

Chapter 1

Stacey

“Thank goodness it’s *finally* Friday. Halle-freakin’-lujah!”

Running my hands across the soft sheets, I think about the stack of documents in my inbox at work and pull the covers over my head. I dread going into work today. The thought of the Powerball ticket I bought yesterday puts a smile on my face. *What if I get all six numbers?* I come up for air, laughing out loud imagining myself telling my boss what I *really* think about him. The laughter subsides when reality sets in. I’d have a better chance at becoming the first woman president of the United States than winning the lottery.

I sit up and move from side-to-side, thinking about what a sweetheart Jessica is for letting me crash in her master suite. She’s more than a best friend—she’s the sister I’ve always wanted and has the life I’ve always dreamed of—blond, rich, and thin—talk about winning the lottery. She was right. Sleeping in her king-size bed was like swimming in melted butter. The soreness is gone. Actually, I slept like a rock last night. Hopefully, my back spasms won’t return. They’ve been flaring up all week, and I’m tired of popping pain pills. Matt would have a fit if he knew

how many I've downed this week. He thinks I'm having back problems because of the extra ten pounds I've put on, but I know that has nothing to do with it. It's because I sit all day at work.

I get out of bed and my eyes shift to the clock on the cherry wood dresser. I wonder why Jessica didn't wake me at 6:00 like I had asked. Staring at the seven and two zeros, I'm glad I woke up when I did. I turn toward the window and squint against the sun's rays spilling through the partially open custom shutters. It's going to be another hot July in the City of Angels. I snatch the squishy out of my hair and it falls just past my shoulders. If I skip washing it, I might make it to work on time.

I walk to the double doors and press them open. "Jess, are you up?" I yell, meandering through the endless hallway toward the guest bedroom. The silence gives me pause. I stop at the nursery. An early riser, maybe she decided to decorate this morning and lost track of time. "Jess, you in here?" I ask, opening the door to the pink pastel room that's outfitted with an enormous pink crib and matching dresser. A shelf on the wall is lined with stuffed animals. Rolls of wallpaper and a can of paint sit on the hardwood floor, but there's no sign of Jessica. Then I remember her telling me she was going to wait up for Grant's call. London's eight hours ahead of us, and he was going to touch base with her when he landed. That would have been 2:00 in the morning our time. Poor thing's probably knocked out.

I make a beeline for the guest bedroom and notice the door's ajar. Peeking in, I get a glimpse of her long blond locks strewn over the pillow and decide to let her sleep. Just as I'm about to close the door, my eyes lock onto my favorite casual Friday outfit draped over the small chair next to the window. Dang. I creep in, hoping not to wake her. Reaching for my jeans and sweatshirt, I notice specs of red on the white wall she's facing. A tingling feeling shoots through

my body and I feel weak in the knees. A twinge of sadness washes over me. The sunlit room is suffocating.

“Jess?” I say, walking around the full-size bed. My stomach lurches and bile spills from my mouth onto the Berber carpet. My eyes burn and I feel tears on my cheeks before I realize I’m crying. I back away from her, trembling, imagining the horror she must have experienced. Her eyes stare vacantly, unseeing. Her throat’s ripped open, and a large pool of congealed blood lies beneath her. There’s blood on the side of the bed and floor. Shrill ear-bursting screams send me tumbling head first over the chair onto my butt. It takes me a moment to recognize those sounds as my own. I bolt out of the room, tripping over my feet, choking, barely able to breathe.

“Help! Somebody help,” I holler, clutching my nightgown, stumbling down the spiral staircase. *What if the killer is still inside the house?* Loud banging on the front door snaps me out of my thoughts.

“*Senora* James, let me in. I can’t find my key. Let me in, *por favor*.”

“Jesus, oh my God,” I say, running to the foyer, flinging the front door open.

“Stacey, what’s wrong? I thought you were Jessica.”

“Jessica...Jessica...she...we have to call the police, Rosa.”

“The *policia*?”

“Yes, the police— 911,” I say sobbing, snatching the phone out of her hand.

Chapter 2

Rachel

“Captain, I know what you’re going to say. So please don’t say it. I’ve given the department twenty-five good years. I was a baby when I joined the force—wet behind the ears, green, anxious, ready to take on the world of crime. I gave it my all. I can’t do it anymore. I’m done. I really am. Put-a-fork-in-me done.”

