once. Now, try to get some sleep.***

"The operative word there is 'try,'" I say. "This room is freezing."

I know. I know the next few days will be hard on you. But that's why I'm not leaving. I've never left you, but now in particular, I'm not going anywhere. Remember that.

I nod and try to find a semi-comfortable position in the bed. I end up on my stomach, which feels relatively okay since I was beaten while facedown. I guess that's one bright spot in all this. Well, that and the fact that if I wanted to look up, I could see the window.

A sudden memory hits the front of my brain. That window—I feel like I've seen it before. I feel like I was in this room before, a long time ago, because it was...

"No," I scold myself. "No, Maria, you're making it up. Go to sleep."

I fall asleep, dream of being choked to death, stumble across the room, and hang my head over the bucket.

CHAPTER 16:

“The floor creaks, the door squeaks, and I’m alone in a lonely room...”

-Oklahoma

The next thing I’m conscious of is someone kissing me. I feel myself gasp. Was this all a bad dream? Did Willis or Chandler somehow hit me so hard I ended up in a coma, was rescued, have just woken up, and am feeling Gil’s kiss?

But no. This kiss is much too forceful. Too possessive. It’s Chandler’s.

“Good morning,” he says from over me. “How’s my favorite victim?”

“Ugh.” I feel a relieved breath leave me when he gives me some air. “Your favorite, huh? How many more were there?”

“You really think I’d tell that to a cop?”

The word “cop” jogs something in my brain. I give Chandler an “are you high” look. “Do I look like I’m in any shape to go find any cops and leak your precious info?”

He studies me. “I guess you’re right, but still, no exact numbers. There’ve been several others. Up around the thirties, I’d say, just like the age bracket you’ll die in. Gramps and I needed practice. You should feel honored, being our ultimate trophy.”

“You know,” I tell him, “it’s a shame you couldn’t learn to use that talent with words for good.”

“And it’s a shame you never learned to shut up.” He jerks me upward. “Now, come on, get moving. I don’t have time for you to laze around in here all day.”

“You want me out of this room?” I don’t know whether to be relieved or scared.

“Yeah,” Chandler says. “See, you’re not like some of our other guests. We leave you alone, you might think too much, and you might come up with ways to escape. So we don’t leave you alone too long. Plus, we need some help. Gramps and I need to make sure our guns are nice and clean just in case we have to use them. Now, come on, get your shoes on and get downstairs.”

If I thought walking up those stairs was hard last night, it's absolute torture in heels. Most of my injuries have been "fixed," as Willis put it, but just enough so infection won't set in. I can also tell I'm walking on a twisted ankle—maybe even broken, considering how much Chandler wrenched it last night. But then again, I didn't hear anything pop, so maybe I got off easy there. Still, I never thought walking down three flights of stairs could be this tough. I fall twice, and that's just on the first set. By the second, I literally have to remind my body how walking works. I grab the railing of the second-story landing and look down. A blurred picture comes to me—rooms, filled with all kinds of people, talking and laughing—and music... But Chandler shouts a dirty insult in my ear, and it's gone.

I grip the railing tighter and fight to bring the memory back. Maybe if I do, it'll tell me where I am.

"Don't make me tell you again! Move!"

I ignore him. "I can't...not now..."

"Fine!" And with that, I'm falling down the last set of stairs, just like the time Willis...

Chandler is sneering at me. "You always were lazy." He starts to grip my arm, but drops his hand. "No. Walk on your own. That'll teach you to disobey me."

Too soon, we're back in the living room, I'm cleaning the first of two guns, and I've realized something. One, I've cleaned guns so often I could do it in my sleep. And two, that means I've got one up on Chandler and Willis. If I look busier than I am, but keep my mind focused, maybe I'll discover a way out of this jam. Ooh...but that's not easy to do when I haven't eaten or drunk since dinner last night. Lord, keep my mind far away from that. I've got an idea. I'll pretend I'm just fasting. Christians fast all the time, and they pray when they should be eating. And that's what I think I'd rather do anyway.

"So Maria," Willis speaks up from across the room. "What've you learned about us so far, huh?"

Take a breath and keep cool, Keller. You can't afford another scratch. "That's hard to say," I tell him. "I'm not a hundred percent right now. But I can tell you, there's a lot about you two

I didn't know until last night." Such as, you are filthy, murderous, cowardly, woman-hating, abusive, psychotic pigs!

"Don't suppose you sat up too late trying to figure out how we hunted you down, either," Willis says.

If he only knew what I sat up doing. "No. But..." I play the logic card. "Since it's just the three of us, and since, well, dead women can't talk, I do have a question for you two. Why now? If Chandler wanted me dead, why didn't he just come after me back in college, for heaven's sake?"

Willis considers this, but nods. "Chandler just got a bonus. See, I didn't know you were his girlfriend—and really, son, what'd you ever see in this tramp?"

Chandler stares at me in a way that makes me feel like a diseased cell under a microscope. "Enough, at the time," he says. "She's scum now, but she used to be decent-looking. Real pretty, actually—prettiest one I'd ever been with. And she wasn't a whiny wimp like some of those others. If she'd been a good little girl and just come on to bed, she wouldn't be here now. Would ya, doll?"

Willis returns the stare. "So you were the only cow who didn't give my boy his share of milk, is that it?"

I put all my energy into giving him my dirtiest look. "I don't sell things like that."

"Why? Would've bought yourself some decency. After all, you were just a foster care nobody without him."

Willis has me there. At one time, I considered giving in to Chandler just because of that. I felt so alone it almost literally made me sick. My cousins were at other schools, my parents were gone, and though I never would've admitted it, deep inside, I was sure Luke and Jasmine did not love me. Chandler was a smooth, artsy charmer, and I thought he was what I wanted—needed. But...

"I don't listen to people like you anymore." I'm talking half to Willis and half to the supernatural jerk he works for.

Chandler thumps my shoulder. "You will."

“All right,” I grind out, setting the piece of the gun I’ve finished with aside and starting on the next one. “But you said I could speak if you were with me, so now you have to listen to me. Why now? If you wanted to kill me this badly, why didn’t you just pull out a gun and do it?”

Willis crosses the room then and gets right in my face. Before I can stop it, the shadow of an old memory—a horrible old one—rises up, and I shrink away before I realize what I’ve done. Meanwhile, Willis leans down. “I’ve killed a lot of people, missy,” he says. “The police never knew about any of ‘em. I’m a pro at dumping bodies. Stuff I got busted for was never that serious. I could always get out. But the murders were the best. That’s what kept me going with the petty stuff, knowing if I left a trail of that and looked like a good little boy the rest of the time, the cops wouldn’t catch on. Catch was, all those murders were just practice. For over twenty years, I’ve had one eye on you, but I wanted my technique to be perfect. Well, now it is, and your time’s up, Maria Keller. Just like time ran out for your folks.”

This is another of those surreal moments where I can almost laugh. Willis Portman honed his killing technique the way I used to hone my singing skills. The thought that I may never get a chance to really sing the way I dreamed about stabs me in the heart, but the wound doesn’t get too deep before what Willis just said replays in my mind. I blink at him as I try to digest it. “So...so you really did...”

Willis lands a punch to the back of my head. “Enough! I’ve had enough. Chandler, get her out of my sight.”

He killed them. I always knew he did, and now I have real proof. Willis Portman killed Mama and Daddy.

Maybe it has something to do with the way my head hurts so much I think it’s gonna fly off into a thousand pieces, but my brain keeps going over that fact. He killed them. Mama and Daddy are dead because of Willis Portman. But why, and how, and why, every time I try to remember, does my brain shut down? What had he done to me that was so awful...

I snort at myself. Well, that’s a no-brainer. Whatever it was, it must’ve been a kiddie version of what he’s up to right now. I stare around the pathetic excuse for a room. Compared to

this, the jail cell in Cherry Creek was a dadgum Hilton. And at least Rawlings didn't try to deny me basic human rights. I feel myself grimace. If I didn't have a stomach emptier than a school on Saturday and a throat so dry I've spent the last few hours holding in a cough, maybe I could think. By God's mercy alone, I've only had to use that disgraceful bucket a couple of times.

Something buzzes near the ceiling and lands on my left cheek. A fly. Attracted by the leftover smell of blood, probably. I brush it away, but instead of disgusting me, the sight of that fly galvanizes me. Good grief, I'm giving Chandler and Willis just what they want by sitting here and thinking how pathetic I am. Auschwitz survivors, chain gang workers, missionaries in Bible times...they went through worse and were still able to deal with it. By golly, so can I! And the first thing I'm gonna do is change positions. I'm gonna sit right here in this chair, pray, and hope God lets me have all my memories back. If I die in three days, I want to do it knowing I told somebody, anybody, what really happened to my parents.

So what did happen? I reach back into my brain again, searching for lost pieces. I'm eight years old again. Willis Portman has been on the theater staff for three years...as a what?

I close my eyes and let my eight-year-old self walk through the theater. She inhales and exhales deeply, enjoying the scent of wood, dried flowers, greasepaint, and lemon Pledge. Daddy's rehearsing with the singers in the next play, and she hums along. This Friday, she'll be sitting in on the very first rehearsal of *The King and I*. She passes the office where Mama's working. School's over for the day, but their voice lesson together isn't for a couple hours yet. She feels herself smile. Mama says she's getting better every day, and maybe that means this year, when it's time for the children's productions, she'll have her first big part.

I see the eight-year-old Maria skip up the stairs and stop at a window. One of the neighborhood girls is waving, and when Maria opens the window, the other girl calls out,

"C'mon, Maria, come play! I want to teach everybody a new game we learned at school."

The little Maria smiles. "In a few minutes, okay, Shelley?" Sometimes she wishes she could go to school with the other kids, but she loves having lessons here at the theater, and sometimes she'd rather be here, even, than with her friends. But they're expecting her, so...

I see eight-year-old Maria start to rush downstairs. She passes music rooms, rehearsal rooms, the costume shop...and then stops. Why did she?

"Come on, honey," I coach my younger self. "What is it?"

Little Maria turns wide eyes on me, and I realize she's scared. "Of what?" I ask her.

And then I know. The prop shop. Willis Portman was our prop master, and because of his behavior, I would not go near that shop for any man's money, as Daddy would've put it. I watch Little Maria backtrack and slip out the side door. If Wicked Willis caught her so close to his territory...

"What?" I ask, but Little Maria has disappeared, and my headache is warning me that's enough remembering for now. I make my way back to the bed and lie down. I'm nowhere near finished with this yet, I assure myself.

By sundown, even though I've begged God, I haven't remembered anything else about Willis. On the bright side, he and his grandson haven't been up here, but that's small consolation. Still, I'm surviving, if only to make them squirm. I prayed for hours, and when I ran out of words, I switched to thinking about good things.

Most of those thoughts revolve around people. Gil, definitely. Now, there's a man. He's never thought of me as scum, as much as he should've. He loved me for who I was, and he treated me so well it almost made me cry on some occasions. If I focus, I can hear his voice. *Gumshoe...sweetheart...my best girl...I love you...* If he were here right now, I'd hold him and never let him go. And I know he'd hold me right back, ruined clothes, bloody, stinking flesh, sunken eyes, and all.

Schmidt and Dorothea. My spiritual parents. Schmidt's been right beside me from day one, and even though I wanted to smack him sometimes, he's the best partner I could've asked for. If he were here, he'd probably think of something to say to cheer me up, something like, 'well, that skirt was never your best color anyway' or 'hey, now you'll have one up if they ever ask you to audition for a zombie movie.' Of course, then I'd joke right back, and we'd both laugh and banter back and forth. And Dorothea...wow. What I wouldn't give for one of her meals, but more,

what I wouldn't give for one of her hugs. One of her assurances, like Mama used to give, that I am going to be okay.

