

# **Getting to the Bottom of the Story**

**By  
Mandy Rogers**

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## Chapter One

Marisa Shaw would have been on top of the world today, if only her dad had been here to share it with her. She had finally made it to a top 20 market as a TV news reporter, and it happened right here in her hometown of Pittsburgh. She'd spent seven years paying her dues in two smaller markets, working mega hours for the slave wages that small market television pays. But she'd learned her profession and was a good, solid journalist. She also had that special charisma that the camera loves. You wouldn't look at her and say she was gorgeous—attractive maybe—but certainly not extraordinary. That is until you saw her on TV. She had that rare gift of being able to transmit the warmth and enthusiasm for life that she exuded in person, over the air.

That caught the attention of the News Director at WKTX-TV. But Kyle Wheeler didn't find her in the traditional way, slogging through the stacks of resume tapes in his office. He first saw her on his own newscast in an interview at her father's funeral. Byron Shaw had been a longtime, beloved, Pittsburgh cop, killed in the line of duty about four months ago. Marisa was his only family—her mother had died when she was a child.

Kyle was struck by her composure and eloquence when she talked about her Dad, so he had asked around about her. When he found out she was a reporter, he had to have her. It didn't hurt that she'd been born and raised in Pittsburgh. Kyle knew Pittsburghers tended to gravitate to one of their own. It was a city where people were born, grew up, got married, worked and died all within a 20 block radius. Pittsburgh was a big city of little neighborhoods.

Marisa was thrilled when Kyle called her. She couldn't believe it. She had been trying to get a job in Pittsburgh for three years, but it had never worked out. Even people, who weren't born in

Pittsburgh, tended to stay and settle down once they got there, so TV reporter openings at the stations were rare. She never expected to end up at WKTX-TV. It was the station she'd grown up watching, and the main anchorwoman was her role model.

She had still had six months on her contract in her current job, but the station had agreed to let her out early, as soon as it found a replacement. That took nearly four months. Kyle was willing to wait, and Marisa needed the time to deal with her Dad's death. It had been just the two of them against the world for nearly 20 years, and his sudden death had left an aching hole in her heart. The first few months after he was killed, she wasn't quite ready to live and work in the city that held their most precious memories.

But today she was starting her new job and feeling very at home again in the Steel City she loved. She had moved into the old row home her father had bought and renovated after she went to college. It was up on Mount Washington and looked down on the Point, where the three rivers which had given the old stadium its name, came together. She also could see the station which was located right downtown. She was so excited to be able to ride the Incline down the hill and then jump on a bus to the station. As a child she had always loved riding up and down Mount Washington on the Incline.

As she walked into the newsroom, the feeling of being home got stronger. These were people she'd watched all her life. And many, like her, were native Pittsburghers. All the stations understood the value of local people on the news in a town where hometown pride is worn like a badge of honor. She had met several of the other reporters when she interviewed for the job, and they welcomed her warmly.

Marisa always thought it was strange when people outside the television news business asked about the cutthroat competition in the newsroom.

From the first newsroom she had interned in, she had found an atmosphere of camaraderie and teamwork that was hard to match. Everyone worked hard and put in long hours—that was the only way newscasts got on the air. There just wasn't a lot of time for competition inside a newsroom. The energy spent on competition was focused on rival stations, not co-workers.

Marisa spent her first week riding with other reporters and getting the hang of how things worked at the station. By the end of the week she had her first story on the air and was feeling pretty comfortable. Being the new kid on the block she was scheduled to work nights starting her second week, but she didn't mind. Since there were only two reporters working at night, that meant that she would often have the lead story on the 11pm news.

Because she had virtually grown up in a police station, she was assigned to cover the cops and courts as her beat. She had mixed feelings about that—she knew she had the contacts and knowledge to do the job well, but every time she walked into a cop shop, she felt as if a cold breeze passed through that hole in her heart. Nevertheless, each afternoon on her way to the station, she'd stop at a different precinct house, introducing herself around to those she didn't know and passing out her card to let them know she was the new cop and crime reporter at WKTU. The more time she spent at different station houses, the more she realized what an impact her father had had. So many officers had anecdotes about Big By they wanted to share—it was like turning pages of a scrapbook of his life.

Finally at the beginning of her third week, she knew she couldn't put it off any longer, she had to go down to her Dad's downtown precinct. It would be the place where many of her news stories came from, because besides being the largest precinct, it was also headquarters for the SWAT and River Rescue teams. When she walked in she was assailed by memories—she had been the little girl who was

the darling of the squad room, practically the precinct mascot. She hadn't been back in the building since she graduated from college. But the desk sergeant immediately recognized her.

"Missy, it's about damn time you made your way down here. We've all been watching you on TV! How are you doing? We all sure do miss your Dad around here." He came around the desk and enveloped her in a huge bear hug.

"I'm doing OK Sarg—I gotta say, it's great to be back in the Burgh! Is it OK if I go up into the squad room?"

"Sure honey, just put on your press pass."

She slowly climbed the stairs to the detective squad room where her father's old office was. He had been captain of the precinct, and she knew how much the officers under him respected him. They had all been at the funeral and had spent hours back at the house regaling her with what they called 'Shaw Stories'. She stood outside the squad room for several minutes before she could walk in. Just as she finally drew up the courage to go in, she felt a hand on her shoulder, and then a smack on her butt.

"Hey!" she turned ready to rail at someone.

"I ought to spank your behind for real young lady! Back in the city nearly a month, and the first I find out is when I turn on the TV!"

Marisa threw herself into the arms of the man who was like a second father to her. John Barry and her Dad had gone to the police academy together, walked a beat together and partnered as detectives for years before they each got their own command.

"John, it's so good to see you! I'm sorry I haven't been in touch since I've been back—I've just kind of been taking things slowly—but you're right that's no excuse for not seeing you and Sal! Are you really mad?" she asked with that innocent little girl look he knew so well.

"No brat! Actually, I do understand—I've been wanting to call you, but Sally said just give you time

and you'd come around when you were ready. But we better see you for Sunday dinner."

"Count on it! Hey have you heard from Chris lately or is he still under on a case?"

John frowned at the question. Chris was his son. He and Marisa had virtually grown up together—he was just three years older than Marisa. Chris was an FBI agent who specialized in undercover sting operations. He had been under on his current assignment several months now, so John and Sally hadn't heard from him.

"He's still under. I know he's going to be devastated when he hears about Byron—and he'll be especially sorry he wasn't here for you. I'll tell ya Missy, it's a constant worry for his mother and me."

"John, you know how good he is at his job—he's also incredibly careful. I'm sure he's fine. I really did miss his being around when Dad died, but I certainly understood. He'll be sad he missed Dad's funeral. I do miss the talks Chris and I have when he's not undercover. We talk about once a month, when he can call."

"How are you doing, Marisa, really?" He'd lowered his voice, and now it was laced with concern for her.

"It's hard being in this city without him, but I'm really glad I came home. I miss him so much it hurts—but I'm getting along. I love my new job, and the support I've received from everyone on the force has been awesome. How about you—you lost him too?"

"It gets a little better every day. Come on, I'll walk in with you, then I've got to get back to my own station house."

"So, which one of the guys moved up to Captain?"

"None of them—no one wanted to try and walk in Big By's shoes. So the brass promoted a young guy from the Hill District. You might remember him, he was one of By's recruits—rode with him 10, maybe 12 years ago—a guy by the name of Michael

Craine. He was one your Dad always thought had a lot of potential—smart, no-nonsense kind of cop. From what I hear, the squad respects him—he's no Byron Shaw, but then nobody is!"

"The name sounds vaguely familiar, but there were so many, and 12 years ago I was pretty focused on being the teenager from hell. Remember all the mischief I managed to get in at 16 and 17? I spent half my time getting into trouble and the other half over Dad's knee paying for it!"

"You did turn his hair gray those couple of years. In fact, as I recall, there were even a couple of times I had to paddle your butt when you stayed with Sally and me!"

Marisa unconsciously rubbed her backside, "Oh, yes, I remember that well!" They both laughed.

"Well, remember this, young lady, I intend to look out for you now, so if you need anything, I better be the first one you call or else you might just find yourself right back across my knee!" Even though he said it with only mock sternness, Marisa still felt a slight tingling sensation at the thought. She hadn't been spanked since the summer after her junior year in college, but she knew her Dad and John both believed firmly in corporal punishment at any age. In fact, she didn't doubt for a minute that John had taken his wife, Sally, over his knee a time or two!

They walked into the squad room at that point, and Marisa was immediately surrounded by the men and women who had been the heart of her father's command. Some she'd known for years, others were new to the precinct, but they all accepted her as the daughter of the man they had loved and respected. She was having a hard time holding back the tears as they embraced her and sincerely wanted to know how she was doing. There was also some good natured ribbing about her 'working for the enemy', since cops and reporters are notorious for butting heads. As she stopped to talk to different people, she was slowly working her way back to the



corner office—the office that had once been her Dad's. As she got close, she asked one of the guys if he thought it would be OK to go in for just a minute.

"Sure Missy, I don't think the Captain would mind too much—just watch out for him—he hates the media!!"

Marisa tentatively walked into the office she used to know as well as her own bedroom. It definitely looked different—less homey, more efficient somehow. The big wooden desk was still there, and the beat-up old metal filing cabinets. The citations to the squad were still on the walls—but it definitely wasn't the same. All the little things that reflected her father's personality were gone. The tears she had been holding back started to leak out and fall silently down her cheeks. She was about to sit down for a second while she recovered her composure when she was startled by an angry voice.

"What do you think you're doing in here?!?"

Marisa jumped up and spun around, hastily wiping her eyes. "I... I'm sorry... I'm..."

"Marisa Shaw." The voice was imposing, and so was the man. It might be a cliché, but if Webster's Dictionary was looking for the definition of tall, dark and handsome, it need look no further than Michael Craine.

"Yes, I didn't mean to intrude... that is... you must be Captain Craine... I'm pleased to..." She was holding out her hand, but he stalked by her and back behind his desk, cutting her off in the process.

"In the future, Miss Shaw, I would appreciate it if you abided by the rules for all media—the squad room and especially this office are OFF LIMITS to reporters!!"

"I'm sorry—I didn't know, the desk sergeant said... well that doesn't matter. Look we're obviously getting off to a bad start. I..."

"Miss Shaw, as far as I'm concerned there is no good start with a news reporter."

Marisa was regaining her composure real fast as her temper rose. "That's a bit unfair—are you this judgmental with suspects too?" She didn't like the fact that although she was 5'8", she still had to look up to face him eye to eye—he had to be at least 6'2".

"Look, Miss Shaw, you may be willing to let your television station exploit the trust and concern people in this precinct have for you because of your father, but I'm NOT. It's obvious you were assigned to cover crime because of your connections—we'll don't expect any special treatment here. And if I find out you're doing anything to abuse your father's memory, I'll have you banned from every precinct house in the department so fast it'll make your head spin!"

Marisa was stunned that he would even suggest such a thing, and so angry she could barely speak. She swung her arm up ready to slap him hard across the face, but he caught her wrist in a painful grip.