Standing at the sink in my bathroom, I stare at my reflection in the mirror and shake my head. What a load of crap. I don’t even believe what I’m saying. How in the hell do I expect the captain to buy it? Rachel Storme, you’re a fake and a fraud. I splash water on my face and shake it off—this need to walk away from it all. It’s not a great time for the good guys. Every day it seems like one of us is going viral beating somebody’s ass or worse, snuffing somebody out. Are we justified? That depends on whose side you’re on. I don’t know what I’d do if I was a cop on the beat.

The phone rings, and I let the bath towel I have gathered around my middle-aged body drop to the floor. I grab the terrycloth robe from behind the bathroom door, making a mental note

to start doing weights again. My thighs are in need of some serious tightening up. I enter my bedroom that doubles as an office.

“Storme here. What’s up?” I ask, putting the phone on speaker while I get dressed.

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

“Herb, why is it that since I’ve been on leave, we talk more now than we did when I was working?”

“I miss you, Storme.”

“I’ve only been gone two months.”

“Two and a half months, but it seems like years.”

“Right. You miss driving me crazy. I appreciate you checking on me, but I’m trying to get dressed and out of the house right now.”

“Aren’t you getting tired of those matinee movies, hanging out at Starbucks all day, watching nannies push babies in expensive strollers? And even you have to be tired of planting flowers, Storme.”

“Have you been following me?”

“No, I just know you.”

“You don’t know anything.”

“I know you were born to be a cop and that you’re one of the best damn detectives on the force right now.”

“I’m not on the force right now. I’m on leave, and when I get back, I’m going to be letting the captain know I want to be on permanent leave.”

“You don’t mean that, Storme.”

“Bye, Herb.”

“Wait. Don’t go. I need you to do something.”

“What?”

“You got your widescreen on?”

“No. Why?”

“Murder in Buderwood Hills.”

“Bye,” I say, about to hang up the phone.

“Just turn to the local news. Please. Hurry. Pretty please!”

Gritting my teeth, I grab the remote off of the stack of papers and books on the nightstand, turn on the TV, and a Maxi-Pad commercial sends my eyes rolling back in my head. Been there and don’t do that anymore. But on the other hand, these hot flashes are driving me crazy. I switch the channel to the local news and then click on the fan that sits on the dresser.

“You still there, Herb?”

“Yes ma’am,” he says, sounding more like a rookie than a supervisor.

I study the face of the pretty blonde that fills the screen. Big blue eyes, pouty lips, and hair for days. I sort through my mental rolodex of murder cases in and outside the area that involve pretty blondes. There once was a serial killer who had a thing for redheads. Momentarily in deep thought, I tune out the reporter’s voice, but certain words and phrases stick—*beheaded*, *twenty-nine-year-old socialite*. She looks closer to twenty than thirty. Her name superimposed over the photo gets my full attention, and at the sight of it, I let out a small gasp.

“Herb, you see that?”

“Yep. Jessica James. Wife of Grant James—the son of oil tycoon and philanthropist, Randolph James. Mother’s Rebecca James. When I got word about the case, you were the first person I thought of, Storme. But then again, I know you’re on leave, so—”

“So you need to reach out to Carlos or Victor. Both are fine detectives. I can’t help you.”

“I need you, Storme.”

“What don’t you understand about me putting my all into the Parker case only to see it go up in flames?”

“That wasn’t your first rodeo, Storme. You’ve seen worse get away.”

“It was the nail and the last straw.”

“Are you open to compromising?”

“It depends,” I say, slipping on a pair of loose-fitting pants.

“I’m getting ready to leave the house, and I’m heading to the James Estate. Meet me there.”

“But—”

“I just need moral support and to see those pretty green eyes of yours.”

“Herb—”

“Storme, a young woman’s head was nearly chopped off, and not by some terrorist group, but by a homicidal maniac right in our own backyard. This is a high profile case. The media’s all over it. I’m going to have my hands full. Storme, are you there?”

“Yes.”

“Burt and his CSI team are already on the premises. I told them to be extra careful with the evidence.”

“Good for you.”

“We got this, Storme. Please don’t tell me no.”

“This is the third case you’ve tried to get me to work on since I’ve been on leave. Why should I say yes to this one?”

“I dunno...three’s the charm?”

I try not to laugh at the corny cliché but I fail.

“Do the giggles mean it’s a yes?”

“I don’t giggle. And no, it’s not a yes.”

“Just meet me there. I need you to hold my hand.”