My best friend, Rose. She wouldn't say much, but she'd sit here beside me and hold my hand, and just her presence would be enough. Or Monique and Meg. Meg would cry her eyes out if she saw me like this, but once I convinced her to calm down, she'd help. She'd hug me, tell me she loved me, rail at Willis and Chandler in French, and murmur encouragement. She might even employ an old chant Aunt Charlotte used to use, claiming it helped with pain. Meg's family doesn't believe in voodoo or anything, but Meg's got a hefty dose of Native American ancestry in her genes somewhere. And Monique...well, she'd just say, "that's it" and go after food, water, clean clothes, and anything else she thought I might need with a vengeance. God help the man who tried to stop her.

Tunney and the guys...well, they'd joke a little about the trouble I'd gotten myself into this time, but then they'd stand beside me. Tunney, gruffness and all, might compliment me for toughing this out. And then—oh, and then, he'd go downstairs and kick some ever-lovin' perp butt. And if Debra Fortney got hold of these two...ooh, you talk about raising some serious Cain!

A sound interrupts my thoughts. What on earth is that? And then I know. I'm laughing. Hoarse, hysterical laughter, but holy crumb, I'm laughing. Thanks a lot, Lord! Maybe I can get through this.

The door crashes open. "I thought," Chandler growls, "we said we wanted silence in here!"

Before I can react, he and Willis have shot me, but not with guns. No—they've sprayed pepper spray directly into my eyes.

"Holy crumb! OUCH!"

Or maybe I can't.

"Good morning. How's my favorite victim?"

Day two arrived much faster than I wanted it to. Well, at least I'm still having a little trouble seeing Chandler clearly. I was allowed to irrigate my eyes, but only after three

excruciating minutes, with the understanding that any indication of pain added a thirty-second penalty. I blink up at him. God, I'm sorry, but I really, REALLY hate this...

Don't, Maria. Hate is what causes things like this to happen.

I shoot a look at the ceiling. *And what exactly do you want me to do? Beg this crud for the right to take care of myself? For the right to live?*

No, no. But here's a hint. He's expecting you to shoot barbs at him. If you don't, that'll knock him, and Willis, off their feet.

Okay, I'll take that tip. I force out a smile. "I'm lovely, Chandler. You?"

"Don't give me that," he snaps. "I know what a good actress you are, and I'm not falling for it. Move it, girlie. Gramps and I need a fresh pot of coffee and help with some, uh, measurements."

Coffee, huh? Well, at least I had plenty of practice with that, thanks to Tunney. But as for the measurements—what are they measuring me for, a coffin?

Hold on, Maria. Trust me.

Oh, of all the... *Can't you see I'm trying? In fact, can you see me at all? Can you hear me? Do you know where I am right now? I realize you're trying to help, but...for Pete's sake, God, I'm not a saint! Why do you keep telling me to trust you, and then just making it harder?*

"Forgot to mention, daydreaming is against the rules, too." At that moment, Chandler stomps across the kitchen and throws a scoopful of coffee beans at me. Every grain lands on bare skin, and I feel hives rising within five seconds.

"Oh, allow me." Willis takes a shot. "Perfect, just like in high school basketball."

"You...you...KACHOO-KACHOO-KACHOO! I oughta...I hope you both go to...kachoo-kachoo!" Everything in me says to grab the coffee can, dump it over their heads, and run. But one, I'm in heels with no other foot protection. Two, I could barely walk downstairs. And three, I'm afraid of being grabbed and raped if I try something like that. I look up. *Jesus, help me, please...*

Several minutes later, Chandler orders me to sit down in the kitchen and places several vials in front of me. "Fill 'er up," he instructs. "And don't get any ideas about drinking them."

For a second, I think I might slam every single shot and risk the consequences, but when I fill vial number one, I see how dumb that would be. Chandler and Willis have ordered me to fill vials with poison. Why? I thought they planned to shoot me. Or worse, what if after I'm dead, they plan to implicate me in their serial killing schemes, claiming I helped them prepare death cocktails? *Oh, God...* I fake a sneeze and look down. I just had to let some of those tears go. *God, what's happening to me? What are you doing?*

There's no answer.

"How you doing, my dear?" Willis asks about fifteen minutes later.

Even though I can't feel God right now, I decide to use the last advice I heard from Him. "I'm fine. Wow, that took me back to high school chemistry."

This time, Chandler and Willis exchange a look that clearly says, *huh?* I feel a quick surge of victory, but then Willis claps a hand against my shoulder, and I feel chills.

"You know, Maria," Willis says after a minute, "maybe you've forgotten you're on the fast track to death. You need another reminder." He studies me. "Being a female, if not a lady, I guess you'd like to clean up after such a difficult day yesterday."

Oh, yeah, like I'm falling for that. "Last time I checked, corpses smell."

"Maybe, but more importantly, corpses are cold. You feel too warm to be an almost-dead woman. Follow me."

The next thing I know, I'm in a bathroom, facing a tub of ice water—and I do mean ice water. There are actual ice cubes in there. I make myself keep my tone light. "How very thoughtful of you." Yeah, about as thoughtful as giving an alcoholic wine.

"We hoped you'd think so," Chandler says. "Now, take your time." He starts to leave.

"Hold it," I tell him. "Okay, what's up? You two aren't gonna stand in here watching my every move? Or maybe you're just gonna burst in after a few minutes and drown me."

"We're not heartless, remember," Willis says. "We'll even give you a good hour to, ah, enjoy yourself. But an entire hour. This door doesn't unlock until then, and if you step out of that

tub...” He presses the button of a device attached to his belt, and I feel a short shock. I shake my head at him.

“I knew there was a catch. You know, y’all should go into the torture business for profit. Now...” I feel safe giving an order. “Do me a favor and leave.”

Well, catch or not, at least it’s water. And though they didn’t leave shampoo, they did leave soap, albeit a tiny bar. Well, so be it. At least I won’t smell like a rotten orchid anymore. My perfume and Degree only goes so far. I almost laugh, remembering how Tunney joked about my “wimpy” deodorant, but I bite it back just in time.

But twenty minutes later, my body is as clean as it’s going to get, and I’m feeling the catch. I feel like a Titanic passenger in the North Atlantic, and darn it, Willis was right. I have a sudden empathy for corpses. Oh, crumb, is this ever unbelievably, freakishly *cold!* My hands are shaking, and if I even open my lips a crack, my teeth start chattering.

That’s it, I think. That’s good. Keep shivering. You’re only in trouble if the shivering stops. Keep trying to get your body to raise its temperature. To that end, I raise my arms, then do my best tabletop, in hopes that’ll keep a couple limbs at a time dry. When that doesn’t work, I try submerging, because I have the slightly crazy idea that the water might somehow absorb body heat. How long does it take to get...no. No, don’t think the H-word.

But that becomes harder and harder the more time passes. I try to focus on warm things, but can’t. The cold, coupled with the pain and the exertion of walking around, combine to make me sleepy. No, no! I yell at myself. No—don’t fall asleep...don’t give them an excuse to touch you without your clothes...

Focus on something, Maria. Anything. Okay, I’ll try. The room’s pretty sparse, like all the others I’ve seen, but... My eyes dart to the right, and I spot something. There, on the edge of the sink...what is that? Oh—it’s the head off a hairbrush. I hear someone say “ouch,” but it isn’t me. Well, it is, but it’s Little Maria. What hurt her? I close my eyes and tune in.

“Sorry, cricket. I’ll try to be gentle.” Mama sighs. “Poor thing...you got stuck with my criminally thick Channing hair. I was always getting mine in knots, too.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It just happens. If I know you, you got so busy washing up and singing at the same time, you didn’t have enough attention left over for what was happening to your hair.”

Mama laughs. “You sounded wonderful, though. Won’t be long now before you can make your onstage debut.”

“Really?” She’s dreamed about this day, but never believed it was gonna happen for real. Not with all those older kids around—they were so good—so much better than her.

“Of course. Just keep doing what you’re doing.” Mama’s brush keeps working, and she taps Maria’s throat. “I think your guardian angel asked Jesus if He wouldn’t let you have just a teeny bit of her voice.”

Maria never knows what to say when Mama talks about Jesus and angels. They’re so big, and that makes her feel so small. She turns to Mama. “What was your first big part?” Mama’s stories are always better than any fairytales.

“Oh, I was much older than you. I was in high school, and I got to play Mabel in The Pirates of Penzance.” Mama sets her hairbrush down and claps. “There! We’re done. Now...”

She points to places where tears left marks, no matter how hard Maria tried not to cry. “Let’s go clean that beautiful face with some cold water, and you can head upstairs and read for awhile.”

That’s when my brain flashes a fact in front of me. There are ice cubes in this tub. Ice is frozen water. Unless Chandler and Willis counted how many cubes they were dumping, and from the looks of it, they didn’t, I can cheat. As for the condition of the water, more desperate people have done worse. This in mind, I scoop up an ice cube and let it melt. Then two others. Ah. Heaven.

Of course, I can’t take all the ice cubes, or Willis and Chandler will find out. I risk sucking on a few more while I try to summon Mama’s voice back into my brain. It won’t come, which makes sense. After all, what would Mama be doing in this awful place? I must be delirious or something.

A few minutes later, Chandler knocks to release me. I fall on the way out of the tub because I’m frozen stiff. Hypothermic, in fact. Oh, that’s great.

I've been upstairs for most of the day since the hypothermia dip, and I still can't get warm. Well, let me rephrase that. My body isn't warm. My heart, however, is broiling.

I know none of this is God's fault, and I'm not mad at Him, exactly. I've already learned my lesson about that. But by now, I am freezing, still starving, still wearing clothes that need to be burned, still throbbing all over thanks to Chandler and Willis' "welcome beating," plus the other times they've hit me, and still suffering from a pounding, stabbing headache. Worse than that, I can't even talk anymore. Dehydration started to set in yesterday, and today, it's made itself quite comfortable. I've discovered the hard way that if I stand up too fast, I get dizzy and end up on the floor. My stomach hasn't stopped lurching for hours, even though there's nothing in it. And I know a lot of God's people endured worse, but...

But really, did they? I ask Him. *Most of your people got some serious help before things got this rough on them. You even let some of them completely off the hook. But me? I have been accused of murder, jailed for almost a week, had a gun shoved up my nose, watched my partner get shot, dealt with flak for "murdering" a psycho professor, and now this. The only person I can think of who I could even halfway talk to without screaming right now—if I could talk—is Saint Paul. And really, all he'd tell me to do is hang in there, just like you have. I've tried, and to tell you the truth, I am pretty darn ticked off at this whole arrangement. So hear this, God. I know better than to tell you what to do, but I am a desperate lady—and yes, no matter what they say, I am a lady. You're gonna tell me exactly why you're letting this happen, and I am not giving up until you do!*

It's then that I almost feel a hand on my shoulder. ***I have a friend, Jacob, who said basically the same thing,*** I hear the voice in my heart tell me. ***And I agreed, so I will agree to do as you ask. I am allowing this trial for two reasons. One, so that you will trust me above all others. And two, so you can learn things about your life you need to know.***

I nod, breathe, and push a few words past my lips, which have begun to crack. "O-okay. And...you...you know I love you, don't you? I'm not...angry..."

I know, Maria.

That's a relief. But at the same time, I have to wonder if God's right. I may be a Christian now, but does that mean I truly trust Him? Well, yeah, I do, but up to now, I haven't had this much "alone time" with God. So...

A fresh wave of head pain and empty nausea cuts me off. I don't talk to God this time, but I hope He understands what I'm trying to say—help!

"Maria? Maria..."