"Try that again, and you'll wind up in the same position you were in when we first met 12 years ago," he growled in a low menacing voice. "Tell me, is a firm hand across your bare backside still the best way to get your attention?"

Marisa blushed furiously—she now remembered the young Michael Craine. He was a 21-year old rookie right out of the academy. Her father was his senior training officer, and as he often did, Byron Shaw had brought the rookie home after their shift for a late supper. Marisa, 16 and full of piss and vinegar, had come home late again. She breezed in, all apologies, saw the handsome recruit and stopped dead in her tracks. She was struck by his looks, his smile and the gentlemanly way he rose, took her hand and kissed it as she introduced herself. Unfortunately that was as far as the little flirtatious scene played out.

Her father interrupted with a stern lecture about being late for the third time in two weeks, told her

to go to her room and get ready for a spanking. He punctuated the threat with two stinging smacks as he sent her down the hallway to her room. She could have died of embarrassment. Michael quickly tried to excuse himself and leave, but her father had simply said to grab a beer and go sit out on the porch—he'd be out shortly. Marisa knew Michael had to have heard everything because it was summer and the windows were open. Her father had spanked her hard that night using the most-hated leather belt, as he always did when she repeatedly disobeyed him. She had cried and carried on just like a child, as she always did when he spanked her.

That whole scene came flooding back to Marisa in one instant, and now it was a contest to see which could make her cheeks redder, anger or embarrassment.

"I see you remember our first encounter. Well, let me tell you what else I remember, Miss Shaw! I remember watching your father worry himself sick over your bratty antics. I also remember his extreme displeasure when you announced out of the blue you were going to be a reporter. Was that just another form of rebellion, or did you really hate him so much for being a cop, that you chose the most anti-police profession you could find, short of being a criminal?"

Marisa wrenched her arm free and actually took a step back, retreating from the heat of his assault. Now she was beyond anger to true fury and she let him have it.

"You bastard! How dare you presume to know anything about my father and me? First of all, not all cops are so narrow-minded and ignorant about the media, Captain Craine. Not that it's any of your business, but it just so happens my father was very supportive of my career choice. The only thing he didn't like was that I couldn't stay in Pittsburgh to go to college or get my first job." Her face was flaming and her hands shook with fury, her anger

didn't lessen even a fraction as she continued her tirade.

"Secondly, you obviously don't have children or you would know that most 16-year old girls are hell on wheels, and having just lost my mother, I was exceptionally difficult—but guess what? I grew up, just like every other teenager. I'm a responsible, independent woman, AND I am not only a reporter, I'm a damn good reporter—as you WILL see, because whether you like it or not, I AM covering the cops beat here. And just to set your narrow little mind at ease—know this—I would quit my job before I would ever dream of exploiting any of the relationships I have here in the department. I grew up knowing these guys—they're the only family I have left, and if you knew the people under your command even half as well as my father, Captain, you wouldn't even think such a vicious idea. So you can just take your rookie stereotypes and shove 'em where the sun don't shine!"

Marisa stomped out of his office, slamming the door as she left, and kept right on going straight out of the precinct house. She could spit nails she was so angry. She walked, or maybe stalked is a better description, to the station 10 blocks away to try and cool off a little. She cursed him every step of the way, rubbing the wrist he'd held in his vise grip.

*What an ass! she thought, Dad, you'd roll over in your grave if you could see who's running your precinct now. Michael Craine obviously didn't learn anything riding with you!*

Michael spent a good part of the afternoon thinking about their encounter as well. He shook his head trying to clear the frustration and figure out when things spiraled out of control. He wasn't one to lose it like that, especially the first time he met someone. It usually took a little while before anyone got under his skin like Marisa Shaw did. Maybe it was just that he didn't think she deserved Byron as a Dad.

All Michael knew of their relationship was the grief she gave Byron during the year he rode with him--and that was constant. Michael was convinced Marisa was nothing more than a spoiled brat who never appreciated what she had in Byron. She certainly still had that famous temper that he knew had gotten her into a world of trouble when she was a teen. Michael scowled as he remembered the number of times they'd been out on the streets and Byron would have that little worry frown he'd get when he was thinking about Marisa. Michael would ask what she'd done this time and Byron would usually tell him he'd had to punish her for some wild bit of mischief she'd cooked up. Then Michael would see the hurt in his eyes—he knew how hard it was for Byron when he was fighting with his daughter—but she just continued to test him that year. Michael figured that girl must have spent her entire junior year in high school with a sore butt.

Michael did know what Marisa was talking about when she said the department was like a family. Byron had been like a second father to Michael, teaching him the ropes with patience and understanding. He had always kept close tabs on Michael's career and had given him advice whenever he asked. Michael knew Byron was that kind of role model for a lot of guys in the department, and it pissed him off that Marisa would exploit those relationships just to get a story and advance her own career.

Michael was sure Marisa's agenda was just like that of every other reporter—exploit, manipulate and sensationalize—anything for ratings. He had seen firsthand the results of that tragically when a key witness in a murder case agreed to talk to a reporter, even though police had warned against it. The television news reporter had promised to protect the witness' identity, but he was sloppy and whatever concealment was supposed to take place in post-production of the story, never happened. The witness was seen full-face and three days later

was found floating in the Monogahela River. The suspect was found not guilty and the victim never got justice. That victim was a young woman he had loved and hoped to marry. God, he hated reporters!

## Chapter Two

The next couple of months flew by. Marisa quickly made a name for herself at the station as the go-to person for crime stories. She was a good investigator and knew how to ferret out those extra facts or background that made her stories stand out. She also didn't limit herself to police blotter stories—murders, robberies, fires—stuff that was easy to cover. She looked for the story behind the crime, and always tried to make crime victims human beings, not just names on a police report. She also tried to report stories from a solution and prevention perspective which viewers and cops liked.

And it wasn't just her co-workers and viewers who noticed her work. It didn't take long for her approach to reporting crime, rather than her father's name, to be the reason she was known by many officers. They slowly stopped seeing her as just Big By's little girl, and treated her as a respected professional. She pushed at the lines and limits just like any reporter, but she never got in the way of an investigation or compromised a case with her reporting. She also treated cops with respect in her stories. She didn't back away from stories about police misconduct, but the rest of her stories typically gave police the credit they deserved.

She was definitely feeling good about things on the Sunday about eight weeks after her first dinner with John and Sally, as she walked up the steps of their home for another home cooked meal. John had been very mysterious, saying he had a surprise for her, but wouldn't give a clue about what it was.

She knocked and walked into the living room. She stopped for a moment to take in the aroma of love and family—the Barry house overflowed with it. The living room embraced you as soon as you walked in, from the slightly worn couch with its hand-knit afghan, to the old piano covered with lace doilies and dozens of pictures—family pictures stood

like little soldiers on every table and shelf, guarding special memories. Marisa had always loved coming here. After her Mom died, this was the place she and her Dad would come when they needed the secure feeling of home.

"Well, well, look what the cat dragged in!" The slow drawl with just the right touch of sarcasm came from a tall, rugged looking man casually leaning against the archway to the dining room. He had wavy dusty blonde hair, and the dreamiest blue eyes you'd ever want to see.

"Chris!!!!" Marisa lit up like a child just given her favorite candy. She raced over to him and nearly knocked him over as she threw her arms around him. He picked her up and swung her around. They held each other tightly for a long time.

"Missy, sweetheart, I'm so, so sorry," he whispered.

"Sssh, I know. Chris, I'm so glad you're safe. When you couldn't get away for Dad's funeral I knew you had to be deep under—I've been really worried about you. I can't believe you're here! This is so great!!"

They walked arm in arm out to the kitchen where John and Sally were busily getting dinner. They were fun to watch—after 35 years of marriage, they moved and worked together like two pieces of a puzzle.

"So what do you think of my surprise?" John asked as he hugged her.

"Well, it's not as good as Sally's meatloaf, but it'll do!" she laughed.

Chris reached around and smacked her behind, "Brat!"

"Hey, hands off!"

Sally just shook her head, "You two are worse than any siblings I know!" They all laughed as they started to carry food into the dining room. It was just the thing Marisa needed—her surrogate family enveloping her in their warmth and love.



"So, Chris, how long are you home for?" Marisa asked. Chris and John exchanged a surreptitious glance which she didn't miss before he answered.

"Actually it looks like you're stuck with me for a while. I decided I wanted a break from undercover work, and there was an opening in the Pittsburgh office, so I jumped at it. I'll be the liaison with local authorities on cases, and work any interdepartmental task forces. So, Louis Lane, we'll be crossing paths on crime scenes."

Marisa knew there was more to it than what he said, but wisely kept quiet. She was just excited about the prospect of having Chris in town.

"Chris, that's wonderful—I'm so happy you're going to be around. Now I'll have someone to pick on. Sally you must be thrilled!"

"I have every intention of fattening this boy up," she said—then she looked at her son in that way only a mother can. "So, now that you're finally both in the same town, what are you going to do about it?"

"Mom!!!" Chris immediately flushed with embarrassment. Marisa just laughed.

"Sally, I know you, John and my Dad had been planning our wedding for years, but I gotta tell you, dating Chris would be like dating my brother—heck you said it—we fight like siblings!"

"AND we love each other like siblings! So stop matchmaking. Besides if I ever had to live with this brat, I'd end up in the nut house!"

"And I refuse to kiss him and get his FBI cooties!" Everyone laughed, but Sally definitely looked at the two of them with regret.

After dinner and the dishes, Chris and Marisa went for a walk.

"OK, Chris, I caught the look between you and John. What's really going on? Are you in trouble?"

"You, young lady, are too observant for your own good. Now tell me, how are you doing, honey?" he asked hoping to divert her attention.

"Oh no, you don't—you're not ducking me mister! Chris, why are you really here?"

"OK, but are we off the record?" he grinned at her.

She punched him in the arm. "How can you even ask that question? This is me, remember--your sister, or so you claimed inside! Now, no more evasive tactics."

"Look, we just don't want Mom to know what's going on and worry any more than she already does. This last case got a little heavy—I was under a long time working some bad dudes. Our team leader decided it would be a good idea for me to lay low for a while. And what I said inside is true. I needed a break from undercover work—it was getting too intense and I felt like I was losing myself. So, I figured what better place to get grounded again than here at home. The liaison's job was open, so I grabbed it."

She watched a strange shadow cross his eyes as he talked about his last case and undercover work. It was only a hint of the darkness he had seen. She decided that moment, that she would do anything she could to bring the normal sparkle back.

"Well, I'm sorry for the reason, but I'm so glad you're here. And I know it means the world to your parents. John especially has had a sort of lost look since my Dad died. The two of them were closer than any brothers could be."

"Yeah, I know—I saw it as soon as I got home. He hasn't talked much about what happened, but I know he will when he's ready. Now, back to you—how are you doing really?"

She tried to turn away from him as tears again glistened in her eyes, but he would have none of it. He turned her back toward him and tipped her chin up so she had to look at him. Then he gathered her in his strong arms and just held on while she let go of a little more of her grief.