“Okay...okay, I’ll meet you there, but it’s going to be a minute. I need to stop by the station to get clearance,” I say, buttoning my blouse, my fingers trembling, thinking about the monster who raped the elderly woman on her way to Bible study and how he’s out there somewhere probably attacking someone else’s grandmother, all because evidence was compromised.

“I’m giving you clearance, and I’ve already told the captain I was going to reach out to you.”

“How’d you know I’d come?”

“I didn’t.”

“You’re something else, Herb.” I narrow my eyes and clench my jaw, thinking about backing out.

“You okay, Storme?”

“I’m fine,” I say, strapping on my revolver belt.

“You know what that means?”

“What?”

“Frustrated, insecure, neurotic, and emotional.”

“Go to hell, Herb.”

“I’ll text you the address,” he says through laughter.

I click the phone and TV off, slip on my flats, and run my fingers through my short salt and pepper layered Bob. Herb's always teasing me about my hair. Says I could pass for forty-five if I got a dye job. What's the point? All it's going to do is turn gray again, and I'm not in the mood, nor do I have time to chase gray hairs above or below. Looking ten years younger isn't worth it. Twenty years, I might reconsider.

My gaze shifts to my gun and badge on the dresser next to my laptop. I'm so confused about my life right now. I've been hiding behind my gun and badge for so long; I don't know how to function in the real world. I grab them both, turn off the fan, feed my two goldfish, and then hightail it to Buderwood Hills, feeling totally spineless.

#

Pulling into the cobblestone driveway, I blow my horn a few times hoping the vultures, I mean reporters running after my Prius get a clue and stay behind the yellow crime scene tape. I nod at the uniformed police officers scrambling about with shock plastered to their rookie faces. I wonder which one was the first to get a glimpse of the body and if they were a virgin. I remember my first time. You never forget your first corpse. I was sick for days. It was a domestic violence case. The husband found out his wife was screwing his best friend. Why not just divorce her? I guess he felt a bullet in her head was the easier softer way.

I park next to the van from the forensics lab and then turn my attention to Herb who's tapping on my passenger-side window. Sometimes I ponder what it would be like to be Herb for a week—home-cooked meals, bubble baths, massages, jazz clubs on Saturdays, church on Sunday, doting children and grandchildren. Clarice, his wife of thirty years, treats him like a king. He grins, revealing his signature gapped-teeth.

I get focused and emerge from the car. I'm greeted by a wave of heat that reminds me to hydrate today. The grounds are breathtaking, typical for the houses in Buderwood Hills—a city in Los Angeles county adjacent to its more famous neighbor—Beverly Hills. Evergreens, purple, pink, and reddish orange azaleas, and an assortment of other expensive shrubs and colorful plants line the perimeter of the mini-mansion. At the center of the circular driveway is a fountain flanked by boxwood hedge. The dizzying deep green maze and foliage create a welcoming fragrant ambiance that belies the stench of death inside.

“What’s cracking, boss?” I ask, moving in for a quick hug. I get a whiff of Herb’s cologne and sniff.

“You like?”

“It’s not for me to like, Herb.”

“Clarice bought it for me.”

“Lucky you. How’s she doing?”

“Great. Busy with the grandkids. How are Mickey and Minnie?”

“Fabulous. You’d be proud of me. I fed them before I left the house.”

He applauds and then passes his Hulk-size hand over his shoe-black dreadlocks that he keeps pulled back with a headband. He juts his dimpled chin toward the entrance to the house, and I follow him. Herb and I exchange a knowing look when we reach the open door. I go ahead of him. Tilting my head back, I take in the vaulted ceilings and tower windows, wondering how much a joint like this goes for. It’s got to be over ten-thousand square feet. The floor in the foyer is marble and not the cheap stuff. A tall bespectacled man with a potbelly approaches us. My gaze moves from his knocked knees to his crimson face. He wipes his brow with a dingy handkerchief and then stuffs it inside his back pocket.

“What’s up, Burt?” Herb asks.

“Too much. It’s real ugly,” he says, glancing at me. “Hey, Storme. Surprised, but glad you’re here.”

“Just visiting,” I say, shaking my head. It never ceases to amaze me how much men gossip. “Who’s in charge?”

“Officer Newson Green.”

I raise my brow.

“Don’t let the name throw you, Storme. He’s from LAPD 77th Street Division. Ten years on the force.”

Rookie.

