

Chapter One

“Wake up.”

“What?”

“Someone’s at the door.”

“You’re dreaming. Go back to sleep.”

“Get up.”

Dez Duchiene groaned as his husband elbowed him in the ribs. “The hell, Stevie?”

“Door.” Stevie’s voice was muffled by his pillow.

“Gah.” With a disgruntled sigh, Dez rolled out of bed. He yawned, put on his black bathrobe, and looped the belt over his waist. He crept out of the bedroom of their Manhattan condo and shoved away the dark hair that insisted on falling in his face. Even without a mirror he knew he had bedhead something fierce. What time was it, anyway? He squinted toward the window. Damn. Daylight.

Indirect sunlight, diffused by the shadow of high-rise buildings, filtered through the west-facing windows in the living room. The day was young. Dez pushed the fog out of his I-am-so-not-a-morning-person head and focused on the clock in the pass-through kitchen. Eight a.m.? On a Sunday?

Another round of knocking.

“Hang on, I’m coming!”

He padded across the maple wood floor while hints of a hangover prodded his head. Last night they hosted a late dinner and drinks with friends, celebrating the news that Stevie’s latest architectural project won a contract from one of the largest firms in New York City. Good news, both for Stevie’s reputation and their joint bank account. Drinks, laughter, and pleasantries filled the evening, and Dez woke with the kind of hangover that could have easily been mitigated by another couple of hours of sleep, but now promised to plague him the rest of the day.

Another persistent knock.

For the love of God, stop making so much noise! Who would knock at their door, anyway? People who knew where he and Stevie lived also had their phone numbers. They’d text first. Did someone forget their phone

last night? Or had Oliver been struck by another existential crisis, in need of some day drinking and a good cry? Dez twisted the doorknob, ready to rebuke a friend for having the audacity to intrude on his hospitality so early in the day.

He did not expect a uniformed police officer and a man in a suit.

The young Black officer wore a standard navy blue NYPD uniform. Her badge, pinned to her shirt, displayed her last name. Covey. The man—in his late 40s, Dez guessed—wore a plain tan suit, off the rack from a store like J.C. Penney. His sandy brown hair appeared tousled out of spite, and his green eyes fixed on Dez.

“Desmond Duchiene?” The man spoke with authority.

Dez shuddered at the sound of his given first name. “Dez. Please. Or Mr. Duchiene. Depends on who’s asking.” A cop at his door should have disturbed him, but apparently his sense of worry had slept in this morning.

“Detective Patrick Bryant.” The man flashed his identification, a quick open and close. “This is Officer Covey. May we come in?”

Dez snapped his fingers and gestured toward the ID the detective had already pocketed. His sense of worry might still be in bed, but his snarky side never slept. “Hang on, let me actually *see* your ID first.” Despite his demand, more of a delay tactic than anything else, a buzz of anxiety flitted through him. Cops. On a Sunday morning. Why?

Bryant reached again for the ID—irritation overridden by his calm demeanor. He handed the small folder to Dez.

The buzz of anxiety morphed into a swarm. Dez looked at the ID, then back up at the detective, not sure he wanted to believe what he read. “City of Madison Police Department?”

“Yes.”

Madison, Wisconsin. A place Dez left behind more than two years ago. Though he’d grown up there in an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance, things had changed over the last few years. Politically conservative views flooded the state and warped one of the staunchest liberal cities in the country. Progressivism, a hallmark of Wisconsin politics for well over a century, struggled to survive. With rights being curbed, anti-Semitism in broad daylight, and state laws poised to permit discrimination against the LGBTQ community in the name of religious

freedom, Dez jetted off to New York City. He found Stevie, fell in love, got married, and lived happily ever after.

Nothing from Madison could possibly concern him anymore. Could it?

Detective Bryant drew himself up, the consummate professional. “Officer Covey here is my escort. May we come in and speak with you?”

“Regarding what?”

“Regarding the death of Whitney Travers.” The detective spoke in a flat, neutral voice.

“Whitney?” Not what Dez expected on this sleepy Sunday morning. Jesus. Whitney was dead? His antagonism faltered. Yes, something from his past *could* concern him now. He returned Bryant’s ID. “Please come in. I’ll, uh, I’ll get coffee.”

“Thank you.” The detective and Officer Covey walked through the foyer and into the tiny window-lined living room. Dez scuttled into the compact kitchen, which was little more than a wall of appliances and cabinets separated from the living room by a counter that doubled as a breakfast bar. He knew he had leftover ground coffee from last night. Sugar? Yes. Creamer? Some flavored stuff in the fridge. Officer Covey might appreciate it. The detective, though? Dez suspected he’d take his coffee black.

“Nice place.” Detective Bryant took a determined stroll around the narrow living area. He circled the pristine white sofa and peered behind the two black easy chairs, a cat searching for a nonexistent mouse. A large decorative mirror helped create the illusion of more space, and a spartan entertainment center held the usual electronics, with a few coffee table art books on one side and a small collection of DVDs on the other. Photo prints of city skylines dotted the walls. Bryant crossed the soft, mottled gray rug with silent footsteps. “You live here alone?”