I'm dreaming. Either that, or one of the men—if you want to use that word—is trying to wake me. I turn as far as I can without hitting the bedpost. "Go away!"

"Shhh." I feel someone's hand on my forehead. "Oh, my word. This is...I don't even know what this is. Couple of..." I hear a couple cuss words. "Maria, listen to me, now. Drink some of this. Here, let me help you."

That's when my mind registers four things. One, what's sliding down my throat is ice water. Two, whoever gave me that water has also thrown a pre-warmed quilt over me. Three, the voice I was hearing is female. And four, when I look at its owner, I see graying reddish hair. "M-Mama?"

She laughs. "No. It's Miss Piper. Remember?"

"Miss...wait." I force my eyes all the way open. When I do, I see a face I haven't seen in over twenty years. Sapphire eyes, a heart-shaped face, French-tipped nails, and hair that, on a second look, isn't red but deep brown. "Miss Piper."

"Yeah, honey."

Piper Gullickson, my parents' assistant director. My babysitter when they had to be away, even the night they died. My best friend in the theater. But... "Miss Piper, what are you..." I choke on another drink of water.

"Oh—" She squeezes my hand. "I don't dare thump your back. Just keep coughing. You need to take it slow. Your system's already so torn up it's not even funny." She takes back the cup I can see now she was using. Once I've regained control, I repeat the question. "What in the

world are you doing here? If Chandler or Willis catches you, you're in major trouble, not to mention what they'll do to me!"

"That's why they won't catch me," she says. "I knocked them both out. They were already sleeping like the d—I mean, already sleeping heavily. I just made sure they got a few extra winks."

"You...how? How'd you even get in here? How did you know where I was? They said the cops wouldn't even know."

"And they don't. I know Willis Portman. Had I called the police, he'd have killed you on the spot and tossed your body onto the roof of a squad car. But since it's just me, you're safe. As to how I got in, I used the crawl space under the house and took back stairs and passageways the rest of the way. I figured they'd have stashed you in here. It's the highest room in the house. Used to be your hiding place, in fact."

She's speaking at normal speed, but my brain is so fried I can't understand three words of what Miss Piper's saying. "Wait, back up. Hiding place? Passages? They told me..."

"Nuts to what they told you." Miss Piper laughs again. "Honey, do you really not know where you are?"

"Well, it hasn't been the biggest thing on my mind."

Then Miss Piper says something that nearly makes me pass out.

"Maria, you're in the Thousand Stars."

CHAPTER 17:

“Hard to see the light now, just don’t let it go...”

-Into the Woods

“Take another one.” Miss Piper hands me a third saltine from her right-hand pocket. I’m tempted to shove the whole thing in my mouth, but I know from the first two that that’s a bad idea, so I just nibble it and stare at her. “Are you serious? I’m in the Thousand Stars? The theater? This is what it’s become?”

“Tragically, yes,” my old friend says. “Eric and Audrey hadn’t left a will, and things just weren’t the same without them. With no one to buy us out, the staff quit one by one. City council’s talked about tearing the place down numerous times, I hear, but somehow, no one had the heart. What you don’t know, Maria, is that everybody here loved your mom and dad, and they adored you.”

“Well, almost everybody,” I say. “Willis hated me. And he told me my parents ruined his life.” I shake my head. “I’ve been trying to remember, but I can’t. Can you tell me...”

“Yes,” Miss Piper says. “I can tell you everything, starting with how I showed up tonight.”

“Please do.”

She nods. “After the last staff member quit, I couldn’t stand to stay. They were gone, you were gone...I missed you so much, did you know that? I thought about adopting you myself, but Social Services turned me down because I was single, young, and unemployed. I was so devastated, I packed up and moved to Dallas. I never knew where you were, but I prayed for you every day. I thought about tracking you down, but everybody I talked to said I shouldn’t—that a child in the system was impossible to find, I couldn’t adopt you, and I’d just add to your hurt. In retrospect, maybe I should’ve told ‘em all to stuff it.”

I nod. “I would’ve been grateful if you had. But I’m happy enough that you’re here now. So you were in Dallas and...”

“Almost every year,” Miss Piper continues, “I would hear these awful stories on the news about people, mostly young women, being stalked, held hostage in various places for a certain number of days, and murdered. The police could never track the killers because they always committed the crime a different way, always took their victims to places that were extremely difficult to find, and used different names every time. I say “killers” because at first, it was just one, but in later years, reports said the original murderer had an accomplice.”

“You mean like, when Chandler got old enough to help his grandpa?”

“Yeah.” She looks at the ceiling. “So much for taking a grandson fishing, I guess. Anyhow, the police didn’t know, but I knew it was Willis murdering all those people.”

My mouth drops open. “You knew? I...you...I can’t...why didn’t you tell them?”

“Oh, baby.” Miss Piper’s crying now. “I wanted to. I really did. But Willis...he had another of my secrets. He knew that I knew how your parents really died.”

“Hold on a sec.” I put my hand up. “Now, I have already had enough shocks recently. What do you mean, you know how Mama and Daddy died? Are you saying you know they were murdered, too? And you didn’t stick up for me when...”

“I couldn’t, Maria. I just couldn’t. I...” She trails off. “How much do you remember about Willis?”

“Other than that he was an abusive idiot who scared the living daylights out of me? Not much. My adoptive parents think I repressed it or something.”

“Well, let me fill in some gaps,” Miss Piper says. She sits on the edge of the bed and tucks the quilt around me like she’s about to tell a bedtime story. “Are you warming up, honey?”

“Slowly, but getting there. How’d you know to bring all this stuff?”

She shrugs. “I didn’t figure Willis treated any of his hostages right, and once I knew he had you, well...” She shakes her head. “Here, have some more water, and keep sipping slowly. Anyway, back to the story. Willis Portman was an ex-con. Back when your daddy first hired him, he’d recently been released from prison, where he’d spent a few years for selling drugs and stealing a car. He’d been in a few fights with other inmates, but nothing else violent, so your daddy just figured it was prison stuff. Willis came to him looking for a job after a lot of other

people turned him down. He had a performing background and wanted to be an actor. Being the kind of people they were, your parents took him on, but they said he should start out as prop master and work his way up.”

“And if I know Willis,” I say between sips, “he wasn’t thrilled with that.”

“Oh, no. He hid it, but anger ate that man up like piranhas on a meat lovers’ pizza—oh, sorry,” she says when I give her a Look. He lashed out at all of us, including me. He said some terrible stuff, but if confronted, he’d swear he wasn’t gonna slip up again. Meanwhile, he was delving into a little suspicious activity on the side. His first year with us, I noticed some stuff missing from our inventory—right after I’d see Willis whispering like mad on the phone. I suspected he was stealing our stuff to get drugs or booze, but I never had any proof. He was a slick one.”

“Huh. Tell me something I don’t know,” I scoff. “But why would he be angry at my parents? I mean, sure, I understand anger. I’m a cop. I’ve seen it. I’ve felt it. I know what happens when you let yourself get mad at the world. But why them? I mean, they let him in when nobody else did. Trusted him when nobody else did.”

“Because they were Christians,” Miss Piper explains. “They knew Willis wasn’t committed to the Lord, but they were willing to give him a chance in the interest of showing God’s love. But that just made him madder and meaner. He thought this meant he was your mom and dad’s evangelism project, and he made it clear that their beliefs were ‘crap.’ He thought if they loved Jesus so much, they’d let him onstage and give him the ‘respect’ he thought he deserved. He played a part with them, but everybody else got the real Willis, including you. I saw how he pushed you around, but I found out that if I went to your folks, he just did it more.”

I’m nodding, because now that someone’s helping me, I can remember times I heard Willis say things like that, or times he would vent his anger at the theater. Once, I heard him shouting into the phone, asking what the Kellers were so afraid of. Did they think he was gonna corrupt their ‘spoiled rotten, stupid kid?’

And that memory brings up another one from when I was eight. Mama and I were about to have a voice lesson, but she forgot her notebook and asked if I’d go to her office and get it. I

said yes, but when I got there, I saw Willis. He was in the adjoining office that belonged to Daddy, bending over the desk, and his hands were full of money.

“I knew it!” I had exclaimed. “I knew you were up to something, you...you...draggled-tailed guttersnipe!” I wasn’t sure what that meant, but had heard it in a musical and thought it sounded good.

Willis locked the office door and stuck a chair in front of it. Then he turned and gave me a wicked smile. “And you,” he said, “are a nosy, spoiled, arrogant, troublemaking little girl. What’s more, I have no use for you or your stingy, judgmental parents. Start me off as prop master until I prove myself—ha! ‘We don’t care about your past, but we do want to make sure you get your feet back under you before you go into acting again’. Telling me I’m ‘on thin ice’ because of ‘theater conduct violations’—huh! And the way your stupid mother looks at me when I show up for choir practice at the church, and then runs her mouth about showing me the love of Jesus... I’ve never heard such tripe! Coupla filthy liars...”

“They are not!” I yelled. “And if you say anything like that again, I’ll...”

Willis’ slap nearly knocked me down. “You’ll keep your mouth shut, is exactly what you’ll do.” He was pinching the back of my neck, hard.

“Let go of me or I’ll scream,” I warned him.

But he just shook me and tightened his grip on my neck so I felt myself choking. “You’ll do no such thing,” he said. “I think you need a little nap.”

“I remember now,” I tell Miss Piper. “He...he just kept choking me. I was coughing, and there was this gurgling noise coming out. And then I felt really tired, but I could feel him picking me up. The next thing I knew, I was awake in the prop shop. Willis was gone, and I was screaming, but the prop shop was in the basement, and there were so many people there that day...Mama and Daddy had been looking all over for me, but it was about fifteen minutes before they found me, partly because I never went in Willis’ domain.”

“Yes,” Miss Piper says. “We all praised God he hadn’t given you more than a terrible bruise. But I remember, too. You told your parents everything, and when Willis came back...”

“Daddy fired him and called the cops,” I fill in. I feel myself smiling. “Mama offered to sit with me that night, and said I was brave when I told her I could sleep alone. Daddy said he was proud of me for the way I handled Willis.”

“As he should’ve been.”

“But...” The rest of the memory is coming fast now. “A few nights later, I woke up and heard all this thumping and bumping in the garage, and voices—it sounded like somebody on the phone, and then there was a lot of cussing. I was gonna go get Daddy, but something told me to go to the garage first. And when I did...yes! When I did, I saw Willis. He was messing with Daddy’s truck. And he—he turned around, saw me, and said if I told, he’d kill them, and me, too. He had this scary look in his eyes—they were glassy.”

“He was high,” Miss Piper says in a dull voice. “I had seen him go down to the garage, but when I confronted him, he said I didn’t see anything. Then he left. But the next day, your parents went to the theater conference in Cherry Creek...”

“And they never came home,” I finish.

“No. No, they were almost home. But Willis—he said he could keep you quiet, but I was the only witness, so he had to take care of me. He called and told me what he’d done, so I called your folks and said you were sick. I figured if I could get them home early, I could stop Willis’ plan. But I guess your daddy took the back roads, figuring he wouldn’t have to use the brakes as much, and they just...went out. I was too late.” She wipes her eyes. “Willis said if I ever told anyone what happened, he’d murder me. And during those years that he killed the other people, he used to call periodically and make sure I was keeping quiet. I had a few—accidents—that let me know he was on my trail. He got put in jail a few times for petty crimes, but he’d always use his phone call to talk to me. And somebody always bailed him out.”

“I knew it.” I can feel tears choking me, even though I don’t know how I can cry. “I knew it for more than twenty years. Nobody believed me. I didn’t even believe myself sometimes. I...” There’s nothing left to do but fall into my friend’s arms and cry.