A few days later Chris ran into Marisa coming out of the downtown precinct—literally ran into her.

She was so focused on her own fury, she never saw him and plowed right into him. He grabbed her shoulders to keep her from falling, and then gave her a little shake to get her attention.

"Missy, watch where you're going! If you hadn't run into me, you would have headed right into traffic. Now what the heck has got you so riled up, you were ready to become a hood ornament for the next city bus?"

Marisa looked up at him, startled that he was there and confused at how she'd ended up in his arms. "Chris, I'm sorry, I didn't see you. But oooh—I'm so angry I could spit! One of these days I'm really gonna lose it with Craine, and haul off and deck him!"

"Whoa—settle down there. The last thing you need to be doing is decking a police captain. They don't take too kindly to that around here. Besides, from what I've seen Captain Craine is a good cop—the folks in your Dad's squad seem to think so. I've heard nothing but good things about him."

"Oh hell, not you too! If I hear one more time what a saint Michael Craine is, I think I'll scream. The man is an ass, and I'm sick and tired of his lecturing me and dressing me down in front of the guys or my colleagues."

"So, what did you do to make him mad?"

"What did I do? Some help you are! The man simply hates the media, and he's taken a special dislike to me because he's convinced I'm trading on my father's memory to get story information. Dammit, I work my butt off to get my stories. I don't need to manipulate or abuse my Dad's legacy to do my job. The nerve of that man! I swear I hate him. You know what, I've had enough, I'm going to the Chief to file a formal harassment complaint!"

Chris tightened his hold on Marisa, and shook her again, a little harder this time. "Stop right there Marisa. You will do no such thing. I know you—and I know Craine's reputation. He wouldn't dress you

down, unless you deserved it. So, I repeat, what did you do?"

"Nothing to deserve the lecture I just got, and he threatened to kick me off his crime scenes permanently or arrest me! I can't do my job if he pulls something like that. Hell, he can't do that anyway—what am I worried about? Public property is public property! And he wouldn't dare arrest me." She was pretty much ignoring Chris and just venting to herself.

"Marisa? I'm waiting for an answer."

"OK, so I crossed a police line last night. It was really dark and we couldn't see anything from where we were. I saw that the crime scene investigators had left, so the scene was processed. I just wanted to get a look at the area and talk to the coroner—it was no big deal, but Craine blew a gasket!"

"You what!? Are you crazy? Crime scenes aren't just roped off to preserve evidence, they're often dangerous. Are we talking about the riverside murder last night?"

"Yes but..."

"Yes, but, nothing! They were still looking for the shooter in that area—you could have been hurt."

"Chris calm down, it was not that big a deal—that shooter was long gone and everyone knew it!"

Now he was as angry as Marisa. He grabbed her arm and hauled her back behind the station house. He rested one foot up on a step and bent her over his thigh. Before she realized what he was doing, he landed a sharp slap to her backside.

"Ow! Chris, what do you think you're doing? Let me go!"

"I'll let you go" SMACK "when I'm convinced" SMACK "that you" SMACK "understand" SMACK "how serious" SMACK "this is!" SMACK SMACK.

"Ouch—oohh, Chris please stop—that hurts." SMACK SMACK "Someone will see us—let me go!" He delivered another half-dozen stinging slaps and

then let her up. She immediately started rubbing her smarting backside.

"I can't believe you just did that!"

"You deserved it and a lot more. Don't ever let me catch you crossing a police line. For crying out loud, Marisa, you know better than that!"

"The only thing I know right now is you ought to register that hand as a lethal weapon!"

Chris had to chuckle at that. He remembered from their childhood, she always got sarcastic after she'd been spanked—once she stopped sobbing at the burn in her butt that is.

"Missy, I'm serious. If I find you putting yourself in danger like that again, I promise you, you'll get a lot more than a few light swats!"

"Few light swats' my ass!"

"Exactly!!" and they both laughed at that, but Marisa was still rubbing at the sting.

"OK. So maybe Cranky Craine had a reason to be pissed at me this time. But Chris, it's really true—the guy hates the media. And he does think I'm abusing my relationships with some of the officers. But I swear I'd never do that."

"I know—but that's because I know you. He doesn't. He also has good reason to hate the media. A bad reporter got a key witness killed in a case of his that was very personal. The suspect walked."

"Oh my God! I didn't know."

"No you didn't. And for someone who usually does her homework, I'm surprised."

"I guess I was just so angry with him after our first confrontation that I never bothered. Still that doesn't excuse his attitude about me and my father. He has no idea how his comments cut through me."

"Would you like me to talk with him?"

"NO, I fight my own battles—you know that!"

"OK! OK! Don't get your hackles up!"

"Look Chris, I've got to get to work, and I assume so do you. I'll talk to you soon—maybe we can have dinner."

"I'd like that, and just remember my warning young lady!"

She rubbed her backside again, "I think I'll be remembering it for a while! And it wouldn't hurt you to remember I'm a grown woman—28 is a little old to be spanked don't you think?"

"I believe it was your father who said in no uncertain terms that you would never be too old to end up over his knee. Well, now that becomes 'big brother' duty! And trust me I will do my duty if you need it!"

Marisa stuck her tongue out at Chris and then scrambled away, just out of reach as he swung for another smack.

Chris laughed, "Call me, brat, I'll take you to dinner!"

"You got it!" She called back over her shoulder and headed up to the Point where the station was located. At least she was in a better mood, despite the slight sting she still felt in her backside. She decided she didn't ever want to get Chris really angry--if that's what he considered 'a few light smacks', she couldn't imagine how much it would hurt if ever really let her have it!

Marisa had only been at her desk about a half-hour when her phone rang.

"Marisa this is Rick—there's something going down in Edgewood you'll want to cover—down by the plaza." Click. He hung up before she could even respond, but Rick was a great source out of the eastern precinct. She went to the news desk, and told the assignment editor she needed a photographer and a live truck if he had one.

"I don't know what we've got, but it'll be nearly four before we get there and if it's big, you're going to want me live at 5. I'll let you know what's going on as soon as we get on the scene, but this source is pretty good, so I'd count on something. The fact that scanner traffic is quiet means they don't want us there, so that's a sign it's a good story!"

"OK Marisa, take Ron and I'll have Dick meet you there with a live truck. I'll let the producers know what's going on."

"Thanks—we'll be in touch!"

When Marisa and Ron got on the scene the first thing they noticed was no other media. It appeared all the cop cars were surrounding a bank in the plaza. They could tell by the way all the cops were down behind their cars that the suspects must still be inside. The SWAT team was on the scene. As Marisa and Ron approached, she swore.

"Damn, what the hell is Craine doing here, this isn't his precinct!"

"SWAT team is out of the downtown station—which is just great!" Ron grumbled, "Everybody's favorite captain is in charge—we might as well go home now!!"

"No way—we're staying and making a pain in the ass of ourselves! This is an exclusive and I'm not missing the story."

She approached the outside perimeter and quickly learned there was a single gunman inside and he had about a half-dozen hostages. The way the cops were acting, she didn't think this was a standard robbery—there was something more going on. She slipped inside the outer perimeter to the inside lines. She saw Craine's deputy and crawled up to him, keeping low.

"Hey lieutenant, what's going on—this doesn't look like a robbery."

"Marisa—what the hell are you doing here? The Cap ordered radio silence—how did you pick up on this? Never mind—I don't want to know. Just do me a favor, stay under Craine's radar—I don't need the grief!"

"No problem, just give me a clue about what's going on. Is the power still on in the bank?"

"Yes, and we have every reason to believe he's got access to TV. All I can tell you is you're right—this isn't a robbery, but there are hostages."

"OK—no live until I hear differently, but please don't kick me out to the outer perimeter—it's too far out, we can't get anything."

"You got a deal—just keep that live truck out of site—this is a volatile situation."

Marisa found Ron and called back to the station on her cell phone—she asked to speak directly to her boss, the News Director.

"This is what we've got Kyle—there's a hostage situation at the First National Bank, but it's not a robbery. No competition here so far—and we can't go live yet—there's a chance that the suspect inside could be watching. I would say don't do anything yet—let's sit on this so we don't endanger the hostages."

"I agree Marisa. Stay on top of it and call in every 15 minutes—or sooner if something happens. We'll go ahead and fire up the live truck and get a signal, so we're ready as soon as you have something."

"Sounds good—I'll stay in close touch!"

Marisa briefed Ron and Dick Grey, the live truck operator who just arrived, then turned to head back to the inside perimeter and ran right into Michael Craine. He had to grab her arms to steady her so she didn't trip.

"We haven't reported anything yet Captain and we're just setting up the live to be ready—we won't do anything as long as the gunman might be watching—so back off—I'm not doing anything wrong!" She was determined to pre-empt another lecture.

"I didn't say you were. Can I talk to you? We need your help." Michael spoke softly, and there was no anger in his voice. Marisa was speechless, it was the first time he had ever treated her with anything other than contempt. He gently guided her away from her crew and over to the negotiation staging area.

"This is Bob Brown, our chief negotiator. Bob, Marisa Shaw, reporter for WKTX-TV--brief her—Miss



Shaw this has got to be off the record until we resolve this." He glared at her with the 'don't even think about it' look she was more familiar with.

"Of course—I understand."

"Miss Shaw, I knew your Dad, I'm sorry."

"Thanks, please call me Marisa"

"Marisa, here's what's going on. We have a single man with a gun. As I believe you already know, this is not about robbery. But I can't find out what is going on. All I can tell is he feels like he was treated unfairly by the bank. He wanted us to send in the bank president. His name is Gary and now he wants to talk to a reporter. He wants to tell his story live—he doesn't understand why there's been no coverage yet." Bob explained this all with the calm confidence of a negotiator.

"So you want me to go in and do an interview or what?"

Michael cut in, "NO absolutely not! We've got a look-a-like police woman coming—we just want to borrow your camera gear for our people." Marisa didn't hear anything after 'look-a-like'. She turned back to Michael with a cold stare.

"What do you mean you've sent for a 'look-a-like'? Are you trying to tell me this guy asked for me specifically?" she asked in a very deliberate voice.

Michael realized immediately he'd made a mistake. "It doesn't matter—there's no way we're sending more civilians in there to be hostages. It's much too dangerous."

Marisa now ignored Michael and addressed the negotiator. "What happens when you send in someone who's not me with two other officers who don't know anything about TV, and this gunman realizes he's been had?"

"He's very volatile—if he figures out what we're doing and he doesn't get the platform he wants, I believe he will start shooting. Sorry, Captain, but that's what I think."

Marisa simply turned and walked away from all of them back to her crew. She told them the situation and asked a few questions, then called her boss and laid out their plan.

Kyle exploded. "You want to go in there? Are you crazy? There's no way I would ask anyone to do that for any story. It's not worth it. I can't approve that." Marisa had to hold her cell phone away from her ear he was shouting so loudly.

"Kyle, listen to me—it's not about the story right now, it's about the safety of a half-dozen innocent people. Now Ron and Dick are both with me on this. We'll wear vests and beam everything back to you live so you know exactly what's going on. There'll be a cop with us on the crew. If all this guy wants is a place to vent—let's give it to him before he kills someone."