“With my husband.” Dez said the word with proud defiance, always up for a mainstream hetero challenge. To his disappointment, Bryant didn’t react. “He’s still sleeping, so if you don’t mind, let’s keep it down.”

A few minutes of thick silence later, the coffee was ready. Dez breathed in the dark, earthy scent and wished he could somehow absorb the caffeine through the steam. No luck. He filled three mugs, put cream and sugar on a tray, and brought them into the living room. He set the tray on the coffee

table and tugged the belt of his robe tighter before settling into one of the easy chairs. Bryant and Covey sat across from him on the sofa.

The detective selected a mug and added two spoons of sugar and a large amount of cream. Covey took hers black. So much for Dez’s ability to mind-read cops.

Bryant blew the steam off the coffee and took a drink. “This is good,” he said with appreciation. “I get the impression you’re a person who favors quality over quantity.”

“You learn to appreciate fine things when your living space is less than seven hundred square feet.” Dez’s hand shook as he added cream to his coffee. He had no interest in small talk. He needed to know why a cop from Madison traveled eight hundred miles to speak with him about his former boss. “So, tell me. What happened to Whitney?”

Detective Bryant perched on the edge of the sofa, a notebook and pen in hand. “He died suddenly last Tuesday night.”

“I am sorry to hear that.” Dez realized he was genuinely sorry, though he knew a lot of people wouldn’t miss the man. “What happened?”

“I can’t comment on that, I’m afraid.”

Dez shifted in his chair, uncomfortable with Bryant’s control of the discussion.

The detective spoke again. “How did you know the deceased?”

“I worked for him for four years. I also grew up with his daughter, Kelsey. In fact, I’m surprised she hasn’t called me.” Very surprised. He and Kelsey were old friends. Why would she keep this from him?

“When’s the last time you saw Whitney Travers?”

“Oh, when?” Dez clasped his hands together. He had to think. Fast. “I was at a conference in Madison over Memorial Day weekend. I saw Kelsey, and Whitney was home. He and I exchanged quick hellos, basic pleasantries.”

“A little over three months ago, then.” Bryant jotted a note in his book. “When did you leave WT Enterprises?”

“More than two years ago.”

“What kind of work did you do for Travers?”

“Hotel and events management, mostly.” Microbursts of energy from the coffee started to wake him up. “He owned the West Travers Inn and

Conference Center, an independent hotel in a sea of chain properties. Whitney preferred quality over quantity, too.”

“Did you leave on good terms?” Bryant tapped his pen against the notebook.

“I wasn’t fired, if that’s what you’re asking.” Dez took another sip of coffee and paused to articulate his thoughts. “I’ll be honest, Whitney was gearing up his run for Congress, and things got, shall we say, uncomfortable for people like me.”

“People like you?”

Dez threw him an exaggerated eyelash flutter and amped the pitch in his voice. “Don’t be coy, darling. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah. Okay. I do.” Bryant’s pen stilled.

“Good.” Dez dropped the stereotype and returned to his coffee. “Whitney is a conservative in the most liberal part of the state. He took a stand on some things we truly did not agree on to energize his base. It’s unpleasant, but nothing new.”

Officer Covey kept quiet, though her face carried a why-do-you-bother-with-bigoted-idiots expression. Of course, while Dez could mask his orientation, Covey displayed her People Like Me status in the color of her skin. He imagined she’d never work for the likes of Whitney Travers if she had any kind of choice.

“You got along well before he ran for Congress?” Bryant asked.

“He was a state senator for a long time, an independent. I actually helped run one of his reelection campaigns. Marketing, messaging, fundraising.”

“His views didn’t bother you back then?”

“His views weren’t intolerant back then.” Dez kept his voice neutral. The detective chose questions to uncover conflict. Bryant needed motivation, he wanted suspects, and Dez refused to satisfy him. “Whitney treated me well, and his campaigns used to ignore social issues. We ran on fixing infrastructure and wrestling with the governor and legislature over health care and education. Whitney was genuinely middle-of-the-road. That’s why he was in office for so long. He paid attention to the people he represented.”

“Did Travers have enemies?”

“Are you kidding?” Dez let out a sardonic laugh. “With the general election in less than two months, and those awful ads that condemned anyone not white, straight, male, and born in America, half the population actively disliked him.” He caught a subtle nod of agreement from Officer Covey. She understood the type. A chill shook him, a fear linked to his next thought. “You think he was murdered, don’t you?”

Bryant curled his lower lip. “Frankly, yes.”

The chill morphed into horror as Dez processed the potential implication of Whitney’s death. If the man had been killed because of his political positions, the repercussions against the liberal demographic could be disastrous. The LGBTQ and minority communities, groups Whitney’s party put down in recent months, would become prime targets in public ways. Society needed to place blame and innocent people would get hurt.