Burt looks over his droopy shoulder and beckons for the officer. The bulky, baby-faced cop saunters over, his eyes roaming. “Newson, this is Detective Herb Jones and Detective Rachel Storme.”

“Nice to meet you. Your reputations precede you.”

“I like this kid,” Herb says, chuckling. He switches gears and says, “Give us a rundown.” Crossing his hairy arms across his barrel chest, he stares at the cop pointedly.

I focus on the officer, too, but not before giving the CSI team a gander while they parade up and down the spiral staircase. My eyes scan the wall covered in family photos. The one that stands out features Grant in a tux and Jessica in a wedding gown. They both married up—Grant got someone with looks and Jessica nabbed a guy with money. Nonetheless, all the photos are exquisite. I grab my glasses from my pouch to get a better look. On each one *S. Sullivan* can be seen at the bottom near the corner of the frame.

“A call was made to 911 at 7:12 this morning.”

“By whom?” I ask, facing forward.

“Stacey Sullivan.”

Hmm. S. Sullivan. Stacey Sullivan?

“And who’s Stacey Sullivan?” Herb asks.

“The best friend.”

“Where is she?” Herb asks.

“In the living room.”

“Alone?” I ask, hoping the answer’s no.

“No, there’s an officer in there with her.”

“Good,” Herb and I say at the same time.

“Hey guys, I’m going to get back with the team,” Burt says, leaving.

We barely acknowledge his departure while we stay fixated on the rookie. “Has her family been contacted?” I ask, pocketing my specs.

“The husband’s on a business trip and is scheduled to come home immediately. The deceased has an older sister who takes care of their mother. According to Stacey, the deceased is estranged from the sister. The mother lives with the sister.”

“What about Grant’s parents?” Herb asks.

“We made contact with their personal assistant. She said they would be here shortly. That was more than two hours ago.”

Herb and I share curious looks. I’m wondering if he’s thinking what I’m thinking. We’ve worked with each other for twenty years, so the likelihood that we are is pretty good. Like a lot of families, this one apparently has its share of dysfunction.

“What did Stacey tell the 911 operator?” I ask.

“After the operator was able to calm her down she said she found her friend with her throat cut and that she was still in the house with the maid.”

“What time did you get here?” I ask.

“Seven thirty. Would you like me to take you to see the body?”

“We got it from here,” Herb says.

“Let me know if I can be of any further help.”

“Will do,” Herb says, heading toward the staircase.

I reluctantly follow him. When we get there, I grip the rail and swallow hard, knowing that viewing the body could be a major game changer.

Chapter 3

Stacey

Sitting on Jessica's favorite sofa, I cuddle the box of tissue the female officer found in the guest bathroom. I've wiped my nose so much it feels like it's going to fall off. I wouldn't mind if it did. I want to be punished. While my dearest friend in the world was being savagely murdered, I was asleep. *How did I sleep through that?* I should have been there for her. Why her and who would do this? A cascade of tears falls from my eyes. I grab tissue out of the box and dab at my reddened face.

"It's going to be okay, *chica*," Rosa says, running toward me. She sits next to me and passes her calloused hand over my back.

I look into her sad brown eyes and shake my head. "It's not going to be okay. Jessica's dead, Rosa. Why? She was the nicest person in the world."

Rosa coughs and blinks back tears. She pries the box of tissue out of my hand, takes a few, and sets the box on the coffee table that's littered with empty water bottles, used tissue, half-eaten fruit, and mangled paper cups. The lady cop, standing guard at the entrance to the living room, makes a loud throaty sound. I shoot daggers at her with my swollen red-rimmed

eyes, certain she's annoyed that she's been assigned to babysit Rosa and me. She folds her arms across her flat chest and shifts her weight from one foot to the other. She gives us a strained smile with her pencil thin lips and rubs her gray eyes. "The detectives should be here soon," she says, nodding, as if she's trying to convince herself of the latter.

Rosa takes hold of the silver cross hanging from her thick neck, shuts her eyes, and recites the Holy Rosary. A devout Catholic, she's worked for Grant for years, before Jessica came into his life. Once she met Jessica, she took to her immediately—*who wouldn't*, I think to myself while I gaze at the wedding photo over the mantel. Jessica was in love with the photo because of the pose I suggested—Grant planting a soft kiss on her hand while peering up at her. Jessica wearing a wreath of snowdrops, slightly red in the face, eyes glistening with the hope of a bright future. She loved the picture so much she had it put in almost every room in the house. They are... were the perfect couple. The three of us jump at the sound of loud chimes.