"Dammit Marisa, you're not a trained negotiator—what if someone gets hurt?"

"We'll be careful and I am a trained interviewer—trust me Kyle I'm not going to put myself or my crew in any unnecessary danger. We'll be OK—but we've all talked about it and we're going in."

She hung up, went back to the live truck and asked one more time if Ron and Dick were sure they wanted to do this. With the solid affirmatives she expected from true newsmen, they all headed back to the staging area.

"Miss Shaw, your double is here—so what's your answer, can we use your equipment or not?" Michael was losing patience, and he was angry that she had just walked off like that.

"Captain you can send your policewoman home. Here's what's going to happen. Ron, Dick and I will go in with ONE of your people as a fourth member of our crew. We will set-up for a live interview and..."

"Forget it!! There's no way you're giving this guy a live platform! God—I should have known you

media people would do anything for ratings!!" Michael exploded.

"Craine for once, shut-up and listen." Now Marisa's anger matched his—she wasn't even sure she could hold her cool long enough to explain the full plan. "We have no intention of putting this guy on the air live—geez give us a little credit. We haven't done anything up to this point, why would we change now as he gets more unpredictable? What I was about to say, before I was interrupted was, we can rig a look-live signal into the bank and it will look to him like we're going live, but his TV will be the only one showing the 'live' report. You can monitor everything from out here in our live truck. That's the only viable plan. We're not turning our equipment over to amateurs, and we ARE shooting the interview for later use. That's the deal—take it or leave it—but right now we're the only game in town for you."

"I'm not sending more hostages in there for him, period! And don't think you're the only source of help—I bet I could call either of your competing stations and get all the cooperation I want in return for the story!" Michael countered.

"Go right ahead—but we're not budging from our position. We go in with our gear or no one does. And as for MORE hostages, I would assume you'd be smart enough to trade us for four hostages in there! Look, we'll sign whatever releases you want—but we're going in, and the only way you're stopping us is to arrest us or shoot us. Hell Craine, look at it this way, if I do say or do something stupid and get shot, that's just one less pain-in-the-ass journalist you have to worry about!" As soon as the words were out of her mouth Marisa knew she'd gone too far.

Michael grabbed her and shook her hard. He was angrier than she had ever seen, and she'd seen him pretty angry. He literally growled at her, "This is NOT a game Marisa! You or your crew COULD easily

get hurt or killed—not to mention the hostages or some of my officers!"

"Let her go Captain Craine." Marisa released a long breath of relief as Chris arrived on the scene. Michael let her go and turned to him.

"Maybe you can talk some sense into her!" he said as he stalked off.

Chris glared at Marisa and then turned to Bob Brown for an objective assessment of the situation. Bob laid it out and then surprised everyone by endorsing Marisa's plan. "We're running out of options to end this peacefully. I'm at a stalemate in talks. We either storm the bank, or we try the TV thing. I truly believe we're less likely to get someone killed if she and her crew go in."

Marisa looked at Chris and could see that was the last thing he wanted to hear. He didn't need to say a thing to her, his eyes conveyed the message of his warning from this afternoon. So she was surprised again when he said, "I don't like it, but I think you're right Lieutenant Brown. I'll go talk to the Captain, you get them suited up with vests and brief her on the right and wrong things to say."

Chris and Michael came back about 15 minutes later and Marisa, Ron and Dick were ready to go along with a member of the SWAT team who would help Ron carry his gear and set-up. Michael didn't say a word to anyone, he simply nodded his head at Bob as a signal to go ahead.

Bob negotiated the release of four hostages in return for sending in the crew. He had given Marisa very specific instructions of what to say and what information to try and get, as well as the hot buttons to avoid. Then they headed in. Marisa's stomach felt like someone had just put it through a sausage grinder. Ron put his arm around her shoulders just as they were about to enter the bank and told her she would do great—then the act began.

Michael, Bob and Chris watched and heard everything in the live truck as soon as Ron set-up

his camera and Dick plugged in the live cables. Just as Bob had instructed her, Marisa talked very calmly to Gary, explained everything that the crew was doing and honestly answered all his questions. Then she started gently probing to get information about why he did it—she told him she needed prep information for the interview and he bought everything she said completely.

Out in the truck, Bob was really impressed. "She's great—very calm—working him perfectly. Captain, I know this wasn't what you wanted, but I think it's working. Once he thinks he's been heard on TV, I'm betting he gives it all up. No one gets hurt."

Still Michael said nothing. His anger was slowly fading, but it was replaced by a deep concern. This woman got under his skin more than any person he'd ever met, but she was still Byron Shaw's daughter and he would never forgive himself if anything happened to her. As he watched her work, he was suddenly struck by the thought there was more to his concern than just her father. *My God*, he thought, *I actually am worried about what happens to this brat! Unbelievable!* He almost chuckled at the irony—of all the women in the world, he had to be attracted to the one who could raise the hairs on the back of his neck just by walking into a room! *Must be the challenge*, he said to himself.

Inside the bank Marisa was just about ready to start the fake live. When she got the cue from Dick that all was ready, she nodded, and they started. On the TV in the bank a Special Report graphic fed in from the live truck came up over the program airing on WKTU. Then Marisa popped up on the screen. She explained the situation and told a little of Gary's story, then she walked over to him and started the interview. She slowly worked him through his story and then took the next step, which was exactly what Bob had told her NOT to do.

Bob jumped up and started pacing like a caged tiger in the tight confines of the live truck. "Damn, I told her not to try and negotiate him out! She's got him right where we want him—she pushes too hard and the whole thing blows!" He turned to Dick who was now back in the truck feeding the live signal into the bank. "Can we talk to her—does she have communication? I need to get her to back off—she's putting herself and everyone else in there in danger!"

"I don't think so," he lied. "But listen--I think he's ready to give up!" Dick said.

Sure enough, she had convinced him that he got what he wanted and had him talking about the fact that he didn't really want to hurt anyone. Then she convinced him he should give himself up on live TV, so he wouldn't be hurt by the cops. They were walking out! Bob, Chris and Michael were dumbfounded.

As police grabbed the suspect, cuffed him and dragged him to a police car, Marisa's hands started to shake. She was afraid for a minute her legs would give out, then she heard her boss talking to her through her IFB earpiece—that's the communication system between live field crews and the station that allows reporters to hear the on air signal for cues and allows producers and directors to talk to reporters.

"Wow, Marisa great job—I've never seen anything like it!! OK, get ready. We're coming to you live for real in about a minute. We've already pulled a long cut from your interview where he talks about losing his job, and his wife's illness and then the bank foreclosing on his house. We'll toss live to you, just tell the story of what happened and how you ended up inside, then introduce the interview clip. It runs about three minutes, and then we're back to you live for a tag and Q&A with Marsha and Jim—stand-by kiddo!"

Ron watched as Marisa shook off her shakiness and got ready for air. "Hey are you OK with this? We can tell Kyle to hold off if you need a minute."

"I'm fine—let's do it." Her voice didn't have the confidence of her words, but as she heard Marsha and Jim break into programming for the special report—she settled into reporter mode. Michael and Chris broke through the chaos at the bank entrance at that moment, but Ron held them back.

"Not now guys—she's about to go live." And at that very second she heard her cue and started. Somehow she held it together for another five minutes while she explained what happened, introduced the clip and then answered at least a dozen questions from the anchors. She was so relieved when she heard the producer in her ear say she was clear. Then Kyle got on the IFB and told her another reporter was on the scene and would want to interview her. Since she was now part of the story, he didn't want her to cover it for the 11pm news. Normally she would have fought tooth and nail to keep an exclusive story like this, but not tonight.

It was quickly starting to sink in what she had done and how much had been riding on every word she had said to the gunman. He had held the gun pointed toward her or the remaining hostages the whole time. Marisa had never had anyone point a gun at her before. She finally understood why Michael didn't want her to go in, and at that moment her hands started to shake uncontrollably and her legs gave way. She would have crumpled to the ground, but both Chris and Michael were right there to catch her.

The firm grips on both arms helped her regain her balance. "Sorry guys, I don't know what happened there for a minute—I'll be OK". But they ignored her comments. Chris lifted her up in his arms, while Michael spoke soft, calming words, as they headed for the rescue squad standing by on the scene.

"Marisa, just relax—what you're feeling is perfectly normal for someone who just went through what you did. You're experiencing a little post traumatic shock—we're going to get you over to the ambulance. You're going to be fine—it's all over."

"Yeah, I'm fine, really. Chris you can put me down, I can walk." But he kept going and didn't put her down till he set her on the back end of the ambulance.

He told the paramedics, "She's pretty shaky—she could be headed for full shock--we need to get her checked out."

"Hello?? Is anyone listening?? I'm feeling much better—I'm going to be fine. I don't need to go to the hospital. I just want to do the interview for 11 and go home." She started to get up and two sets of hands pushed her right back down.

Chris looked at her sternly, "Listen to me young lady, you're already in enough trouble for ignoring the negotiator's orders, don't make it worse by arguing with me now. You almost collapsed a couple of minutes ago—I can feel your pulse racing, your hands are shaking like flags on a windy day, and you've lost every bit of color in your face. Those are all classic signs of someone about to go into shock. You ARE GOING to the hospital!"

Marisa opened her mouth to argue, but the looks on both Chris and Michael's faces stopped her—that along with a dizzy spell!

"The adrenaline has definitely worn off—and with it, the fearlessness. I'll ride with her to the hospital and let them know what happened and that shock is a definite possibility." Chris spoke under his breath to Michael as the paramedics loaded Marisa into the ambulance.

"I've got some things to clear up here—then I'll join you at the hospital. We've got to get a statement at some point—but that probably won't happen until tomorrow. See you at the hospital in about an hour." Michael watched as Chris climbed



up and was speaking soft, soothing words to Marisa. He was very annoyed to find he felt a stab of jealousy that Chris was in the ambulance instead of him. *What is it about this woman that gets into my head?! I can't possibly be jealous—that would mean I actually feel something! I'm not letting this happen!* Unfortunately Michael's self-talk was not helping—he really did feel something for this woman and it wasn't the loathing he'd been feeding off of for weeks!

## Chapter Three

It was nearly two hours before Michael got to the hospital. He found Chris pacing and muttering to himself like a nervous candidate before a big job interview.

"What's wrong—is she OK?" Michael asked, the concern etched in his face as it had been all evening.

"Yeah, it looks like she's going to be fine—her blood pressure spiked and she's still pretty unsteady on her feet—but mostly she's just a pain in the ass. She's giving the ER doc a hard time about possibly staying overnight for observation and hassling everyone about leaving. I'll tell you Michael, I love that girl to pieces, but when she gets in her 'Miss Independent, I don't need anyone' mode, she is a royal brat! I've never met a woman who needed a good trip over a man's knee more than that one!"

That pang of jealousy gripped Michael again as he heard Chris declare his love for Marisa. He knew they were close and had wondered if there was more than friendship there. Now he mistakenly figured he knew, and he was not happy to discover how disappointed he was at the news.