Miss Piper holds me, rocking back and forth on the bed. “I know. I know.” Her voice is dry, but strained. “I tried, baby. I really tried.”

“Yeah.” I swallow. “But why are you here?”

Miss Piper sighs. “I hadn’t heard from Willis in several years. I thought I was safe, so a few months ago, I risked coming back. But then I heard on the news that you were missing, as well as the history of your case and the suspects, and I knew who you were with. Willis called and did his same old routine, but I wasn’t taking it anymore. I know this theater a lot better than he does. So I grabbed a quilt, some food and water, and a nine-iron—I’ve taken up golf in recent years. I couldn’t risk drugging them—my timing would have to be to-the-minute perfect, and I couldn’t count on their leaving drinks out. So I used the club, stashed it in a closet, rushed up to find you, and here I am. I couldn’t save Audrey and Eric, but I am going to save you.”

“We...we’d better get moving then,” I tell her. “I don’t know how much time’s left until daylight.”

“Yes,” Miss Piper agrees. “It’s almost four AM now. We’ll have to go down the trellis outside the window.” She laughs. “You used to be a pro at that.”

I nod, because now I remember. This room, where Mama kept special things like favorite Christmas ornaments and love letters Daddy wrote her, was the place I went when I needed to hide. It was the same place I went right after Willis choked me, and the day the social worker came to take me away. And if I was afraid somebody like Willis would see me leaving, I did use the trellis. But...

“Miss Piper, I’m not sure...”

“I’ll go first and help you. You think you can do it one more time?”

“I would, but the window’s locked.”

“Not anymore.” Miss Piper holds up a key. “Filched it off Willis just like he did your mama’s Wedgewood china. So...” She crosses the room and unlocks the door, which automatically unlocks the window. “Okay, honey. Start breathing real deep and bracing yourself. Come down after me.”

“Okay...” I focus on Miss Piper while she edges out the window and heads down the trellis. Pain’s the only thing keeping me from cracking my knuckles.

“Come on,” my friend rasps.

I shoot up a prayer, pull myself up, grip the sill, and slide out. God, help me remember where all those footholds and handholds used to be! This was so easy when I was eight, but now I'm decades older, beaten almost to a pulp, and barefoot in a shredded skirt instead of in jeans and sneakers. Plus, I'm not sure this old trellis is gonna support mine and Miss Piper's combined weight. No...no, girl, don't think about falling. Just start moving...oh, I think my foot just grazed a nail! I grope for the next handhold while Miss Piper grips my waist. I feel hot. I must be getting a fever from all the temperature changes my body's been through...

"What in the—oh, that stupid harlot..."

"Gramps, you're dreaming. She's locked up. Now shut up...you're giving me a headache."

"You lose your mind, boy? Listen at that noise up there!"

"Oh, crumb!" I whisper. I hear a door slam and know one or both of my captors is headed outside. "Miss Piper, go! Run!"

"No, Maria. I'm getting you out of here."

"Miss Piper, if they catch us here, they'll kill you, too. Run! I think I can get back through the window and pretend to be asleep. You go get help!"

"Okay." She drops her hand back and gives me something. "Here's the key. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Oh, God, dear God...please help me...you said trust you...help me..." I can hear Chandler outside, on the other side of the house. Meanwhile, Willis' voice, evil and a little drunk, carries up the stairs. I barely make it back into the bedroom before I hear him reach the second floor landing. I've got to lock the door, hide the key...he's halfway up the last flight. I don't have any time. Please, God...

I hear Willis trip, fall, and cuss. Thank you, Lord! I relock the door. But what to do with the key? He's getting to his feet now...where...ah! In a flash of inspiration, I drop the key in the bucket. If Willis thinks I'm so filthy, he surely won't want to touch anything that came from me, in any context. I make it a few more feet before collapsing to the floor. I pray they think I was too weak to make it to the bed.

The doorknob rattles. “Maria! Maria, what’s going on up there, girl? You better get up and tell me, or I’ll...” I hear him kick the door open, and the next thing I know, he’s flipping the light switch, jerking me off the floor. “All right, you self-righteous hussy, what are you pulling on me?”

I blink up at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t give me that. Somebody else was here. You were trying to get away, weren’t you?”

“No. No, who else would be here?”

“I heard voices, girl!” He shakes me.

“J-just my voice. You wouldn’t blame me for praying right now, would you?”

That seems to distract him. “Oh. Breaking the rules again, huh? I don’t know what else I’d expect from Keller’s little brat...”

“Wait a minute.” I’m not sure where the tiny bit of strength in my tone came from. “What did he ever do to you? What did they ever do to you?”

“They broke the rules.” Willis is right in my face. “I was an actor. They should’ve let me perform onstage. But no, they were afraid I was just too temperamental for a big job just yet, and too much exposure to me would scare their poor, innocent little Maria.” He cusses. “I always hated kids. You know, a kid was the reason I got hooked on drugs—had to carry a snot-nosed brat during a scene in a play and snapped a couple muscles. Good thing I had a pal who knew where to get morphine, and it worked. But you were the worst. You influenced them, telling them how mean I was, telling lies about me. And that’s why you’re gonna die.”

“They weren’t lies,” I tell him. “And I’ll tell you something—you won’t be able to lie anymore. Even if you kill me, someone will find out what you did, and you and Chandler will end up on Death Row. I’ve seen Death Row. I looked it in the eye. They wanted to send me there for supposedly killing four people in North Carolina, so what do you think they’d do to two men who killed more than thirty people, most of them women, in Texas?”

Willis slaps me. “Listen, missy,” he says. “That won’t happen. And you know why? Because we don’t get caught. Now...” He seems to stare through me. “Maybe you didn’t try to get away, but I think the hope of escaping and seeing anyone you love again is making you too

brassy. Let me take care of that for you.” Before I can breathe, he snatches my engagement ring and pockets it before shoving me to the floor. “Might as well stay awake,” he says on his way out. “Thanks to your mouth, you just lost a day. Chandler will come up to get you as soon as we’ve got sunlight, and we’ll start the killing. Fair warning, it’ll be slow.”

He slams the door. For several minutes, I can’t seem to get a good breath. I know I should be happy that Miss Piper got out, but what if she can’t find help in time? Chandler’s still out there—what if he’s still looking for her and she had to hide? And as for Willis and Chandler...

I sigh. I’m not gonna get through to them, no matter what I do. I stare down at the white mark where my ring used to be. I really am gonna lose everything.

No, Maria. Not everything.

I look up. “Yeah,” I rasp at the ceiling. “Yeah, I know. And...and thank you for being with me through all this...and especially for sending Miss Piper. Thank you so much.”

You are so welcome, darling. But she promised to get help. You’re going to have to trust her as you do me.

“Oh, Jesus, I don’t know if I can. Trusting has always been so hard for me. Other people, myself, you...and now...I...but I guess if I can trust you through this, I can do it for anything, huh? That...” I’m choking up. “That’s what you were trying to tell me, wasn’t it?” I start crying, but stagger over to the bed and bury my face in the sheet so Willis won’t hear.

Yes. Yes, it was. Well done, Maria. No...no, don’t stop. You need to cry. You need to accept tears.

“L-like Claire said. Thank you.”

Yes. Now, we’re almost through this trial. Do you think you can be brave a little longer?

It occurs to me that God is talking like I’m a little kid. But I guess if I’m His little girl, it fits. “Yeah. Yeah, I think so. I can take anything for one more day. And...and if I’m coming home, I just want you to know, I’m going to throw myself at you and hug you senseless.”

I can hear God laughing. ***I wouldn’t expect less.***

“Maria Keller, come on down! You’re the next contestant on Choose your Death!”

I shake my head at Willis and Chandler. It's 5:30, just a little after sunrise. Chandler said he chased somebody through the woods, but lost them and has no proof they're connected to me. "But we better do it quick in case of witnesses," he reminds his grandpa. "I fired a shot into the woods, but there's no guarantee that scared 'em off."

"Okay," Willis says. "Behind curtain number one..." He cocks his gun. "You can choose to get shot. I personally recommend it if you're feeling weak and wimpy. One quick bullet right through your heart and it's over. Of course, if you want to go a bit slower..." He holds up a vial. "We can do it the Stage Door way and poison you. You'll have your pick of strychnine, arsenic, insecticide, aconite, or coffee. I don't recommend the coffee, though, since that means slowly drinking as much as it takes. Of course, it would be worth it to watch you in such pain."

"I'd like to put you through some pain," I snap.

Willis acts like he didn't hear me. "And finally, behind curtain number three," he says, "we have an updated version of your little hypothermia dip. We basically fill the tub to capacity, have you get in fully clothed, and work together to drown you in ice water. So..." The moron starts humming the Jeopardy theme.

That's when the reality of what's happening crashes in on me. Miss Piper would've tried her best to come through, but what if she couldn't? What if she got shot? What if she's dead? No...I have to try to reason with these thugs one more time.

"Chandler, wait," I say.

"Oh, you have a better idea? Well, we are open to suggestions."

"No," I tell him. "It's...Chandler, you might not remember, but I do. Back when we were...together, there were times—just a few, but times—that you were a decent guy. You must've at least cared for me at some point. Well, if you care now, do not let your grandfather do this. I know it's him behind it all, not you. I know you agreed to hurt me because you love him, but don't show it this way. I have a life. I have a fiancé who's had his heart broken once. Those kids—they need me. You might not give a rip what happens to me, but don't let them live the rest of their lives without a mom. Please."

Chandler studies me, but just smirks. "You're right. I don't give a rip. Now choose, before I do it for you."

Oh, Jesus, come through for me. I think for a minute and then nod. "Drowning."

"All right, then, let's get going," Willis says. "Nate, hand me that rope, son. I don't want any funny business."

"We could've already been halfway done," my ex-boyfriend growls, "if you didn't make these knots so blasted tight, Gramps!" He's working on the fourth and final bond around my left ankle. In the meantime, I'm trying to think of anything but what's happening. But my brain must be in total panic mode, because I keep thinking I've heard things. Cars...movement...even heavy boots. Well, I never did like to go down without a fight. I make myself walk across the bathroom and try to focus on the idea of seeing my parents soon.

"Okay," Willis says once we're all settled. I'm kneeling, facing him and Chandler. "On three, push down and hold. We'll count, and if she's still breathing, we'll bring her up and go again. One...two...three!"

Four hands force me under. Water fills every open crevice I've got, and it's all I can see, smell, taste, or feel. My lungs start burning, just a twinge at first, then an all-out signal that my air is in the red zone. My brain says to fight back, but there's nothing I can do.

Willis' hand pulls me up by the hair. "She's a feisty one," I hear him say. "Okay, one, two..."

The unmistakable sound of a boot in the door ricochets through the room, followed by a couple of gunshots. "Police! Freeze! Let go of her, buster...get on the ground before I put you there! On the ground, now! Hands where I can see 'em..."

Another man bends over the bathtub and scoops me up. Out of habit, I try to struggle against him, but can't do much. He chuckles. "It's okay, sweetheart. You're safe now."

"I..." I blink, remembering. "Miss Piper...where..."

"Your friend got shot," the man says. "Practically crawled in the station, screaming for help."

“Oh, no...no...”

“Easy, darlin’. She’s gonna be okay, and so are you.” The officer unclips his radio.

“Dispatch, I need the paramedics at 2425 Theater Street. I’ve got a lady here who needs serious medical attention. That’s 2425...”

That’s all I hear before I pass out.

CHAPTER 18:

*“Impossible things are happening every day”**-Cinderella*

The next thing I'm aware of is warmth. Incredible, unbelievable, dry warmth. And white. Tons of it. I blink. Did I die after all? A woman crosses in front of me, and I manage to get her sleeve. “Angel?” It's all I can get out.