"It's the grandfather clock in the library," I say, my eyes shifting from the officer to Rosa. The cop glances at her watch. Rosa nods knowingly and gives her phone a gander. "What time do you have?" I ask.

"It's ten," they say.

Ten? I need to call Matt again. Where is he? He should be at the rehab center by now. I've called several times. Maybe this time I'll leave a message. On second thought, I better not. This news is going to devastate Matt. He loves...loved her as much as I do...did. I hate this, not knowing what's appropriate—present or past tense. It's too soon to speak about Jessica as though she's no longer here. When my father died, my mother said his spirit would always be with us. Whether that's true or not, I don't know. I've never been religious. Before today I would have categorized myself as agnostic. Now I'm leaning toward atheist. I can't believe that if God

existed, he would let something like this happen. And where is everybody? I know Jessica and Georgette barely spoke, but Jessica's dead now. That has to count for something. She could at least bring her mother by. She probably hasn't even told her Jessica's gone. Who does that? I'm not surprised Grant's parents have yet to show. There's no secret Jessica wasn't on their short list of marital prospects for Grant. "Ugh," I say, pressing on my head. All this stinky-thinking, as Matt would say, is making me batty.

"Officer, excuse me; I need to make another call. Is it okay if I use the house phone?"

"No, please don't touch the phone."

"*Chica*, you can use my phone again. It's okay."

"Thanks, Rosa. Mine is upstairs and I can't go up there."

"It's okay. Use the phone." With a shaky smile, she thrusts it toward me.

I take the phone and press down on the screen. "It's locked, Rosa."

"*Lo siento*," she says, taking it out of my hand.

"No need to apologize." Now nervous about talking to Matt, I wring my hands until they're beet red.

"The number's still here," she says.

Before she has a chance to touch the digits, *Matt Sullivan* flashes across the screen. We share surprised looks. Rosa answers and then puts the call on speaker.

"*Hola, Senor Sullivan.*"

"Who is this? I've gotten several missed calls from this number."

I part my quavering lips to answer him, but Rosa jumps in before I can speak.

"It's Rosa Martinez. I work for Grant and Jessica."

“Right, Rosa...what’s going on? Have you seen Stacey? I have a bunch of messages from the law firm she works at. She didn’t show up to work today.”

Rosa hands me the phone and I say, “Matt, I’m here.” There’s silence. “Matt? Matt?”

“Who is this?”

“It’s me. *Your wife*, Stacey.”

“Stacey? Oh...uh...you sound different.”

“I’ve been crying. My voice is raspy.”

“Crying about what?”

“Where’ve you been? I’ve been trying to reach you,” I say, stalling.

“I’ve been in outside meetings all morning. My phone was in the office. When I got back, I saw a bunch of missed calls from this number, and I had messages from Dave wanting to know why you weren’t at work today. And now I’m calling. Where’s your phone and where are you?”

“I’m still at Jess and Grant’s house.” There’s more silence. “Matt, are you there? What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Why didn’t you go to work?”

“Matt...Matt...there’s been an accident...I mean...Matt, Jessica has been murdered. Did you hear me?”

“What do you mean murdered?”

“Just what I said. The police are here and everything. I need you to come here. I’m scared.”

“I’m in the area. I’ll be there in a few minutes,” he says, his voice cracking.

I hand Rosa her phone and press down on my stomach that’s now in knots. A sick feeling overcomes me, thinking about how Matt never asked how I was. He didn’t even bother to say he

loved me. I should be used to it by now. Jessica called it a rough patch, the seven-year itch. Whatever it's called, I'm tired of it. *Life is too...* "Rosa, how are you holding up?"

"Don't you worry about me, *chica*. I prayed for you. You have to be strong for Jessica. She loved you. She always would tell me what a talented photographer you are. It's true. You have something special. You are special. You should quit that typing job and follow your dreams. Tomorrow isn't promised to any of us."

"No, Rosa, I'm not special. I failed Jessica. I let her get killed on my watch."

"Stop that. It's not your fault. Jessica needs you now. She needs you to get her justice."

"The police will do that," I say, wondering where the detectives are.

"But you can help. They will need your help."

"I'll screw things up, Rosa. I have to stay out of it."

"Stop putting yourself down. You do that a lot. It's no good to do that. You have to be confident."

"I know you mean well, but right now I don't want to talk about me," I say, rising.