"I swear when I get her home she's got one heck of a spanking coming!"

Michael chuckled. "I have to admit the same thought's crossed my mind a few times the last 24 hours!" At that moment the ER doctor came into the Waiting Room.

"Mr. Barry, we've decided to release her tonight. She's so agitated about staying I honestly think it would do more harm than good to keep her overnight. Her blood pressure's stabilized and I'm pretty sure the risk of going into full shock is passed. But someone should stay with her tonight—keep an eye out for disorientation, the shakes or chills. She still hasn't really dealt with the trauma of what happened tonight and when it hits her she's going to need someone there to help her with what

will most likely be an overwhelming sense of fear. Right now she's got a pretty high 'I'm fine' fence up. That will come down at some point and she shouldn't be alone. But physically, I think she'll be OK in a day or so. She should take it easy at least for tomorrow—although I don't envy the person who has to enforce that!"

Chris and Michael both laughed at that—the doc had sized up Marisa pretty quickly.

"I'm going to give her a super-shot of Valium which should help her to relax and eventually sleep, then she can go home. I assume one of you will take her because she definitely should not drive tonight."

"Yup, we'll get her home. Thanks doc, I know she's been a pain in the ass!"

"Let's just say assertive and leave it at that!" the doctor gave them a look that clearly said he was very glad she wasn't his fulltime responsibility.

At that moment Chris' pager went off. He looked the number and message and swore under his breath. "I've got to make a call—be right back."

Michael walked over to the curtained area where Marisa was and heard her arguing with the nurse over the shot.

"What's going on in here?" He looked at Marisa's face and saw real fear. When he looked at the nurse there was only frustration.

"Nothing, I'm just trying to explain to Nurse Ratchet here that I've been poked and prodded quite enough for one night. I don't want anymore drugs, I just want to go home!"

"We're going to take you home Marisa," he said softly. "But you need to get this Valium shot first." He turned to the nurse and asked, "arm or ass?"

"It goes in the buttocks."

Michael reached around and took Marisa's hands gently and started leading her to the examining table to lean over. All the while he talked to her to try and calm her. "Don't much like needles, huh?"

She shook her head no—tears were beginning to glisten in her eyes.

"It's OK—me neither. But this will be quick and then we're out of here." He figured any fear of needles was exaggerated by the emotions and stress of the night. He gradually got her to lean over the table and kept holding her hands, as he gently massaged her wrists with his thumb. It was working to calm her down. Then she felt the nurse pull down the pants she had already put back on and she tensed, squeezing Michael's hand.

"Marisa—look at me." She looked up into his eyes, expecting to see ridicule and instead found incredible compassion. "Try not to tense up, it'll only hurt worse—just relax and you'll be done before you know it."

The nurse swabbed the area with alcohol and injected the drug, but it had to be a slow injection so Marisa felt every bit of it. Her sharp intake of breath told Michael it was a painful shot. He merely captured her eyes in his gaze and squeezed her hands for support. Then it was over and the moment between them passed. Marisa looked away, embarrassed by her childish behavior, and confused by the feelings his touch was generating.

She turned to the nurse, "Sorry, I didn't mean to be such a brat. I had a very nasty experience with a needle that broke off during a shot as a child and now I sort of have an irrational fear of needles."

"No problem honey—you should see some of the grown men who whine and carry on at the slightest shot! You take care now, and we'll be watching you on TV."

Marisa wasn't sure what to say to Michael. She almost preferred the unyielding cop who yelled at her to this new tender approach—the grouch she knew how to handle. She had no idea what to do with what she was feeling at this moment. Fortunately she was given a reprieve as Chris walked into the area, and took advantage of the bare butt she presented to smack her hard.

"Oww! Dammit Chris, I just got a shot!"

"I know, I figured I'd take your mind off the needle!" he grinned briefly, but then turned serious. "Missy, I've got to fly to D.C. tonight. Something's breaking on my last case. I can call Dad to come get you and take you to my folks' house."

"No, don't worry them. I can just grab a cab—I'll be fine, honest."

"You're obviously forgetting the doctor said you shouldn't be alone tonight. Don't worry Chris, I'll get her home." Michael said.

"No really—it's OK..." Marisa jumped in—she didn't want to be alone with Michael until she had a chance to sort out her feelings.

"Marisa this is not open to discussion. Besides, you and I have a few things to talk about!" Michael said sternly.

"Thanks, Michael. I'll feel much better knowing she's got a firm hand to keep her in line and following doctor's orders."

"Hey—Hello?? Remember me?? Don't I get any say here?"

"NO!" They both said at once.

Chris came up and kissed Marisa on the forehead. "I've gotta go—take care sweetie, and for goodness sake—be good, or I promise you, you'll get a spanking you'll never forget when I get back!"

"Chris!" She blushed for the second time at the mention of a spanking in front of Michael.

Chris chuckled, shook Michael's hand and left. Michael turned to Marisa, "If you're ready, I'll take you home."

"Definitely ready!"

The ride to Marisa's home was quiet. Both were lost in their own thoughts—about each other. When they pulled up to the row house that had been Byron's pride and joy, Michael again felt the loss of his mentor. He wondered how Marisa managed to live here and not dwell on his death everyday. She seemed to read his thoughts.

"Being here lets me focus on the memories of our life together rather than the fact that he's gone. You know I actually never lived here—Dad bought this place and restored it after I went to college. He always said without me around he needed another major project." She smiled that faraway smile people get when they're lost in a special moment.

Michael didn't say anything. He could remember coming out here on weekends sometimes to help By—it had been great therapy sanding down a railing or painting a ceiling, and always there was the quiet wisdom of experience slipped in. Several of the guys had a hand in the restoration project—they used to kid each other about which one had been conned into providing free labor that weekend. But they all had treasured those one-on-one visits and talks with Byron.

Michael got out and walked around to help Marisa out of the car. She still seemed a little unsteady. He took her keys, opened the door and guided her to the big, overstuffed couch. He insisted that she sit and then lifted her feet up, so she was reclining.

"Now you stay put! I'll put on the kettle for some tea. Do want something to eat?"

"Michael, I appreciate your bringing me home, but you don't have to stay. I'm going to be just fine. I'll probably just go to bed in a little while anyway."

"That's fine, whenever you're ready, just go. But the doctor said you shouldn't be left alone tonight—so you won't be. And I don't want to hear another word on the subject. Now, how about a sandwich or something—you haven't eaten all night."

Marisa sighed. She was obviously stuck with Michael tonight, so she'd just have to deal with him. "You know, you're awfully bossy! But I guess I should be grateful it's you bossing me around and not Chris. If he were here tonight, I'd be going to bed with a very sore bottom."

Michael stuck his head out of the kitchen doorway with a raised eyebrow, "What makes you

think you're off the hook because it's me here young lady!?"

Marisa blushed and then tried to change the subject by answering his previous question. "I'm really not hungry, but a cup of tea would be nice. There are herbal tea bags in the pantry."

Of course Michael saw right through it. "Nice diversion, but we will get back to the question of your backside over my knee before the night is over!"

Michael busied himself in the kitchen, all the while thinking about a different conversation he needed to have with Marisa. It wasn't easy for him to admit he was wrong, but he certainly had misjudged her, and he had to make that right. Even if he couldn't act on his feelings, he wanted to clear the air, and at least open the door to friendship.

Marisa laid her head back on the arm of the couch and closed her eyes. But as soon as she started to relax a little, the images of the evening came flooding back, and a paralyzing fear with them. She immediately opened her eyes and sat up. When Michael brought out the tea, her hands were shaking so badly she couldn't hold the cup.

"Marisa, what happened—are you OK?" He took her hands in his own large, strong hands and gently rubbed them. She felt cold, so he grabbed the afghan lying over a chair and covered her. Then he sat on the edge of the couch and helped her drink some tea. She took a couple of deep breaths and seemed to calm down.

"You know, you need to talk about what happened tonight before you can get over that fear that you feel now." he said in the gentlest voice she'd ever heard. It was almost like listening to her father when she was a small child. Tears welled up, but she just wasn't ready to face it, so she shook her head no and concentrated on taking the tea cup and holding it steady. She refused to look at him.

Michael knew he shouldn't push her. So he backed off, and moved to a chair next to the couch.

He watched her for several moments, and then decided what he wanted to say might be just the distraction she needed.

"Marisa, we need to talk about something else." The serious tone of his voice brought her eyes back to him. "I am so sorry for the way I treated you when you first came back to Pittsburgh." Marisa wasn't sure what she expected, but this certainly wasn't it! Captain Michael Craine—notorious hater of reporters and the man convinced she was nothing more than a spoiled brat—apologizing! Her mouth opened, but she was speechless.

He grinned. "You don't have to look quite so shocked! Believe it or not, I can admit when I'm wrong." She smiled now.

"Please feel free—you have my undivided attention."

He gave her a look that said don't push it, but then continued in the same serious tone he started with. "I was way out of line with those things I said about you and your father. You were right. I still had you pegged as that bratty 16-year-old who I watched give By nothing but grief. It used to make me so angry to the point I'd think you didn't deserve him as a Dad. You see I lost my father when I was very young, and Byron was the closest thing I'd had to a father in years. It made me furious that you couldn't appreciate the precious gift you had."

Marisa didn't know what to say—his confession was so heartfelt, she was completely caught in its emotion. Michael was quiet for a few minutes and then continued. "Then of course you added insult to injury in my book by becoming a reporter. I could only see that as a slap in your Dad's face."

Now she felt compelled to defend her profession—this was at least something she felt on safer ground with. "Michael, I know you had a really bad experience with a reporter. I'm so sorry about what happened to your fiancé. But just like one bad cop doesn't make all the rest corrupt, one bad



reporter doesn't make us all irresponsible." She spoke without any recriminations in her voice—just straightforward facts.

"I know you're right—it's just very hard for me to look at a reporter and see any motive other than exploitation. But I have to admit, I've been watching your work closely—like tonight. You are a top notch professional Marisa, and I respect what I've seen--with the exception of ignoring the negotiator's orders tonight, which by the way, we WILL have a discussion about later!"

A chill crept up Marisa's spine at the mention of tonight's events. Normally she would have caught the threat in Michael's voice, but that was blocked by the irrational fear which once again settled in. Michael saw the change in her eyes. He'd seen that look in many a rookie's eyes after their first encounter with the real danger of the job—usually the first time they faced down a gun. It was very important to get the fear out in the open and deal with it, or it could incapacitate her the next time she faced a dangerous situation. But he also knew she was not ready yet as he watched her with great effort, mask her feelings and come back to the discussion at hand.

"I know it took a lot for you to make that admission! Thank you, it means a lot."

"Marisa, I guess you're just going to have accept one fact about the guys in the department. As much as they are growing to respect you, a part of them and me will always see you as Big By's little girl. For many of us, you're all we have left of him. That's something we want to protect and cherish. Besides we can all imagine him chewing us a new butt if we didn't take care of you!"