“Am I an angel? No.” She chuckles. “You're still alive. But in a way, I guess I did get to be your angel. I'm Dr. Shannon Sperry. You're in Austin, Texas, St. David's South Austin Hospital's ICU. This is the first time in two days you've been awake.”

“Two days?” Why do I sound like a moron?

“Yes, and you needed some sleep. But now that you're awake...” She helps me sit up and puts something against my mouth. “A little bird told me you were a big-time tea-drinker, so I thought I'd start you off with some Celestial Seasonings. It's lukewarm so your system won't get shocked, but you got pretty cold.” Then she laughs. “It's all right. It really is tea, and you can drink it.”

So I drink it. Mmmm...cinnamon spice. “Thank you, Dr.—Sperry?”

“Yeah. How are you feeling, Maria?”

“How did you...oh. I guess that officer told you.”

“That's right. So, how you doing?”

“I'm...my head is...it hurts like heck. And I...I just hurt.” It feels so good to be able to tell the truth.

“I'd be worried if you didn't. So, are you seeing two of me?”

“No, ma'am.”

She holds up six fingers and ask me to tell her how many there are. I do, and she nods.

“Do you know your first and last name? Address? Age?”

I give her all those, and she asks a few other simple questions like who the president is, how to spell something, the answer to a math problem, and if I remember, basically, what

happened to me. I let out a sigh when Dr. Sperry says I answered all her questions correctly. “Well, at least I’m not brain-damaged.” The idea of spending the rest of my life with the IQ of a third-grader is only slightly better than death.

“Not from what we can tell,” Dr. Sperry says, “which is a miracle. But you do need us, desperately. You’ll notice a couple of IVs, which we’re using to give you a continuous supply of food and water. If you feel up to it later, you can try eating on your own. As for your injuries, you’re looking at several broken ribs—did you ever notice that breathing hurt you...back there?”

“No. I mean, it did, but I thought that was because everything hurt.”

“Okay. Well, you’ve got several broken ribs, a badly twisted ankle, a dislocated wrist, cuts, scratches, and lacerations on everything but your eyebrows, bruises the size of grapefruits, lingering hypothermia symptoms, an unbelievably mild concussion, and...” She breaks off when I sneeze. “The beginnings of a major cold, including a low-grade fever.” Dr. Sperry grins. “That’s the bad news. The good news is, you’re gonna make it. Most of the damage is cosmetic. We’ll get you into X-ray for the big stuff, and what remains, a lot of TLC and rest will go a long way for.”

“And...and what about...” Gil’s face flashes in front of me, and I moan. Why would he want a woman who let the symbol of her promise to him get snatched away, especially if she looked like a monster? I make myself ask. “How awful do I look?”

“Oh, Maria.” Dr. Sperry laughs gently, like she gets it. “I’ll be honest. You’re a mess right now. And you will scar in places, but you will still basically be the same woman you always were. And if pictures I’ve seen are any indication, you will be beautiful.”

Well, not hideous, maybe. But as to the same woman I always was... That thought gives me a fresh headache, and a fresh longing. “Dr. Sperry?”

“Yes?”

“Luke and Jasmine, I...would you call my family for me?”

“Already done. Now...” She adjusts the bedspread. “I’m going to give you a painkiller which will probably knock you out. If you get sleepy, don’t fight it.”

I laugh. “That’s a refreshing change.”

“Okay now, take it easy. You don’t want to put even the slightest bit of weight on that ankle. Here, let me...”

“Thanks, Angelita,” I tell my officiating nurse once I’m back in bed a few hours later. We both got a good giggle when I realized what her name was, but in the past hour I’ve learned Angelita Desmond is the closest thing to an angel I’ve ever seen. First off, the woman cleaned me up without having a heart attack when she saw Willis and Chandler’s handiwork. Not only that, she managed to get me out of the tub, into a fresh gown, and back into bed without causing too much pain. Yup, a complete angel. Dorothea Schmidt would have a run for her money if...

“Maria? What is it?” Angelita asks.

“Oh—uh, nothing. Just...you remind me of someone really special. She’s a nurse, too.”

“Ah. Relative?”

“Might as well be. She’s my police partner’s wife. She practically adopted me two years ago.” I swallow the lump in my throat and switch subjects. “How long have you been doing this?”

Angelita’s eyes snap with something between humor and dead seriousness. “Long enough to know how not to make a hurt worse, and long enough to know the body’s usually not the only thing that needs healing.” She sits on the edge of the bed and takes something from her pocket. “I spent a lot of years working in a shelter for battered women, and I learned that after what they’ve gone through, they need to feel like women again. So I was wondering if you’d let me do your nails. A little bird mentioned you’re partial to cherry red.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” I tell her. “Don’t you have other people who need you?”

She winks. “Not right now. I’m supposed to be on a lunch break starting in about four minutes, but...” She starts on my left thumbnail without waiting for permission. Two more fingers in, a thought occurs to me. “Angelita?”

“Hmmm?”

“That ‘little bird’ you mentioned—is it the same one who told Dr. Sperry I love tea?”

“Yes.”

I feel myself smile. “Luke or Jasmine?”

“Neither.”

“What? Then who—“

“Sorry, Detective. That’s classified.”

But I’m not giving up yet. “Is Miss Piper here? She might have known something—
and...and how is she? Is she okay?”

“Shhh. Calm down, Maria. Yes, Piper Gullickson will be all right. She’ll need heavy rehab for that gunshot wound—they say the bullet was an inch from her spine. Plus, she nearly killed herself staggering to the police station. But she’ll recover. As soon as I get clearance, I’ll personally take you to see her.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“It’s nothing, sweetie. Give me your other hand.”

Almost the minute I do, I hear a commotion in the hallway. There are running footsteps, and then a man’s voice. For one horrific second, I think it’s Willis, but then I recognize it.

“Excuse me...coming through...come on, keep moving, people...”

“Don’t you give me that look, pal. Where is she, Luke? What room did they say?”

Angelita certainly looks like an angel right now—one who’s about to kick some demon behind. She sets aside the nail polish. “I’ll be back, Maria.” She steps into the hall, and I hear her scolding my parents. There’s quiet for all of five seconds, and then they descend.

“Maria! Thank God...”

“My baby!”

“How did you get away?”

“Are you all right? Any permanent damage? Oh—oh, I don’t care, of course, but...”

Jasmine’s kissed me so many times I think I might have more lipstick prints than bruises.

Luke calms down first. “C’mon, Jazz, easy. We’ve got to stay calm, remember?”

Jasmine gives him a Look. “I know that, but after thinking your daughter’s dead for almost a week...”

“All right, all right. Score one for you.”

“I side with Jasmine here,” I say. “It’s fantastic to see you. I thought...”

“We know what you thought,” Luke says. “It’s what we thought, too. But we were wrong. God worked it all out. You’re alive, you’re okay, and all three of us are overjoyed.”

I blink. “Three?”

Luke signals “one minute,” crosses the room, and pokes his head out the door. “C’mon in here, Gil.”

No. No, he did not just say...

Oh, but he did.

For a minute or two, Gil and I stare at each other like we’re complete strangers. I’m not sure who says whose name first, but whoever it is, the voice sends Gil rushing toward me like a shopaholic on the trail of a new pair of shoes. Instead of hugging me, he grips my hands as tightly as I can let him.

“Maria,” he breathes. “Precious Maria. I love you so, so much. There are no words.”

“I don’t have any, either. I thought about you every single day, especially after...well, after it happened. The whole thing was horrendous, but you—you made it...I could stand what they did to me because of you.”

“I felt the same way,” Gil says. “Even when you were reported missing, I knew I’d see you again. I knew you’d fight them and win. I had to know that.”

“Well, I did. I won. No. No, God won. If He hadn’t...He was the one who sent Miss Piper, and...”

“Who?”

“Never mind. I’ll tell you later. For now, I just want to be with you and hear about you.”

So for the next several minutes, Gil sits on the edge of the bed, holds my hand, strokes my face with his fingertips, and tells me everything I’ve missed in the past few days.

“The minute I heard you were gone,” he says, “I called for a flight out. I didn’t even pack—literally stuck a toothbrush in my pocket and jumped on the first plane. Luke’s been loaning me his clothes.” He tugs at the sleeve of Luke’s Houston PD sweatshirt, which is just big enough to be baggy on him. The idea of Gil just showing up on Luke and Jasmine’s doorstep in a panic, in the middle of the night, somehow makes me laugh.

“What did you do once you got here?” I ask. “I mean, besides worry constantly.”

“I did do that,” Gil confirms. “But mostly, I prayed. I couldn’t think of anything else to do. It seemed like you’d dropped off the face of the planet.”

“That’s right,” I say. “Luke, Willis told me that he planted a false trail so you and the other cops wouldn’t find me.”

“He did.” Luke’s voice is unreadable. “The other morning, when I realized you were gone, I knew why, and I just...I basically went crazy. Screamed at every officer I had, multiple times. Broke speed limits, drove through stop signs, cussed like mad, threw Coke bottles out the cruiser window, fired my gun at anything that moved. We’d get a lead—a red shoe planted somewhere in the woods, false perfume scents, you name it. I finally figured out we were being set up. I searched for three days, with and without the others, and came up empty. I came home last night trying to face the fact that I’d spend my weekend planning a funeral.”

“Oh, Luke.” I squeeze his hand. “But you didn’t.”

“No. No, because the captain here called me with Piper’s story. He described you, and I went nuts again. You should’ve seen me, dancing around the kitchen, grabbing onto Jasmine, saying the same things over and over—‘they found her, she’s alive, she’s okay, they got ‘em, they got ‘em!’ And Gil...poor guy was so thrilled he couldn’t even talk.”

I have to laugh. “I’m sorry. I mean, I’m so glad to see y’all, but I’m sorry to cause trouble. Again.”

“Baby girl, it wasn’t your fault. You’ve got to quit thinking of yourself as a scapegoat. You’re safe now, and everything’s gonna be different,” Jasmine says. Her tone makes her meaning clear, and I smile. “Thank you.”

“It’s nothing, honey. Now, we’re going to be around as much as we can, but I think we need to leave now and let you get your rest. You need to get your strength back, because you’ve got a wedding to get ready for.”

“Oh...” A different kind of pain courses through me when I see my left hand. “Gil, they...they took my engagement ring. I’m so sorry.”

Gil kisses the bare finger. “There’s nothing to apologize for. They took the ring, not you. And now nothing is going to stop all five of us from having a life together.”

“Five—yeah. Where are the kids?”

“Back in Tennessee with their Nana and Pop-Pop, but Susan and Kipp will bring them here soon. Then we’ll go home together.”

“Do they...know?”

“Yes, and they’ve been praying for you. But they don’t want you to worry. They just want you to be well again. As Sophie put it, you better do everything the doctors and nurses say and not try to move around too much, or she’ll make you eat a whole box of lemon bars.”

“Ha. Tell her I’m on it.”

A few days later, I’m feeling better, but still in awful pain. When the nurses ask me to rate it on a scale of one to ten, I still have to pick a six or seven, and I hate seeing the concerned looks they exchange. They’ve also been on to me because I’ve apparently been overdoing it at physical therapy, and they’ve ordered me to relax. I started out trying to read my Bible, but my eyes ache, so reading isn’t a good idea. I turn on the TV instead. News reports with my face all over them—boy, people who want their fifteen minutes of fame do not know what they’re getting into—Home Shopping Network, Lifetime—ha, like I want to watch a movie about a wife murdering her husband’s mistress—oh, here we go. Turner Classic Movies is airing *My Fair Lady*. Eliza has already met Higgins, but that’s just where it gets good.