“We don’t have a full autopsy report yet.” Bryant crossed one leg over the other, a ploy to project a casual air. “The man was healthy and only in his mid-sixties. Young, relatively speaking. He collapsed and died at a political fundraiser in front of his supporters, on video, and it’s just a few weeks before the election.”

At a fundraiser. In public. Dez’s mind raced. “That doesn’t make sense. Why kill him when his numbers were sliding?”

“You know about his polls?”

Dez shrugged his answer.

“Interesting. You keep up with what’s going on in Madison, then.” Bryant’s voice lifted with cautious curiosity.

“Sure. I have friends back home.”

“Family?”

“Not anymore. After she divorced my dad, Mom moved to Colorado to be closer to her sister. I have an older brother in Minnesota.”

“Where’s your father?”

“No idea.” Dez bit back regret laced with abandonment. “When the divorce was finalized, he disappeared. I haven’t seen him since I was a teenager.”

Bryant leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “When I checked Mr. Travers’ phone records, there were several calls to you in the days before

he died. You want to tell me about those?”

Dez set his jaw. Detectives were trained to study body language. He knew Bryant was focused on his voice, his word choice, anything that could indicate deceit. He didn't want to delve into any personal issues that had nothing to do with Whitney's death, but the truth remained the least risky path to travel. “Whitney called to see if I'd be interested in working the last few weeks of the campaign. His numbers were down, and he thought I might be able to help.”

“Which is why you know about his polling status.”

“Yes.”

“Could you help him?”

“Of course.” Dez flashed a self-confident smile. “I'm good at what I do. But with the anti-gay rhetoric, I didn't want to become any kind of token poster child for the right. Whitney offered me the job, and a lot of money along with it.” A lot of money that Stevie would find useful. The decision between financial gain and ideology had been difficult, but Dez believed he'd made the best choice. “I thought about it, but in the end, I turned him down.”

“Fair enough.” The detective set aside his notebook. “Where were you last Tuesday night?”

Dez's mouth snapped shut and his heart rate jumped. A routine question, true, though he'd hoped Bryant would have assumed distance provided an alibi. Apparently not. With effort, he steadied his voice. “I was here. Manhattan. Home.”

“With your husband?”

“Later that night, yes.” His expression ticked up with mixed emotion. “Stevie worked late, so I was on my own for dinner. Leftovers, I think. Nothing exotic. When he came home, we watched TV and went to bed.” He didn't mention the argument. They worked things out, but the tension hadn't completely dissipated. Dez returned the detective's even gaze. “You think I had something to do with Whitney's death.”

Bryant ignored the statement. “We're working down the list of people who knew Whitney. Routine stuff. Just a few more questions and we'll be on our way.”

Dez complied with the rest of Bryant's inquiries in something of a daze,

his simple answers sounding trivial in the wake of a man's death. Whitney Travers hadn't been a bad guy, but he was no saint either. A variety of people worked for him, none of whom ever gave the impression that they were capable of murder. With all the turnover in the past few years, Dez had fallen out of touch with anyone who might have had motive or access. He wasn't familiar enough with the other area politicians to offer much insight on them, either.

Bryant made a few final notes, tucked the notebook in his pocket, and finished his coffee. “Thank you, Mr. Duchiene.” He stood up and offered Dez his business card. “The usual protocol; if you think of anything, let me know.”

“I will.” Dez palmed the card and led Bryant and Covey to the door. “Tell me, is it standard procedure for a detective to travel so far from home to interview someone?”

“It's not.” Bryant tugged at his jacket sleeves, bunched up around his elbows. “Normally I'd have a detective here talk to you, but my oldest is a student at NYU and I happened to be here visiting him this weekend.” He swept his eyes across the condo, taking in the shimmering silver trim and expansive windows. “Thought I'd see what kind of lifestyle a kid from Wisconsin could achieve by moving to the big city.” He nodded his approval. “Not bad. Quite the change from cows and cornfields.”

“You and I both know that Wisconsin is far more than cows and cornfields.”

“It's also politics and possibly murder these days.” An icy tone chilled Bryant's voice. “I will find out who killed Whitney Travers.”

“Honestly, I'll do what I can to help.”

Bryant held the doorknob. “No hard feelings about the man?”

“Detective, I've been in the political game for years. I know the difference between public and private personas.” Dez shifted from one foot to another and wondered why the interview left him so uneasy. “Whitney Travers used to stand for reasonable things. He took a hard right turn in an attempt to win the election, but that's not the only way to piss off people in politics.”

“I'm sure you're right. Thank you for your time, Mr. Duchiene.” Bryant opened the door. “And thanks for the coffee.”

“You’re welcome.” Dez watched Bryant and Covey leave, then beelined for the bedroom to retrieve his phone and call Kelsey. What the hell happened? Her father drops dead, and she doesn’t call him? Why hadn’t he seen the news himself? He knew the answer to that. He’d been lost in his own little world the last couple of weeks, not online, not keeping up with the news. Madison was half a country away. A lifetime in the past. Why was it knocking on his door and demanding his attention now?