Marisa smiled at that, "I guess I never thought of it that way before—that I'm all that's left of my Dad." A tear slipped down her cheek. "I'll try a little harder not to be so prickly when one of you gets overprotective. But I still plan to do everything I need to, to do my job—so I won't let any of you get

in the way of that!" Her stubborn streak was now showing a mile wide, but Michael was relieved to see it replace her fear.

"And there's still going to be plenty of times when we do everything in our power to get in your way! There are times when the progress of investigation outweighs the public's right to know. But I think I've learned I need to be more responsive to the media, and I will try."

"Wow! Wait till my colleagues get a look at the reformed Captain Craine! You know what we all call you, don't you?"

Michael groaned. "I'm afraid to ask."

She laughed, "Cranky Craine!"

"Oh you do, do you! And I suppose you top the list of those endorsing that moniker?"

"Well, until tonight, I haven't had much evidence to the contrary!"

"I see. I'm going to the kitchen to warm up the water for more tea. Then young lady, you're going to find out just how cranky I can be when someone doesn't follow orders for her own safety!"

Marisa definitely got the threat in his voice this time. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Big mistake, little girl! I never back down from a challenge!"

He went into the kitchen. Marisa contemplated making a run for it to her bedroom, but suddenly she was overwhelmed with exhaustion and honestly didn't think she could get up from the couch if she tried. She laid back and almost immediately fell asleep. When Michael came out a few minutes later, that's how he found her, sound asleep.

He chuckled to himself and thought, *well she found a way to get out of a spanking for now—but tomorrow will be a different story!* He set down the tea and carefully picked her up and carried into her bedroom. He couldn't help but notice her stuff was still in the guest bedroom, she hadn't moved into Byron's master suite. In fact, he realized she hadn't changed a thing—the house was still exactly as he

had left it. Michael supposed it would take time before she made it her own. He laid her on the bed and covered her. She didn't stir once. He figured she was out for the night.

He headed out to the couch she had vacated and resigned himself to sleeping there tonight. He couldn't imagine sleeping in By's room either.

When Marisa awoke in the morning, she was surprised to still be dressed. She stretched and recalled some of what happened last night. She was feeling fuzzy headed and lethargic. She figured it must be lingering effects of the shot, which had also left a sore bruise on her backside. What she needed was a good run to clear her head and limber up her body. She changed into her spandex running pants and midriff top, stretched and headed out to the living room. She noticed the pillow and afghan on the couch and suddenly remembered that Michael had planned to stay the night.

She smiled at the thought of him—then she shook her head in wonderment. How could she change her feelings about a man so quickly? And why did she now get this funny warm feeling inside when she thought about him? She thought about the electricity of his touch. *No way! I'm not getting tangled up with a stubborn, bossy cop!*, she said to herself firmly. But she couldn't deny the feeling of disappointment that he wasn't still there.

She looked to her key hanger on the wall and saw her keys weren't there. *Damn, I bet he stuck them in his pocket last night and took off with them this morning!* She decided she'd just leave the door unlocked, have her run, and then call him when she got back and arrange to pick up her keys. She headed out at a slow easy pace into a beautiful Pittsburgh fall morning, never noticing the note on the kitchen table.

Marisa had just rounded the bend out of sight when Michael drove up. He headed into the house loaded down with fresh bagels, cream cheese and wonderfully smelling coffee from a corner deli. As

he fumbled for her keys, he was surprised to find the door unlocked. He was sure he'd locked it when he left. He dropped his armload on the dining room table and headed back to her bedroom to check on Marisa.

He was immediately concerned when he found her gone. He called out thinking maybe she was in the bathroom or something, but there was no answer. He went back into the kitchen. It didn't look like she'd touched his note. Just then the phone rang—he debated over answering it, and decided he should let the machine pick up. When he heard her boss start to leave a message he picked up.

They chatted for a while, and Michael explained why he was there. He then told Kyle he didn't know where Marisa was. Kyle suggested she might be out running, because that's how she ordinarily started her day—he'd often caught her on her cell phone in the middle of her run. Michael and Kyle talked for a little while longer. And when Michael hung up the phone, he had another reason to be angry with Marisa.

Marisa meanwhile was starting to feel a little light headed and decided to turn back early. When she got to her house, she was surprised to see a strange car in the driveway. Then she remembered it was the car she rode home in last night—Michael was back! She breezed into the house.

"Michael, you're back... Mmmmm... something smells..." She didn't get to finish her sentence before Michael confronted her.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Relax. I went for a run—needed to clear my head. I smell 'Tony's Deli' coffee."

"Do you always leave your door unlocked? And what about my note—you couldn't wait 15 minutes or leave me word where you were? Plus the doctor said you should take it easy today—so you interpret that as go out and run?"

Marisa was stunned by his attack. "Michael, chill out! Once and for all, I'm fine! I'm sorry, I never

saw your note, and I HAD to leave the door unlocked because YOU had my keys! Geez—you're grumpy in the morning." She brushed past him and headed toward her bedroom.

"Now where are you going? We have things to talk about young lady!"

Marisa was getting angry herself now. "You know what? You can just talk to yourself! Better yet, why don't you just leave! I'm jumping in the shower and getting ready for work."

Michael was down the hall in three strides and grabbed her arm, dragging her back into the living/dining room. "Oh no you don't! You're benched for the day Missy—doctor's orders remember."

"Let me go—you're hurting my arm."

"I'm gonna hurt a lot more than your arm," Michael growled through clenched teeth. "Your boss called while you were out doing the exact opposite of what the doctor told you to. He absolutely agreed you should take the day off—he also mentioned he had told you NOT to go into that bank last night—a fact you conveniently neglected to tell us."

Marisa struggled to get free—but Michael's iron grip held her fast. "I don't need a day off—I need to get back to work. And what I talked about with my boss is none of your business. Now let me go!"

"Your friend Chris is absolutely right. I've never met a woman who needs a spanking more than you do!" With that Michael dragged her over to a dining room chair, sat down and pulled her over his lap.

"NO!" She screamed just before the first smack pounded her backside. "Owww! That hurt!!"

Michael chuckled at her surprise and then concentrated on thoroughly reddening her bottom. His rock hard palm found its target again and again despite her wiggling and squirming to get away. She was kicking and yelling, calling him every name in the book. He considered baring her bottom, but figured her tight spandex pants weren't providing

much protection. He could feel the growing heat in her butt right through them.

Marisa was starting to panic—she couldn't escape his stinging swats and the pain was becoming unbearable. She was determined not to give him the satisfaction of crying, but she didn't think she could hold out much longer--her butt was on fire, and Michael gave no sign of letting up.

Michael knew she had to be hurting—hell his hand was smarting, but still she was defiant. His anger had long since dissolved, but he was now on a mission to get her to let go. She needed a firm lesson, but she also needed to release the fear and guilt bottled up from last night. So he continued paddling her now red hot backside with his hand.

Finally the dam broke and she went limp over his lap, sobbing uncontrollably. Michael immediately stopped spanking her and gently massaged her back and buttocks, all the while encouraging her to let it all out. "It's OK Marisa... cry it out—let go of the fear."

He helped her up and then stood and took her in his arms, holding her tightly, as she continued to sob and the words just poured out between sobs. "Oh God Michael, I was so scared. I've never had a gun pointed at me—or anyone else. All I could think was if I say the wrong thing somebody dies—but then once we started talking I couldn't stop myself. My brain kept trying to put the brakes on—but the adrenaline... the fear... I just kept going. I'm so sorry I didn't follow Bob's orders—but I just couldn't. It was almost like my head was on the outside looking in as my mouth headed us closer and closer to disaster. Oh, Michael what if someone had gotten hurt—I'd never be able to forgive myself." She was shaking badly now. He picked her up, carried her over to the couch and sat her down, smiling slightly at the wince as her burning bottom touched the upholstery.

"Don't you dare smile at my discomfort—you... you... bully! Man, oh man, you spank hard—I swear

I'll have bruises for a week!" But the distraction helped calm her down a little and her tears subsided.

"Just remember that young lady, the next time you decide to do something risky or reckless, or even bratty! You could find yourself back over my knee faster than a Ben Rothlisberger (the Pittsburgh Steeler Quarterback) run for a touchdown!"

"You try that again, and I bet I can outrun Big Ben!" Now she was smiling.

Michael knelt down in front of her and tipped her chin up so their eyes met. "Seriously, Marisa, what happened last night should not have happened. It's not all your fault. We never should have sent an amateur in to a volatile situation. We were desperate to keep things under control ourselves, and got carried away—partially by your own confidence. I'm glad to hear you were scared, because you acted fearless and that worried me more than anything! You actually did a pretty amazing job, even when you stepped over the line—and how you held it together to go on the air afterwards I'll never know!"

"More adrenaline—there's always an adrenaline rush when you go on the air live. It wasn't until that rush faded that my brain really kicked in and it hit me like a ton of bricks how dangerous the whole thing was and how unprepared I was to handle it."

The tears started to flow again, and Michael moved to the couch to take her in his arms. They sat like that for a while until slowly their lips met. The kiss started softly, but quickly deepened fueled by their passion and the tension that had been building since they first met. Marisa was so lost in the moment she didn't realize what had happened when Michael suddenly broke it off and jumped up off the couch.

She looked up at him, with a vulnerable, hurt expression in her eyes. "Michael? What's wrong?"

He was pacing the living room. He stopped at her words that sounded so small and lost. He ran

his hand through his hair in a frustrated, angry gesture, and cursed himself. "Dammit, Marisa, I'm sorry. I never should have taken advantage of your vulnerability right now."

"Michael, I don't..."

"NO, don't—it was completely my fault. I need to go, now."

"Please, Michael, don't go."

"I have to—I obviously can't control myself. Marisa, I am so sorry. God, what's wrong with me? I never poach on another man's territory!" And with that he was out the door—gone before Marisa could say another word.

She was left hurt and confused. She didn't understand what he had said, she only knew that he had reached in and opened her heart, and then left it torn open and bleeding. Her tears flowed again, but this time she wasn't crying over what had happened, but what didn't.



## Chapter Four

The next week Marisa was uncharacteristically quiet. Her co-workers and friends attributed it to the bank incident and didn't push her. If anyone asked, she just smiled and said she really didn't want to talk about it, which was true. She didn't want to talk about anything related to that night because it only led to thinking about Michael. And thinking about Michael meant being overwhelmed by emotion.

Part of her was indignant at the way he manhandled her as if she was a child, but more than the lectures, she remembered the burning passion of his kiss, and then the ice cold feeling when he suddenly rejected her. Since she didn't understand why he'd left, she just made up her own reasons, and of course the lesson that every journalist knows about assuming proved true—it makes an ass out of you and me!

Marisa's assumption was that Michael just couldn't get over the fact that she was a reporter and his whole heartfelt speech that night was really bull. That explanation was at least better than dealing with flat out rejection. She really didn't have much experience with relationships. She had concentrated on her career and so had dated only occasionally, usually just going to social functions with friends. She definitely had never experienced anything like the emotional rollercoaster she felt with Michael Craine. One minute he was bossy and overbearing, and the next he was tender and caring. And his touch—oh his touch! Even when it was a strong hand trying to shake some sense into her, there was an electricity that charged through her. The other thing she was REALLY not ready to admit was that despite her independent and headstrong nature, it also was nice to have someone else take control and take care of her once in a while.