It doesn’t take long for me to notice that my mind’s not on the movie. Instead, I’m sitting in bed, reliving my own theater experiences. A particular moment stands out—senior year of high school, when I played Marian the Librarian in *The Music Man*. When I walked into the cast party at the local pizza parlor, everyone else stood up and cheered. Monique, who’d painted scenery, hustled me over to a center table, and once we all had pizza and drinks, she winked at the guy who’d played opposite me as Harold Hill. I didn’t know it then, but it was a secret signal. He stood up, raised his glass, and said,

“Everybody...attention...HEY! Shut your holes! Okay...I wanna raise a toast. To Maria Keller, the best darn actress Sam Houston High has ever seen, and one of the only female actresses I’ve ever met who wasn’t a total snob. Today, Sam Houston High, tomorrow, Broadway!”

“I heard that,” Josie Trent, who played Eulalie Shinn, said.

“Hear, hear!”

“Yeah!” Glasses practically smacked together with enthusiasm.

Another moment pops into my head. I’m a freshman at Texas A&M, beginning the next phase of my drama career with a role as Hero in *Much Ado about Nothing*. It wasn’t my first choice since if you ask me, Hero’s kind of a weepy wimp, but after our last show, my director said,

“Maria, I wanted to congratulate you. You made that role shine in a way I haven’t seen an actress do in a few years. Moreover, although I know the role didn’t quite fit you, you accepted it gracefully and put your whole heart into making it work. You are a true star.”

And another, when I played Grace in *Grace and Glorie*, for which I was called “versatile and outrageously funny.” Another—my role as the witch in a children’s production of *Rapunzel*—even though I was the “bad guy,” a lot of the kids said my scenes were some of their favorite parts because I was “really scary.” And the time I played Princess Winifred in *Once Upon a Mattress*, and one of the weights (a painted Nerf ball) fell off during the scene where I was supposed to lift a barbell and rolled across the stage. Not knowing what else to do, I picked it up, threw it offstage shot-put style, and set the barbell up on its end. My theater class laughed about it for days. And the time I was Amalia in *She Loves Me*, or Anne Oakley...

Whoa, stop right there, sister! I warn myself. Why are you thinking about theater? Theater’s what got you into the whole mess that is your life, or did you forget? If you had gone to get Daddy that time instead of spying on Willis, you wouldn’t have lost the theater that was your home. If you had stayed out of theater like Luke and Jasmine wanted and just gotten your criminal justice degree, you could’ve had a somewhat cushy desk job somewhere and avoided the rape and the suicide accusation and all the rest of it. But no! You just had to...you had to...

Yes, I had to. As hard as I've tried to stuff it down, I love theater. I love the way it feels to go up on that stage and perform, not just for myself, but to make people smile, laugh, or cry. I love experiencing all kinds of new lives in every new play. I adore singing. If I had the strength, I'd have died singing when Willis shoved me off that dock.

Well, you can sing now, can't you? I ask myself. What does it matter if you can make a career of it or not? Just sing!

So I try. But when I do, my throat closes up and nothing comes out, because I can't focus. All I can hear are voices—Willis and Chandler telling me how worthless I am, foster parents saying I'll never amount to anything because my life is about playacting, teachers who shook their heads and clicked their tongues about me, Luke discouraging me with all his talk about reasonableness and what was practical...

"I can't sing."

"Well, I'll bet you'll be able to in a few minutes," I hear Dr. Sperry's voice say. "Luke, Jazz, come on in."

"Hey, guys," I say. I know I don't sound enthusiastic, but I don't feel it right now. I don't feel anything.

"Hi, sweetheart." Jasmine leans down and barely brushes my forehead with her lips. "Oh, you look so much better...but enough about that. Luke and I have a surprise for you. Close your eyes."

I do, expecting one of them to press a gift box into my hands. My hands stay empty, but I do hear footsteps, and I smell something like flowers and herbs. Okay, so someone sent me flowers. Doesn't everybody around here get them? Why is that a surprise? And... My ears pick up a new sound. Since when do the doctors around here wear boots? This is Texas, but seriously...

"Okay." Luke's voice vibrates with anticipation. "Open them!"

"Okay, what...oh! Oh, my Lord...holy crumb...I....aaaahhh!"

Standing in front of me, their faces a mixture of smiles and tears, are Gil, Schmidt, Dorothea, Rose, Meg, Monique, Debra Fortney, and Tunney. For a minute, all I can do is gape at them, until I find words again. "I...I'm...I..."

Tunney snaps a picture of me. “I wanted to get a record of the one moment you couldn’t talk.”

“Very funny, Sarge,” I tell him. “But what are y’all doing here?”

“Meg and I came because we planned to,” Monique says. “But when we heard you were kidnapped, well...Luke made arrangements to bring us all here.”

“We thought we were coming to say goodbye.” Meg’s eyes are shiny, and her mascara’s already trickling. “I for one didn’t see how you’d live through that,” she says. “But now there’s been a real live miracle!”

“Meg,” Monique warns. “Cut the drama, okay?”

“It’s cool,” I break in. “She’s right. Wow...this is...I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

This touches off a reunion of epic proportions. I describe how I thought of them to each person, and some respond the way I thought they would—Schmidt with a good-natured one-liner, Dorothea with one of her healing hugs, and Tunney by saying,

“I really regret not getting to kick that guy’s behind. And you were right, Keller. I was never able to admit it until now, but you’re more than a tough chick. You are one incredible gal.”

“Yeah,” Schmidt backs him up. “You put the “whoa” in “woman.”

“And I can make a man out of you, ‘cause I’m a woman, W-O-M-A-N...” Monique blasts out.

“I am woman, hear me roar, in numbers too big to ignore...” Meg squeaks.

“Man, I feel like a woman!” Debra sounds like an alto who ate ice cream before choir practice and is now singing in tenor range.

“Hey, Maria, aren’t you gonna get onto them for being off-key?” Luke teases.

“Not to mention being so cheesy I could make a pizza?” Tunney adds.

“Long story. See...” I explain about not being able to sing.

Gil kisses me. “Understandable. But you’ll get it back. I’ll see to that.”

“We all will,” promises Dorothea.

“I’ll call Claire if you think that would help,” Jasmine offers.

“Forget that.” Tunney’s voice breaks into the concerned suggestions. “Forget all that kinda-maybe-iffy, with-time, call-a-shrink crap—and yes, I said crap. Now is not the time for you people to act like a bunch of nuns.” He stares me in the eye. “Keller, I can understand why singing’s tough on you right now. But that’s why we’ve gotta deal with it. You need your voice back, and on the double. You hear?”

“Yes, sir,” I answer. “I want it back. But how...”

Tunney gives me his “I must be dealing with an alien” look. “Keller, how hard did those clowns hit you? You’re gonna get your voice back same way you got everything else you wanted or needed—just take it!”

I know he’s right, but I’m not sure if I can, or even should, take my voice back. If I want to get technical about it, my voice is what nearly killed me. If I face the fact that I’m through with singing in all its forms, won’t that make my life better? I’ll be able to be the cop Tunney and the others need me to, and then...

Debra slides up to me and grips my hand. “C’mon, Maria. For once, the old crust has a point.”

Everything in me says to refuse, but as usual, one little piece can’t resist the lure of music. What could it hurt—just one more time? But...

“Now?” I ask.

“No, the next time you cheat death,” Tunney says. “Of course now.”

Luke turns to Tunney. “Now, Sergeant, I don’t think...”

“Let Keller do the thinking. If she thinks she can do this, then she can. Go on, Keller.”

“Okay,” Luke consents. “But if you feel your voice giving out, you stop.”

It occurs to me that once again, Luke is trying to control just how much theater can get inside my life. But I’m through with gloom and doom, so I decide to ignore that. Instead, I hum a pitch and launch into “Happily Ever After” from *Once Upon a Mattress*. I start off shaky, and the dryness in my throat does mean I have to sing an octave below normal, but I get through the whole song, and by the end, we all know I can sing.

“Thank you,” I say, half to my friends and half to God.

“That’s what we’re here for,” Tunney says. He gestures to the others. “Come on, troops. Let’s split before some doctor threatens to chase us out for disturbing the peace. Keller, we’ll all keep stopping by. Hope you like the flowers—Dorothea helped us pick ‘em out.”

I nod at the dozens of roses, orchids, snapdragons, snowdrops, and bunches of cinnamon and peppermint. “They’re fabulous, thanks.”

“You go on,” Gil tells the others. “I want to stay for awhile.”

“Okay, but not long,” Luke says.

“So, do they approve? Your parents, I mean,” Gil asks.

“Of you? Yes, definitely. Of other things? I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean, Gumshoe? I...I can still call you that, right?”

“Always. I just...”

“What?”

“It’s...” I take a breath. “Lately, and especially just now, I’ve noticed something. Ever since I’ve been...you know, awake...all I can think about is theater and how much I love it. Especially today...” I tell him about the movie. “Even before I was taken, I had those moments. And yes, I have thought about turning in my gun and badge and pursuing it again. But now I don’t know. Luke still thinks...and what if this is just some kind of reaction to a near-death experience? And what if I tried, but failed?”

Gil shakes his head and squeezes my hand. “You’ve never been afraid to fail.”

“I know, but those times were different. This is...if I failed at theater—again—it would break my heart.”

“But you really want to do it.”

“I don’t know! I never have known. So much of this is wrong...” But then pain sears through my head. A stomach cramp, one of many I’ve been getting lately since I went back on a regular diet, doubles me over at the same time. Gil grabs my hand and presses my call button with his free one. Within minutes, Angelita arrives.

“Maria, what did you...oh.” She rushes over. “Okay. Okay, let’s get some meds into you.” She drops two pills into my hands, and I force myself to hold a cup of Sprite steady to take them.

Angelita nods and speaks to Gil. "I've given her a sedative. If she's still awake in fifteen minutes, buzz me."

"Yes, I'll stay."

The last thing I remember is Gil standing over me, tucking me in. "Don't worry," he says. "God will show you what to do. And just for the record, you're a jewel, with or without the badge."

CHAPTER 19:

“It’s time to start living the life I never led”

-Sister Act

Finally, Dr. Sperry tells me I can go home, and a week or so later, after emotional goodbyes with Luke and Jasmine and a promise to keep in closer touch starting with my wedding, I’m back in Cherry Creek. Monique and Meg have hovered over me like crazed bees, but I can’t say I mind too much.

Before I left, Luke told me that Willis Portman and Chandler Halliday were transferred to San Quentin Penitentiary on multiple first-degree murder charges, not to mention the mistreatment they put their hostages through all those years. Willis has also been charged with my parents’ murder, and Texas cops are still praising me for helping them solve a cold case. Luke says I’ll have to testify at the trial, but not to worry about it now. He and Jasmine and the rest of my family will be with me, and Gil will be coming, too—as my husband.

“Husband.” I kiss Gil’s cheek. He and I are sitting on my porch with cold drinks—tea for me, lemonade for him—and just enjoying being with each other again. “Just a little while longer and I get to call you that.”

“In a little while, just a little while/you and I will be one, two, three four...” Gil intones.

“Yeah. So, how’s the Stage Door doing?”

“We’re great. In fact, I’ve reserved the box for us to go see *Forever Plaid*. And...” Gil trails off.

“What, honey?”

He clears his throat. “I didn’t want to tell you. Not then. But Dad and I...we’ve talked about a lot of things, including you. He still doesn’t like you, but I told him I didn’t care anymore. I’m a grown man and it’s time I started acting like one, which means I not only marry who I want, but I also run my theater and my life my way. He didn’t take it well. In fact, he withdrew financial support.”