"Excuse me, officer, but I have to use the restroom." She motions for me to go ahead. I look over my shoulder at Rosa cleaning the table—force of habit, I guess.

I pull Jessica's sweater closed. The flimsy gown I'm wearing is no match for the central air that has the house feeling like a morg—. I shake that thought and go into the restroom. Sighing, I flop down onto the toilet. It feels like a dream. Maybe I am dreaming. Maybe none of this is real, and I'm actually still in bed. I flush the toilet wishing it was that easy to get rid of all these thoughts swirling in my head. Now standing at the sink, I wash my hands. A pain pill would be great right now. I open the medicine cabinet, looking for something, anything to soothe my aching heart. Rosa's right. I have to get it together.

“Stacey, are you in there?”

Startled, I slam the medicine cabinet door shut and grip the edge of the sink. “You scared me,” I say, opening the door.

Matt looks at me and I fall onto his chest, sobbing, waiting for and wanting him to hold me, to tell me it’s going to be okay, but he just stands there with his gangly arms at his sides. After a few seconds of awkwardness he pats me on the back. I pull away from him and compose myself. I look up at him and he runs his spindly fingers through his thick brown hair, pushing it out of his reddened face and matching red-rimmed eyes. I shriek when I get a glimpse of the long scratch on his forehead.

“What happened to your head?”

“I had to make a 12-Step call in the middle of the night. The guy was out of it. It got a little rough. It’s nothing though,” he says, dismissing my concern. “Every news station in town and then some is outside. The police wouldn’t let me in.”

“How’d you get through?”

“Grant’s father pulled up right after I got here, and the media and cops went berserk. I slipped through and came around back. My God, Stace, what happened?”

I peer into his almond-shaped brown eyes, searching for the love he once had for me, before I lost my inheritance, before I had to stop buying him expensive gifts, before we had to downsize, but it’s not there. “Why don’t you wait for the detectives? I don’t want to have to repeat myself.”

“Okay. Has anyone contacted Grant?”

“He should get here later tonight.”

“From London?”

“The management team he’s with is sending him back on their private jet,” I say.

“You talked to him?”

“No. I called the bank and talked to his assistant. She called me back and told me she had gotten the message to Grant and that he was coming home.”

“Poor guy,” Matt says, passing his hand over his face. “He must be a basket case.”

“What about you?” I ask.

“The whole thing is crazy. How are you holding up?” he finally asks.

“I’m not doing well, but Rosa says I need to be strong.”

“She’s right,” he says, taking my hand. “Let’s see what’s going on with the police.” He heads toward the living room. I follow him, relishing the feel of his strong grip. It’s been so long since we’ve held hands. I hate that it’s taken Jessica’s death to get us here.

Chapter 4

Rachel

The clicking of the camera's shutter upstages the banter between Herb and the members of the CSI team. I notice sweat beading on the upper lip of the portly crime scene photographer as he moves about the room, getting shots of Jessica at every angle. Rigor mortis has set in, and the smell of dried blood permeates the cold air. I walk toward the window, careful not to disturb anything. I make a mental note of a pair of jeans and an orange sweatshirt lying crumpled on the floor near the bed. My gaze moves from the clothing to Jessica. The only thing holding her head to her body is the blood on her chest that looks like a thick red glob of crazy glue. Her blue eyes speak volumes to the horror that according to Burt, took place in this room around 3:00 this morning. The bloody sheet has been pulled back exposing her petite physique. It's not just any sheet but one of the fancy ones. And it's white with the exception of the blood. The entire room is white with the exception of the blood. Splatters dot the white wall making it look as if it's polka dotted wallpaper.

Wearing only a pink camisole and matching panties, she's lying in a fetal position. Her arms, however, are twisted with the right palm facing up and the left down. A huge diamond ring

and wedding band peppered with smaller stones, on the ring finger of her left hand, glitter under the light. I'm no expert, but the diamond has to be at least five carats. There's a gold chain that's on the floor near the bed, and on the nightstand, there's a cell phone, watch, and a pair of pearl earrings. It's obvious whoever did this was not here to rob her.

Until Burt told us otherwise, I thought Jessica had been murdered in her bedroom—the master bedroom. I always wondered who the hell came up with that master stuff. A bedroom is a bedroom. I guess when you're loaded it becomes a *master* bedroom. I guess if you can afford a home with a *master* bedroom, you've *mastered* something, you're at the top of your game, and you're running things. Well, this is the guest bedroom, and I really don't see how you could improve upon it, with the exception of the small bed. Otherwise, I could fit my entire house in this space. There's a private bath, a walk-in closet, a fireplace, and a picturesque view of the backyard.