The one thing that could have made Marisa feel a little better, she didn't know. Michael was having the same tough week dealing with his feelings that she was. Ironically it was another wrong assumption that was feeding his thoughts and actions. Several members of his squad noticed he was on a short fuse. And like Marisa, he wasn't talking to anyone either. Finally his number two decided to take on the lion's den. Lt. Sam Tower knocked on his boss' office door and went in.

"Hey Cap—how about we head out to the range and fire off a few rounds?"

"Not now." Michael didn't even look up from the stack of paperwork he was trying to plow through.

"Maybe a couple of games of hand ball—or how about a few rounds in ring down in the gym?" Sam persisted.

Finally Michael looked up. "You got something on your mind L-T?"

"No, but you obviously do!"

"You want to explain that?"

"Look boss, I'm not trying to pry, but it's pretty obvious you've got something stuck in your craw and man, you're taking it out on everyone in the squad. So I just figured maybe you'd like to let off a little steam."

Michael sighed. His deputy was once again doing the toughest part of his job--keeping the Captain on the straight and narrow.

"OK, Sam, message received."

"You sure you wouldn't like to take out some targets at the shooting range—you could pretend those silhouettes are anybody you'd like!" Sam was grinning, and somewhat relieved that he wasn't booted out of the office on his ass.

"Actually anything would be preferable to paperwork, but unfortunately I've got to get through these reports for the Chief. Thanks Sam."

"No problem boss—just let me know if there's anything I can help with, or if you just want an ear to chew on—I'm around."

Michael sighed again after Sam left. He wasn't used to being uncertain about anything. But as far as Marisa was concerned, there was only one certainty, or so he thought. She was out of bounds. It seemed obvious to him that Marisa and Chris were a couple—they definitely were very close and had known each other a long time. He liked and respected Chris and wasn't about to come between them. He was pretty sure Marisa only responded to his kiss because she was vulnerable and needed to feel something other than her fear. And like an ass, he had taken advantage of that! She was probably furious with him for the whole mess.

He had to just get her out of his mind. They had managed to avoid one another all week, and he would continue to do that as much as possible. When he did run into her on a crime scene—it would be all professional. That was the only way to deal with this.

It turned out the first time they saw each other wasn't professionally at all. It was Saturday afternoon at the Big Brother/Big Sister annual picnic. Neither knew the other was a volunteer. Marisa was playing Frisbee with her Little Sister and ran to get a bad throw. She was running backwards and ran right into Michael knocking them both flat.

"Oh my goodness! I'm so sorry..." She stopped cold when she turned to see who it was she had flattened. "Michael... I... I... uh..."

"Marisa, you sure know how to knock a guy on his ass!" He added, "in more ways than one" under his breath. He rolled out from underneath her, got up and then offered her a hand. She ignored it and got up on her own.

"I didn't realize you were a Big Brother, Captain Craine," she said in as unaffected a voice as she could muster. Michael winced at the formality—but figured two could play that game.

"Yup, Miss Shaw." He drew out the 'Miss Shaw' with exaggerated emphasis. "Tom over there has been my Little Brother for two years. Are you OK—

that was a pretty good hit, and you're covered with grass." He reached over to brush off her back, and felt her flinch at his touch. He immediately pulled back.

"I'm fine—sorry I wasn't watching where I was going. I've got to get back to my Little Sister."

Michael couldn't let it go at that—he reached for her arm. "Marisa, please wait."

"Captain, I think it's better if we just keep everything professional. Don't you? Now please let me go." She was having a hard time keeping her voice even with his hold on her.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry for running out the other day."

"Fine, apology accepted. Now I've really got to go." She shook her arm loose and fled like a scorched animal that got too close to an electrical fence. Michael started after her, but thought better of it. If he had seen her tears he never would have let her go, but all he saw was her fleeing back—trying to get away from him as quickly as possible.

Marisa was feeling pretty glum as she headed home that evening. So it was a wonderful surprise to see Chris leaning against her front door, waiting for her when she drove in the driveway.

"Where was the school yard brawl?" he asked with amusement.

"Huh? What kind of hello is that?"

"Well, I was just curious. You're covered in grass stains, there's dirt in your hair, and you've got smudges on your face. I thought it was a pretty reasonable question."

"I was on the receiving end of bad Frisbee throw. Chris, I'm so glad you're back. Is everything OK?" She threw her arms around him and held tight.

"Oh, what's this? Such a welcome! Everything's fine with me—but what's up with you?"

Tears glistened in her eyes again, but she wiped them away—she was tired of crying. "It's a long

story, and to be honest, I'd really rather not talk about it."

"OK for now—but sooner or later you will tell me what's behind those dark circles under your eyes, my dear. In the meantime, how about dinner down in the Strip District? We can go to one of those seafood bistros you're so fond of down there."

"I'd love it—just let me go in, shower and change. Come on in, I think there's probably a Rolling Rock in the frig for you."

"Good deal—of course you know that's the only way you'd get me to wait while you primp."

"I DO NOT primp! I just want to wash off the remnants of Point State Park that I managed to bring home. So what happened in Washington?"

"Nothing that I can talk about—but let's just say everything's back on track to go to trial."

"That's good. Make yourself at home—I'll be out in 20 minutes."

"Yeah right! I don't know a woman who can get in and out of the shower in 20 minutes—let alone be ready to go!"

"Well, you do now—just watch me!"

True to her word, 20 minutes later Marisa came out, clean and beautiful in a simple dress, her hair down long and practically no make-up.

"Wow, you clean up good in 20 minutes—imagine what you could do with a half-hour!" She laughed and punched him in the arm. "Hey, don't you know it's a crime to assault a federal agent?"

Their whole evening was like that—teasing each other and laughing. It was exactly what they both needed. But over coffee, Chris turned serious. "Come on Missy—something's bothering you. You're not having trouble sleeping because of the bank incident are you? When I talked to Michael he said the two of you had worked through most of that."

"You talked to Michael? When was that?"

"Friday night—I wanted to know how you were doing."

"So why didn't you call me? Why did you call him? What did he tell you?"

"Whoa... slow down there. One question at a time. I didn't call you, brat, because I knew all I'd get out of you is 'I'm fine!'. That's all I ever get out of you in situations like that. He told me about your discussions Thursday night, and Friday morning—including the conversation with your boss!" Marisa made a face at him. "Don't get bratty with me or I may remember that I still owe you a stern talking to!"

"I heard enough from Michael, thank you very much!" She turned her back to him and crossed her arms over her chest as if to say 'end of discussion'. But Chris wasn't through. He walked over and put his hands on her shoulders—he was surprised by just how tense she was. As he massaged her shoulders, he asked again, "Marisa, please tell me what's wrong."

"Oh Chris, I just don't know what to do about Michael."

"I thought from what he said, you two cleared the air of your hostilities."

"Yeah, and then some," she said sarcastically.

He turned her around to face him. "You're going to have to explain that one, because I'm just not following."

"I guess he forgot to mention the kiss—and then the speedy exit—like I was contaminated or something."

Now Chris couldn't help himself, he was laughing. "What the hell's so funny?" she demanded.

"Let me get this straight—the guy you were ready to throttle a couple of weeks ago—the guy you were going to report to the Chief for harassment—that guy kissed you, and now you're upset because he's not falling at your feet?"

"OK, so it was sudden turnabout in my feelings! The point is for some unknown reason I'm really

attracted to him, but he's like—hand's off now. Damn, men!"

Chris could see she was really distressed, and he had to admit, he had never seen her so upset over a guy before. Gee, maybe she was really hooked!

"Sweetie, I'm sorry. How about I go punch him out for you?"

"Very funny! I'm glad you think this is a joke."

"I don't, but I'm desperate to see you smile. Seriously, why don't I talk to him and just find out what the deal is."

"No Way! Chris I know what the deal is. It was one kiss, probably just to comfort me. I mean, hell, he apologized immediately and then took off, muttering something about poached eggs, or something—I don't know."

"Poached eggs?! What the heck does that have to do with anything? Did you make him a bad breakfast or something?"

Now she was laughing too, "You know very well if I have any interest in a man, the last thing I would do is cook for him!"

"Well, my dear, just chalk it up to his loss, and move on. There are plenty of guys who'd trip over each other to win just a smile from the fair Marisa!"

"You nut! What would I do without you?"

"Oh, you'd definitely be lost. Now how about I take you home? You should go soak in a nice hot bath, or you're going to be sore tomorrow—I already see a couple of bruises." She thought, the biggest bruise couldn't be seen—the one on her heart.

Chris took her home, and that's exactly what she did—soaked until the water got cold in a nice bubble bath.

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Things on the police beat quieted down for a while after the bank hostage story—just routine stuff, and even Marisa was getting bored with her stories. She wanted something she could really sink

her teeth into. She thought about maybe doing something with the cold case squad—profiling some of the juicier cases that were never solved, and looking at how modern investigation techniques were applied to old cases.

She talked to Kyle about it, and he had an even better idea. Why not get out of the city and go to some of the smaller communities in the surrounding counties that the station reached. She could profile the most notorious case that was never solved in each community. She was even thinking she could get a criminologist from the University of Pittsburgh or Duquesne to go over the case files with her. She thought, *who knows, maybe we could even turn up a new clue—wouldn't that be something!*

She called 20 community police departments. About half agreed to cooperate and let her look at their cold case files. From those ten, she chose five cases to profile—a bold bank robbery, a child kidnapping, two murders of young women and a deadly arson. All the cases were at least three years old, and a couple were more than ten years old. Marisa was fascinated with the files and spent hours pouring over every detail.

She went to a woman recommended by Chris at Pitt for help. Dr. Marlane Sanders was a well-known profiler who specialized in cases with no leads. Chris said she'd been called in on a few FBI cases and was very good at teasing new evidence out in old cases. Marisa liked Marlane right away. She was a smart, attractive woman in her late 30's, and was fascinated by the cases Marisa brought her.

"You know, I'm usually brought in on big cases by the FBI or big city police departments. It's kind of nice to work on small town case files. These are the departments many of my students are going to start out in. It's a good chance to see what kind of investigative tools they have and how they approach case work." she told Marisa.

"Yeah I know—I was practically raised in the Pittsburgh department, so it's been interesting for



me too to work with these communities' two to five man police departments. I'll be interested in what you think, because to me the files look pretty thorough—lots of good old fashioned shoe leather."

"That's often the way even big cases are broken. All the technology we have nowadays to process crime scenes is great—but it still comes down to understanding human nature many times. I'll get back to you in a few days and we can go over them together."

"Thanks Marlane."