“Oh, Gil. Captain. I am so, so sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. Mom’s going to help out for awhile until the new plays start bringing in extra money. I’ve contacted a Christian scriptwriter who’s willing to work with us, and...” He winks. “He’s anxious to meet you. He wants your help and input, too. Meanwhile, I’ve set some boundaries. Dad and I won’t be having much contact until or unless he can respect my adulthood and decisions.”

“Gil...” All I can do is hug him. “Wow. I guess we’ve both done some pretty brave things lately, haven’t we?”

“Yes.” We kiss, and when Gil lets go, he gives me a searching look. “But I have a question, Maria. Have you decided whether you’re going to do the bravest thing of all?”

“Well, you don’t get much braver than surviving a hostage situation with no food, no water, and a bucket for a bathroom,” I say, but I know what he’s talking about, and it pricks my heart. I’ve been praying, but God hasn’t answered. It’s as though He knows I know the answer, so He won’t tell me.

“I want to,” I say for the first time in years. “I want to go back to theater. I want it more than I’ve wanted something in a long, long time. But...” I shake my head. “Gil, I’m scared to death.”

“Maria!” Gil exclaims.

“What?”

He’s laughing. “Maria, do you realize what you just did? Do you realize that’s the first time you’ve ever looked someone in the eye and said ‘I’m scared?’ I’m so proud of you!”

I roll my eyes. “Well, maybe that’s just proof I’m going soft.”

“No!” Gil turns so we’re looking each other in the eye. “Maria, think about this a minute, okay? Your dream was to be a homicide detective. You wanted to help people find justice and to spare them your pain. And you’ve done a wonderful job. But there’s a reason theater has stayed so entrenched in your heart, and I think we both know what it is.”

“I don’t know...”

“Yeah, you do.”

I get up and pace the porch. “No. If Willis and Chandler hadn’t kidnapped me, I wouldn’t be having these thoughts now.”

“Well...” Gil shrugs. “Maybe that’s one reason it happened. God knows the truth about you. He knows you never listen to your heart anymore, not unless someone makes you.”

“C’mon Gil. That ‘listen to your heart’ stuff is just for little girls.”

“And I suppose caring too much is such a juvenile fancy, and learning to trust is just for children in school?”

“Ooh, musical lyrics. Breaking out the big guns now, are we?”

“You could say so. Please, Maria.” Gil gets up, holds my hands, and then uses one to touch the angel pin, then the engagement ring, the police restored to me. “Please think it over. For real this time.”

I’m hoping God will let me off the hook, but no such luck. In the next few weeks, all I can think about is theater. Plus, all the songs on the radio are ones like “Impossible,” “Defying Gravity,” and “The Life I Never Led.” I know the answer, but fortunately or unfortunately, however you look at it, I get too busy planning my wedding to think about it much.

And finally, it’s here. September fifteenth, two PM. Luke and Jasmine are in from Texas, and yes, Luke is going to walk me down the aisle, and dance with me to a sappy, but touching father-daughter song. My bridesmaids are all in various shades of fall colors—Meg in deep cream, Monique in butter yellow, Rose, of course, in red, and Isabella Schmidt in an adorable brown and gold jumper. Dorothea and Jasmine are sharing matron of honor duties—and Kleenexes. Schmidt, as Gil’s best man, looks positively sharp in a tux and—hallelujah—with all of his hair in place. My fellow cops are here, and Tunney has planned a twenty-one gun salute. And Gil’s kids—my children...

Desi and Sophie, my flower girls, look like princesses in their white dresses and the flower wreaths their Nana Talbot put in their hair. Sophie’s is a bit cockeyed, but she doesn’t seem to care, so neither do I. And Clayton...

I catch his eye as he turns from where Schmidt was helping him straighten his boutonniere and set the rings on the pillow. He smiles at me, and I nod back. After I came home from the hospital, he confessed to what Luke thought he would—that he had worried about me more than he had his mom when she was in the hospital.

“We knew Mom was gonna die,” he explained. “There wasn’t anything the doctors could do. But I knew they could do something for you, and I wanted you to get better and be my mom so bad—I betrayed my real mom. I love you more than her!” And he buried his face in my shirt and cried.

“No, Clay,” I told him. “Look at me—no. You love me and your mom equally. I think you just love us in different ways. Just like your dad and I love each other, but I don’t expect him to forget your mom or pretend they never loved each other.”

“But...” Clayton sniffled. “But I’ll hurt Mom’s feelings if I love you too much.”

“No,” I told him. “I had a talk about that with Luke while I was away. See...” I explained about my parents and how being adopted felt at first. “But Luke and Jasmine told me something that helped. They said my parents were in heaven, and they were perfectly happy. They wouldn’t come back if they could because heaven is so wonderful. But they still remembered and cared about me, and they’d want great parents to take care of me when they couldn’t. That’s how your mom feels. I think if she could be here, she’d say she loved you and your sisters, but that since she can’t be here, she trusts me to be your mom, and that it’s okay to love me. You don’t even have to call me Mom if you don’t want to.”

He considered this. “Can I think about what to call you?”

“Sure.”

The object of my thoughts comes over then. “Mr. Brendan says we’ll start soon,” Clayton tells me, his voice edged with excitement. But then his face turns concerned. “Are you okay? Does anything hurt?”

I have to grin. Ever since I got back, Clayton has acted like a miniature Gil, fussing over me constantly and scolding me if he thinks I’ve done too much. I squeeze his shoulder. “I feel great, buddy. But thanks for asking, and thanks for helping take care of me all this time. Now, I’ve

got to get back to the bridal room so Jasmine and my cousins can help me finish getting ready. See you in a few.”

Too soon, the bridal march is echoing through New Life Community Church. I turn to Luke. “You ready?”

He helps me adjust the veil. “Ready, Songbird.”

Because the wedding was scheduled for fall, and because that’s my favorite season, I chose a white wedding dress, but had crimson highlights put in to reflect the rubies in my ring, as well as my signature color. And instead of flowers, I’m wearing a bridal crown of red and yellow leaves, which matches my bouquet. I knew from the rehearsals that I looked pretty good in the outfit, but I’m still unprepared for the shocked, pleased, tear-edged gasps that come from everyone when I start walking down the aisle. I even hear whispers of “gorgeous” and “so wonderful.”

At that, I have another surreal moment, but this one’s good. It’s as if time stopped, and suddenly, all I can see are my shoes. And all I can think about is what’s happened to me in the last three years. This time three years ago, I was a borderline agnostic, fake-cheerful, tough woman who, on the inside, was scared of everything, including and especially herself. And now...now...

Now I’ve got to finish walking. My husband’s waiting.

Within a minute or so, Gil is taking my hand, and Pastor Ken smiles down at us. Before I know it, he’s going through the “do you take” part, and he asks me first.

For a minute, I can’t remember the answer. But one glance at Gil makes me nod. “I do. Definitely.”

Pastor Ken chuckles. “And Gilbert, do you take...”

And that’s when Gil does the most impetuous thing I’ve ever seen.

“Pastor, I’m already committed, in all but the last two words,” he says. “So...I do!” He turns to me. “I do, Maria Keller. Forever.” And without waiting for permission, he throws back my veil and kisses me.

“I love you, my Gumshoe. My Jewel,” he says.

Pastor Ken looks like he just won the lottery. “Well, can’t beat that,” he says. “Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert Josiah Montgomery!”

The reception is held at the Stage Door, complete with a potluck of everyone’s favorite foods. The party is filled with all the general wedding fun—dancing, toasts, great conversation, and excellent music—but no one expects what happens halfway through, when Adams strides to the front.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he says when we’re all quiet, “I have an announcement. I promised Keller—I mean, Montgomery—that I had a surprise for when she got back. Well, here it is. I wish the Montgomerys the greatest marriage in Cherry Creek. I love you guys.”

Of course, we all converge then, wanting to know how Adams made that announcement without a trace of a stammer. He laughs and explains,

“Drama classes. I...well, when I heard everything Keller...I mean...”

“Just call me Maria,” I break in.

“Okay,” Adams agrees. “When I heard about Maria’s personal life and everything, I decided it was stupid to let a little old stutter run my life as long as it has. So I asked Gil for help, but made him promise not to tell her. I still trip over words, but not nearly as much.”

“I agree,” Greenwood says. “And Maria—Diane and I are dating regularly now. It’s mostly because of you.”

“Yeah,” Tunney agrees. “You’re a pretty special lady, Maria Montgomery. You’re worthy of a hundred forty-four gun salute, but I didn’t wanna get sued over busted eardrums.”

I have to laugh. “You’re never gonna change, are you, Sarge?”

“You got a problem with that?”

“Not at all.”

A couple hours later, the party’s winding down. Gil and I have danced our legs off, I’ve been running all over soaking up good wishes, and my still-recovering limbs are feeling it, so Gil has insisted I sit down and have some cake. At one point, Desi climbs in my lap and falls asleep there. I’m planning to take her into a quieter room, but then Schmidt signals me from near the

door. I carefully pass my youngest daughter off to her Nana and cross the room to meet my partner.

“What’s up?” I ask. “Somebody trying to lift the bouquet?”

He laughs. “No. I just wanted to say congratulations. Dorothea and I wanted this for you almost from day one. And...” He pauses. “Maria—we want to see you truly, one-hundred percent happy. So I wondered...did going by your real name today mean you’re headed back to theater?”

I try not to flinch at the mention of the question I hate. “I’m not completely sure yet. I’m being yanked in two different directions. I don’t know what to do.”

“You will. And no matter what you decide, I’m behind you. I’ll always be around if you need me to back you up—or even hurt somebody.” He laughs. “But if you do leave, I’ll miss you something awful. You’re the best partner I ever had.”

“Right back at ya. But if I do go back, I’ll look forward to just being your friend. Then again, what would we do if we couldn’t chase down perps together, huh?”

“Who knows? Maybe you’ll finally let me teach you to use a BlackBerry.”

“I’d rather watch a chick flick marathon.”

My partner cracks up. “I pity the theater industry. When you get back in, you’re gonna blow them out of the water.” He gives me a chaste peck on the cheek. “Love you, sis.”

“Yeah, you, too.”

“Oh, and I’m supposed to say, Luke wants to see you.” He laughs when he sees my face. “Gil’s with him, so it can’t be that bad. C’mon, partner, don’t chicken out on me now.”

Gil sends me a thumbs-up, but that still doesn’t calm my heart when I face Luke. Well, if Gil can be a man, I guess I can woman up one more time. “Luke, I just wanted to say...”

“Hush,” he says. “It’s my turn to talk. Sit down.” He waits for me to do so and takes my hand. “Maria, I owe you an apology. A big one. I have never accepted you as you are, on many levels. I thought I was protecting you, but I was just hurting you. And when you went missing, I—no, that’s not true,” he backs up. “I’ve been fighting God on this for a long time. But not now. I’m like you—not good at big speeches. So I’m just going to say one thing. I love you so much I don’t

have room for it all, even in this body.” He pats a belly that has gotten a little bigger since I last saw him in college. “And as part of that love, it’s time to love all of you. So no matter what you’re carrying, script or gun, and no matter what you do or don’t do, did or didn’t do, I approve. I accept. I don’t want any other daughter but you.”

I can’t help it. I’m bawling my perfectly-made-up face right off. “L-Luke,” I finally manage. “Luke...”

He holds me. “I know. We both do.” He pulls Gil into our hug. “Gil may have claimed a jewel, but you’re my songbird. Always.”

“Hello, Mrs. Montgomery.”

“Hi, Mr. Montgomery,” I say from the honeymoon suite in our hotel. I pat the bed, where I’ve been sitting in a white nightgown trimmed with red ribbons, my hair in Gil’s favorite style, splashed with orchid perfume. “C’mon up.”