I look out the window at the kidney-shaped swimming pool and Jacuzzi, wondering how I let Herb talk me into coming out here when I could be at the local YMCA taking a dip. The pool may not be as fancy as the one below, but it's water just the same. My eyes meet the gaze of a woman in the backyard of the house to the right of the James Estate. She turns her back to me and tends to her garden. I move away from the window and lock eyes with Jessica. I get a pang of guilt in my gut, wondering who and why someone would do this to her, wondering if I want to join Herb in this investigation.

“Storme, Burt wants to chat. Can you join us?”

“Sure,” I say, following Herb to the hallway. I instinctively remove a pad from my pouch to take notes.

Burt yanks on his tie and then takes a swig of water. “Nasty stuff in there,” he says, looking at us as if he needs confirmation. “Anyways, as I was saying, she was killed around 3:00 this morning. There was no forced entry anywhere. Whoever did this had access to the house and the passcode for the alarm.”

I rifle through my pouch for a pen and Herb sends a smile and a pencil my way.

“What’s with the clothes on the floor?” Herb asks.

“Not sure. Maybe that’s what she was going to wear today,” Burt says.

“What I’m wondering is why she was sleeping in the guest bedroom,” I say.

“Well, at one point she was sleeping in the master bedroom because the bed’s unmade,” Burt says. “I have a few guys down there dusting for prints, checking things out. We’re going to go over everything with a fine tooth comb—all fourteen rooms. The master bedroom is a few doors down and get this, there’s a nursery.”

“Is there a baby?” Herb and I ask at the same time.

“No kids that we know of. Looks like they were preparing for one,” Burt says. “When the lab reports come back, we’ll be able to confirm if she was with child and if she was sexually assaulted.”

“So you think whoever did this placed the sheet over her,” Herb says.

“Right. It was just too perfect. There was definitely a struggle, but not a big one. Meaning she wasn’t awake when the perp attacked. If that were the case, she would have extensive defensive wounds. I’m sure the knife to her throat woke her up and by then the perp had the upper hand. We’ll get whatever’s under her fingernails checked out in case she managed to get her claws into this monster. And of course we’re on top of the fibers. We found some blue particles on the area where the indentations are. There are indentations on the edge of the bed,

deep, like knees. Whoever got her came from behind. If you look closely, you can see that the cut wasn't smooth. It took some time."

"Damn," Herb says.

"She suffered and the asshole wanted her to. This was personal."

Herb takes a moment and then says, "Good work as usual, Burt."

"Thanks. You know I'm just a text, email, or phone call away, and I'll keep you abreast of all the lab results—blood, prints, everything."

We turn toward the staircase when Newson, the officer first on the scene, appears at the top of the stairs. "Randolph James is here and the coroner is downstairs, too."

Burt, Herb and I exchange knowing looks. "Why don't I go deal with Mr. James and Storme, if you don't mind, could you go and meet with the best friend...uh...?"

"Stacey," I say, finishing Herb's sentence.

"Right," he says. He turns on his heel and follows Newson down the stairs.

"So, are you gonna be working on this one?" Burt asks.

"Maybe, maybe not."

"We need you, Storme. You're the best."

"Right. That's what I've been told." I give Burt a smile that I'm sure doesn't reach my eyes. Who am I kidding, I'm already knee-deep in this thing and Herb knows it. I head downstairs chuckling to myself as I pass the coroner on his way up the stairs. I stop midway where I have a bird's eye view of the goings-on. The front door is still open, and I can see cops milling about. There's a glass window above the door that gives me a clear view of the driveway and wrought iron gate where reporters are clamoring for sound bites. I bring my attention back to the house that's abuzz with excitement about Randolph's arrival. You'd think he was the second

coming. I look down on his bald spot barely covered by a few strands of jet black hair, wondering why he just doesn't get a toupee or join one of those hair clubs for men. He can certainly afford it. He seems to have a permanent space on *Forbes* richest people list. They have his net worth around two billion. Wearing what looks like a Brioni suit, he waddles down the hallway, with Herb following. Not only do he and Grant have thinning hair in common, but they both are borderline obese. I watch Randolph and Herb disappear down the hall and then focus on the living room. I nod at the tall female cop standing in the doorway and head that way.