Gil does so and takes my hand. “I want you to know,” he says, “that this is our wedding night, but that does not equal pressure. I will be as gentle as possible. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, I want you to tell me, and we will stop. Deal?”

I nod. “Deal. But Gil—Captain—I am your wife now. And I want you to have all of me. Right now.”

“Okay. But would you like to leave the lights off for now?”

“Yes, please.” I giggle. “As if I couldn’t find you in the dark, anyway.”

“Oh, feeling a little confident, are we? Well...” Gil leaps off the bed and runs, and I chase after him. Several minutes later, we collapse into the darkness. And then I’m ready. Love takes over, and Gil and I lose ourselves in each other.

About two months later, my life is almost normal again. Gil and I still can’t get enough of each other, and I mean that in every sense of the word. We’re doing pretty much what we always did—balancing each other out. I make plans, he makes sure they get pulled off. I write the budget, he makes sure we stick to it. He makes sure the kids get their homework done, eat their

veggies, and behave in church. I quiz them in creative ways, do voices for Bible stories, and slip an extra cookie under the table if I think it'll help fix a scraped knee or bruised heart.

To my relief, the kids have made a fairly easy transition from seeing me as "Miss Maria" to accepting me as their stepmom. The first time I had to discipline them for getting into such a big fight that they threw toys at each other, they looked absolutely floored. Sophie eyed me with suspicion and fear, asking if they'd get spanked. I said no, but assured them that yes, I expected the kids to apologize to each other, clean up the mess, and work on homework quietly with no backtalk. Worked like the proverbial charm.

Today, a Saturday in early November, I've gotten up early to go for a run. I've not worked up to going out alone for that yet, but the treadmill is a pretty good substitute. I'm almost through when I hear Clayton's footsteps. "Hi," he says without adding to the greeting. He's still stuck on what to call me, even though the girls have settled on "Mama," explaining that since Mommy is in Heaven, they want to have somebody who has almost the same name.

"Hey, bud." I check the treadmill's built-in clock. "You're up early. It's not even time for cartoons yet."

He digs his toe into the carpet. "I had a bad dream."

I slow down, but resist the urge to jump off the machine. "Oh, I'm sorry. Wanna talk about it?"

Clayton keeps his eyes down. "Willis and Chandler came back. I heard on the news how Willis broke out of jail before."

"Ah. Come here, Clay." I sit on the floor with him. "I've worried about that too, but there's no way they can get out this time. San Quentin is the biggest, most well-protected prison in Texas, and your Papa Luke is personally keeping an eye on them. Plus, there was a lot of physical evidence, and that'll help get them locked up for good."

"I know. But I still get scared. I mean, what happens when you go back to work? What if somebody else comes after you?"

“That won’t happen,” I say with confidence. Tunney has told me he’s seriously considering moving me to desk duty, at least until the hoopla dies down. That is, if I decide to come back, which I can’t seem to do for sure.

Clayton squeezes my hand. “Are you still thinking about coming back to work with Dad? ‘Cause if it’s really what you want, why not do it?”

I squeeze back. “It’s hard to explain, sport.”

“Can you try?”

“Okay. Theater is a wonderful career, but some people don’t think so. They believe all theater is evil, because some plays have sin in them.”

“Like dirty words and people hurting each other.”

“That’s right. Now, Dad and I don’t produce plays like that because we want to do theater God’s way. But that doesn’t change the way these people feel. They think that because of people like Willis—people who were actors and got into stuff like drugs, stealing cars, and killing people—that only criminals do what we do. And that’s hard for me to hear, Clay. It’s hard for me to deal with, because when I was a little girl, people talked about my parents like that. They said Mama and Daddy were sinful and deserved to die—that they didn’t even go to Heaven. And they said I was sinful, too. That all I cared about was playing pretend, and I’d never do anything to make anyone’s life better.”

Clayton looks ready to fight. “But that’s not true! You make everybody’s life better. And when you’re in the plays, or sing at church and stuff, it’s so good. My Sunday school teacher said Jesus must love your voice. You should listen to Him, not a bunch of people who don’t know what they’re talking about.”

I feel myself grin. “I’ll try to remember that. Now, is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yeah. Can I have some pancakes? I’m starving.”

I laugh. In the last two months, I’ve discovered that giving Clayton Montgomery food has ensured me a friend for life. “Coming right up. Plain or apple cinnamon?”

“Plain. Last time you made apple cinnamon, you put peelings in ‘cause you were singing a church song and waving your hands around like a crazy lady.”

“Oh, yeah? Let me show you what else these hands can do, buster.” I chase after Clayton, wiggling my fingers, and he takes off shrieking “crazy lady” and laughing. Eventually, I get hold of him and attack his feet. We’re still laughing when Gil and the girls come down.

Well, I do know one thing. Spending the morning with my family sure beats spending it in the station.

A few Saturdays later, I experience the exact opposite. The kids aren’t with me, but Luke, Jasmine, Miss Piper, and Gil are. The only catch is, I can’t see them unless I turn around. That’s because I’m in the first district court of Angel’s Crossing, in the plaintiff chair, for Willis and Chandler’s trial.

I’ve tried to tell myself I’ll be okay because it’s an open and shut case. Isn’t that what Luke and everybody else said? There’s no way the judge can see my two assailants as anything but guiltier than homemade sin. And yet, the justice system has failed so many times...

But God never does. I pray one more time, just moments before Captain McCready and a couple of the burliest cops I’ve ever seen walk in, leading my parents’ murderer and his grandson. If I were a saint, I’d feel bad for them, but their shackles give me a huge dose of security.

“All rise!” the bailiff calls out. “The first district court of Angel’s Crossing is now in session in the matter of the state of Texas vs. Halliday and Portman, the Honorable Judge Harrison Thorpe presiding.”

Judge Thorpe takes the bench. “Please be seated. Prosecution, you may begin your opening statement.”

At that point, it seems like I go deaf. I don’t hear or see anything except the judge’s face. I keep searching it for clues to what he might be thinking. Despite his name, he reminds me of the gentle, clean-cut dad from *Full House*—is that good or bad? Will he think the prosecution only has the argument of a hysterical woman to back itself up? How good, really, is the defense attorney sitting over there? What if...

Easy, Maria. The truth will set you free.

I almost giggle at that. Good grief, I'm more scared now than I was at the bail hearing two years ago, when I was on the defendant's side of the room. I hear myself pulling in deep breaths. Thank goodness lawyers go on and on with those arguments of theirs—

"Prosecution, please call your first witness."

District attorney Zach Linwood is ready for this—so ready he looks like he's about to bust with excitement. I send up a prayer thanking God that Linwood listened to my plea not to be put on the stand first. Instead, he calls family members of other victims, a few Houston cops, including Luke and Officer Neely, who rescued me, a former employer of Chandler's who fired him because of violent tendencies on the job, and finally, Dr. Sperry.

"Yes," she says when Linwood asks about me, "I was Maria's attending physician, and I can tell you she was in terrible shape when they brought her in. I have her file, X-rays, and some photographs right here."

"Exhibit D, ladies and gentlemen of the jury," Linwood says, holding up each piece of the file. He's been showing grisly physical evidence all morning, but this is almost too much. Luke puts his arm around me, and I have to lean against his chest.

"Do you believe that Maria's physical injuries would have killed her?" Linwood asks, facing the jury the whole time.

Dr. Sperry stares straight ahead. "She had significant blood loss, nearly to the point that she needed transfusions. Even now, she is approximately ten pounds underweight for her height. And although her attackers appeared to have spared Maria crippling injuries, I have no doubt that had she not been rescued, and had the men not made an attempt on her life, dehydration alone would have killed that woman within twelve hours."

"Thank you, Doctor Sperry." Linwood nods to the defense attorney. "Your witness, counsel."

Willis certainly knows where to find a smooth lawyer, which I was afraid of. The attorney's good. He makes it sound as if, had I not "sassed" Willis, he would've let me have food and water, and as if Dr. Sperry made my injuries sound worse than they were because she's a woman and we stick together. Fortunately, Linwood gets some of what he says stricken from the record, but

when I hear him call me to the stand, I still have to make myself go up there. I almost ask to hold onto the Bible after they swear me in.

The funny thing is I don't remember most of the questions or my answers, because the more Linwood talks, the more I realize I can't keep my eyes off Willis. This is the man who took my parents from me. He destroyed my childhood and taught me to be terrified of men. He took every shred of physical dignity, emotional support, and free will I had, and he tried to murder me. But right now, I don't feel angry. I don't feel the least bit sorry for him, either, it's just...

"Mrs. Montgomery." Linwood's voice pushes me back into the courtroom. "You claim that Willis Portman killed your biological parents. During your time as hostage, did he say or do anything to prove that he was interested in a legacy killing, as it were?"

I put my hand against my forehead. He had said something, the night before he tried to drown me, but... The memory comes back, and I know what to say.

"Yes. He confessed to me that he did kill them. As for his motive to kill me, he said it was because he hated me. He hated kids—blamed a child he worked with in a play one time for getting him hooked on morphine, and later, other drugs. But the main reason, Willis said, was because my parents...broke the rules. He didn't feel that they...gave him the respect he...felt he deserved. And..."

At that second, I feel something different. I've recovered really well over the past two months, but my body's still weak. My voice hasn't been completely steady during the questioning, either. But right now, I feel as if I've just swallowed a whole glass of strength. The lights in the courtroom seem brighter, and I think I can feel Heaven rooting for me, with Mama and Daddy in the front row. I stare straight at Willis and the grandson who convinced me he loved me.

"Maybe my parents did make some bad decisions," I say. "Maybe they should've checked Willis out more, or given him a chance onstage. But no matter what they should've done, they didn't deserve to be killed, and I didn't deserve to lose them. Because that theater—the theater industry in general—it belongs to people like me and my family, who want to use it the right way. It does not and never will belong to people like Chandler Halliday and Willis Portman."

Linwood steps aside. "Your witness, counsel."

But the defense attorney just stares at me. “Uh...no further questions. Mrs. Montgomery, you may step down.”

Two weeks later, I’m back in Cherry Creek. Death Row has two new inmates, and the Stage Door has a brand new actress. Well, not brand new, but I’ve been gone so long it feels as if I could be. And tonight, Gil and I are starring in *The Sound of Music*. Yeah, that’s right—I’ve finally started healing enough to be able to play my namesake, and tonight, Gil’s gonna be my Captain for real.

“You decent?” I hear him ask while knocking on the door of my dressing room.

I straighten my wimple. “Yeah, come on in.”

Gil enters, armed with a bouquet of roses. “For my favorite actress.” He holds and kisses me. “You almost ready to go out there? Any butterflies?”

“A few, but I’ll be okay once I start singing.”

Gil strokes my cheek, including the scar hidden under makeup. “I’m so happy to have you back, Gumshoe. In more ways than one.”

“I’m just as happy to be back. I could be in the chorus line and I’d be thrilled.”

Gil laughs. “With your talent, you’ll never see chorus line duty, baby. Which reminds me, the Civic Theater in Asheville called. They insist that you come and help with their children’s production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*—and appear as the narrator. And they hinted that if you do as good a job as they know you will, it won’t be the last time the Stage Door will have to loan you out.”

“Wow.” I match Gil’s grin. “I knew I was supposed to come back to theater, but I never dreamed...”

He winks. “You better get used to it, then.”

“Five minutes,” warns Caleb, the AD, from outside.

“We should get going,” I say.

“Not yet.” Gil purposely puts my wimple askew. “Now, that’s the real Maria. And...” He pulls me to his chest for a long kiss.

“Thanks for giving me one of my favorite things,” I tease him. “And that goes for you, too,”
I direct at the ceiling, with reverence. “Thank you.”

I take Gil’s hand, and we walk backstage.

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