I step into the living room and my stomach sinks. I grimace at the sight of the three people staring back at me. What the hell. I turn to the cop. "Please don't tell me these are the witnesses."

"Yes, ma'am. They're the witnesses."

I motion for her to follow me to the foyer. "Why are these people not in separate rooms? Murder investigation 101—separate the witnesses."

"Ma'am, Officer Green asked me to handle the women, and I'm not sure where the man came from."

My eyes dart around and lock with Newson's. He approaches.

"Is there a problem, Detective Storme?"

"Whose bright idea was it to put all the witnesses in one room?"

"They're in one room?"

"Yes."

"He blinks rapidly and swallows hard. "Uh...the...uh...Sharon, I told you to take care of the witnesses until the detectives arrived."

The female officer scrunches up her face. "I'm sorry. I should have...I wasn't thinking."

“No, you weren’t,” I say, leaving the two of them looking dumbfounded. I return to the living room to deal with the fiasco. By now, all three of them could have corroborated their lies. I know they’re supposed to be innocent until proven guilty, but in my book, everybody’s guilty of *something* until proven innocent.

When I enter, the tall brown-haired man with matinee-idol good looks rises. “Excuse me, but I’d like to take my wife home. Can you tell us how much longer she has to be here?”

“And who are you, sir?” I ask, my eyes zooming in on the fresh scratch on his forehead.

“I’m her husband, Matthew Sullivan.”

“And who’s your wife?”

“I am,” the younger and plumper of the two women says. “I’m Stacey Sullivan, Jessica’s best friend.” She flips her mousy brown hair over her shoulder and looks at her husband with the brown dots under her unibrow that are masquerading as eyes. I give her the once-over, taking in the nightgown and sweater she’s wearing. The maid must have discovered the body this morning, called Stacey, and she rushed over here still in her PJs.

“And who are you?”

“I’m Rosa Martinez, the housekeeper.”

“Okay. Well, this—”

“And who are you?” they ask.

“Sorry about that. I’m Detective Storme, and I’m one of the senior investigators on this case.” *Did I just say that?*

“Well, Detective—”

“Before you go on...”

“Matt. I’m Matt.”

“Right. Matt, I need you to go with Officer Green.”

“I’m right here, Detective Storme,” Newson says, entering.

“And Ms. Martinez, I need you to go with—”

“Officer Williams,” the young female officer says.

Matt pushes the hair off of his handsome face, and I raise my hand before he has a chance to object. “Please, it’s a difficult day for all of us. We appreciate your cooperation.”

“*Si, no problemo.*” Rosa rises and runs to keep up with Officer Williams.

Matt, on the other hand, inches along and then abruptly turns around. He returns to the table where Stacey’s standing. She extends her arms, but he either doesn’t notice or purposely ignores her. He grabs his cell phone off of the table, gives me a fake smile, and then leaves the room with Newson. She drops her arms like a sack of rocks and flops down onto the sofa.

I wait until they’re all gone and then turn my attention to Stacey who’s squirming on the sofa. She rubs her eyes and clears her throat. There’s something so familiar about this chick. Then it hits me. She reminds me of myself twenty something years ago—an average-looking girl who somehow managed to marry a great-looking guy. She reeks of insecurity and so did I back then. That’s probably one of the reasons my marriage failed. I was way too damn needy.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I ask.

“No, thank you. It’s just going to make me go to the restroom. I’ve been going all morning. I’m sorry about my husband. He’s broken up about Jessica and so am I.”

“You really cared about her, didn’t you?” I grab one of the fancy chairs near a large Ficus and place it in front of the sofa. I sit, facing her.

She nods as though her life depends on it. “Yes, of course. She was my best friend. We met in high school. We’re literally closer than sisters.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jessica has a sister, but they rarely speak.”

I need to put Jessica's sister on my person of interest list. “Tell me about this morning. It looks like you rushed over here straight from home. Did the housekeeper call you about Jessica?” Her gaze drops to her lap, and she passes her shaky hands over her nightgown. “Are you cold? Your hands are trembling.”

“Yes, thanks for asking. It's freezing in here.”

“Let me see if I can get the thermostat adjusted. In the meantime, grab that throw over there.” I point to the chair that matches the one I'm sitting in.

“Good idea. Thanks.”

“No worries. I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere,” I say, leaving her behind and now glad Herb called me. I'm not a superstitious person, but I just have a funny feeling there's a reason Stacey and I have been brought together and it may be bigger than this case.