As Marisa left, she was more excited about this project than any story she'd done in a long time. She was especially anxious to see what Marlane thought about the two murders of the young women. Marisa was drawn to those cases, probably because the women were her age, but still there was something else. The murders were committed six years apart—one nine years ago and the other three years ago, in two different counties, but there were eerie similarities. The victims were about the same age, same hair and eye color, and both were single women living alone. One was strangled and one was stabbed, but both bodies were found in remote wooded areas in October, the night before Halloween. Even though she kept telling herself the chances of the cases being related was a million to one—she couldn't get the coincidences out of her mind. It was going to be hard to wait until Marlane called before doing anything else—especially since All Hallows Eve was tonight.

Of course nothing happened that night, other than a few trash bin fires, it was actually two nights later when Marisa and Ron heard the call on the scanner. The code number for a body found—it was in a wooded area near the river on the west side of the city. Marisa and Ron called in to the station and then headed out to the scene. They had been on their way to their 11pm live shot on an all-night vigil some high school students were holding at the scene of a drunk driving crash that had killed one of

their classmates. Marisa had produced a strong story to go with the live, talking to the teen's family, and the kid who was driving, but wasn't killed. She knew they'd just run the story without her live intro and tag, and then she would do a live breaking news story on the body if it turned out to be something.

They only had about 20 minutes before the 11pm news when they got on the scene—so Ron quickly shot some cop car scene video and then started to set-up the live truck while Marisa went to get info. The rope-off of the scene was out by the road, and the body was more than a hundred yards into the woods according to the patrol officer handling traffic. So she wasn't going to be able to see anything. The officer didn't know much except the victim was a young woman. Marisa stopped cold. *No, it couldn't be, could it? My God, another one?*

She started asking rapid fire questions of the officer, "Was it foul play? What did the victim look like? Could the body have been there a few days?"

The officer was a little put off by her interrogation, and wouldn't tell her anything, except that yes, it was definitely foul play.

Marisa had a hard time concentrating on her live shot for 11—she was too focused on getting down to the crime scene. She had to see it for herself. She managed to do a 45 second live stand-up at the beginning of the show, and then they came back to her at the end of the show for an update and ran some of the video Ron had shot and edited by then. Marisa didn't have much to say, but she told what she knew, all the while thinking it was possible she knew a lot more even than the cops!

Once they were clear, Ron started breaking down the live gear and bringing down the tall mast on top of the truck that was used to get a signal.

"Ron, listen, I've got to get closer. Once you get broken down, just grab your gear and hang around at the perimeter until someone comes up to talk or

they bring the body up. Hopefully no one will notice I'm not with you. If they do, just say I'm keeping warm in the truck."

"Yeah like anyone's going to believe that! They know you at crime scenes—you're not one to sit back Marisa. What exactly are you planning? You know how much trouble you got in the last time you crossed police lines."

"I'll be careful Ron, but there's something I've just got to check out—and we're way too far away. If I'm not back in an hour—send in the troops!"

"OK, but don't say I didn't warn you—this is NOT a good idea!"

"I know, but what the hell! In for a penny, in for a pound!!" She took off her bright red jacket, leaving black pants and a black turtle neck. She was not happy that she hadn't brought her work boots—she usually always had them because she never knew what she was going to run up against out in the field. But for just the live shot, she'd left them back at the station, and was wearing leather soled loafers—oh well, at least it wasn't heels.

She cut around behind the live truck, figuring she could approach the scene from the riverbank side, and hopefully avoid having anyone see her. She went way around and then made her way back along the ridge above the river. As she got close, she found a perfect vantage point. She could see the body, and all the crime scene investigators. Her heart lurched as she saw Michael, and his detectives. *Please, don't let him see me, or my ass is grass!* she thought. As she looked down at the body, a chill went right through her—it was a young woman with dark hair. There was blood on her chest, but from a distance Marisa had no idea how she'd been killed or how long the body had been there. She did notice something else though—it looked like there was something in her right hand—maybe a flower. As she looked closer it looked like a red rose—she got more excited. Now she had something to check out—there was no mention of a

rose in either of the other cases, but police often held back a detail like that from the public files to use as a way to weed out criminal wannabes who will confess to anything just for the notoriety.

She was ready to head back, feeling pretty keyed up—when she slipped. The ground was wet and muddy from a recent rain. She hit a slick spot, and went right down on her butt and then slid about three feet down the embankment. Once she determined she wasn't hurt, just wet and muddy, she had to figure out how to climb back up. She was about to turn around and try crawling on her hands and knees, when two strong hands grasped under her arms and pulled her up.

Marisa was about to offer profuse thanks to her rescuer when she looked up into familiar eyes, black with anger. "Chris, I can explain..." She didn't get another word out as he hauled her off her feet and tossed her over his shoulder, and then headed out of the crime scene area.

"You just never learn." he said in a low menacing voice.

"Chris, come on. Put me down, I've got a really good reason for..."

"I don't want to hear it!" he snapped.

"Chris—put me down this instant! What are you doing?" she asked puzzled by her sideways view of him as he tested several branches and finally broke one off.

"I warned you about what would happen if I ever caught you crossing police lines again."

"Chris, no! You can't! Not out here!"

"I can and I will." She started to struggle, trying to get free, as he stripped the supple branch of leaves and side branches, and then swished it through the air a couple times.

"I think this will serve nicely. Nothing like a good hickory switch to tan a naughty girl's hide!"

Marisa was now struggling and squirming in earnest to loosen his grip, but he held fast with seeming ease. He hauled her over to a fallen log,

sat down and quickly flipped her over his thighs and brought the switch down hard across the center of her buttocks. Swish—CRACK!

"Yeoooww! Don't you dare hit me with that again!" she squealed at the red hot stripe of pain. It stung like the dickens and she immediately put her hand back to rub away the fiery sting. He grabbed her arm and pinned it behind her back.

"We'll have none of that young lady. And, you might want to temper your yells, unless you want the entire detective squad as an audience, that is."

Marisa immediately clamped her mouth shut. He was absolutely right, another cry out and she would likely have every cop in the area descending on them. "Damn you, Christopher Barry!" she whispered.

"No, I'd say you're the one who's damned, my dear. Now take your punishment like a good girl!" Swish—CRACK! His anger had cooled a little, but not much. Swish—CRACK! Her fury on the other hand was growing with every stinging stripe of the switch. Swish—CRACK! She kicked, hissed and moaned, but she didn't cry out. After about five blows, tears silently fell. Her thin linen pants and silk panties were providing no protection at all. In fact it was probably hurting worse because her seat was soaking wet. All she knew was she had never felt anything like the sting of that switch—it was like hundreds of little needles pricking her bottom at the same time.

Chris was surprised that she managed to keep relatively quiet, but he could tell with each sharp intake of breath, that he was definitely making an impression. He finally stopped after about 20 licks figuring her rear end was pretty well striped by then. As soon as he loosened his grip on her she scrambled up, gently rubbing her butt and looking daggers at him. He was going to gather her in his arms to comfort her, but she was too pissed. She stalked by him and headed back to the road, wincing with every step.

But he was not through with her, yet. He caught up to her, and hauled her over his shoulder.

"Put me down, you... you... caveman! Haven't you done enough, tonight! I won't sit for a week, damn you!" She was kicking and pounding his back.

"I don't think you've quite learned your lesson! But I'm betting Michael will have a thing or two to say to you since it was his crime scene you violated! Now settle down, unless you'd like another trip over my knee!" he punctuated his words with a sharp slap to her already burning backside.

"Owww! You son-of-a-bitch, let me go!" He slapped her again.

"Now don't be calling my mother names!" Now his anger was completely gone, and he was actually amusing himself at the thought of Michael's reaction. Maybe between the two of them, they could head off her 'act first, think later' nature, before she got into serious trouble.

Marisa stopped kicking and pounding and gritted her teeth. She couldn't take another assault on her bottom—it was stinging something terrible, and she could feel little welts rising where the switch had struck the same spot more than once. She was just plain miserable, and it was only going to get worse when she had to confront Michael.

Chris didn't put her down until he was up by the road and practically right in front of Michael, who was talking to two detectives.

"Well, well, what have we here? A little late for a moonlit walk by the river isn't it Miss Shaw?" he asked sarcastically.

"I found her up on the embankment above the body, taking in everything!"

Michael's anger immediately flared. "Dammit Marisa, I warned you once to stay outside police lines on my crime scenes! What's it going to take to get through that thick head of yours?"

Marisa decided for once, she'd hold her tongue, but she practically had to bite through it to do that. She was furious, but had a hard time concentrating

on anything what he was saying through the embarrassment of being dropped in front of him like so much baggage. She could hear the snickers of other cops and her fellow reporters.

"Well, Michael, I've already tried reaching the seat of learning with a good swat, but she's still plenty defiant." Chris told him.

"Fine, let's see how defiant she is after a night in jail." Marisa gasped. Michael turned to the patrol officer Marisa had originally questioned. "Officer James, Miss Shaw here is under arrest for obstructing an investigation. Please cuff her and take her down to the holding cell at the precinct house."

"No way—you can't do this!" Marisa was in shock as the officer cuffed her and started to lead her to his patrol car.

Her photographer, Ron saw what was happening and ran up. "What are you doing? Let her go! You can't arrest her—what about the First Amendment?"

The officer didn't say a word, just opened the door and shoved her in. Marisa couldn't help crying out when her bruised bottom hit the hard leather car seat.

"Marisa, are you hurt? What should I do? Call the station lawyer? I'll call Kyle—we'll get you out! Don't worry."

"No Ron, don't call Kyle! He'll have my ass for crossing police lines again without permission. He nearly suspended me the last time Craine nailed me for it. Listen, I'll be fine—these guys aren't serious, they're just trying to teach me a lesson." But Marisa wished she believed her own words. She had a bad feeling, she was spending the night in jail.

"Marisa, are you sure you'll be alright?"

"Yeah, call the precinct house in the morning—if they haven't let me go by then, call Kyle and he'll get me out."

As the patrol car drove off, she saw the determination mixed with amusement on both

Michael and Chris' faces. She could have screamed she was so furious with both of them. But instead she finally gave in to her tears and just put her head down in her handcuffed hands and cried.



## Chapter Five

As Marisa was led into the station house, her face was flushed with anger and embarrassment. Thank goodness it was late, so third shift was already out on the streets. Only the night desk sergeant saw her come in.

"James, what's going on? Why you got Big By's girl in handcuffs?"

"Captain's orders. She's under arrest—got to take her to lock-up."

"Land sakes, Missy, you can get that Captain of ours riled up faster than any rookie I know! What'd you do this time girl?"

"Oh, you know Craine, Mike—all a reporter has to do is look at him wrong and it sets him off. Officer James here is just following orders. Any chance you got a single cell for me? I think I'm gonna be here a while!"

"Slow night, Missy, you got the holding cell to yourself. I'll get some blankets and a pillow—but I can't do much about dry clothes. You ain't exactly dressed for a swim in a mud hole!"

"Trust me I know. I got tangled up with a muddy embankment, and the embankment won!"

"Problem is, Sarg, that there embankment was inside Captain's police line! That's how she got her butt hauled in her to jail!" Officer James added.

"Missy, child, will you never learn? I thought the Cap already chewed you a new rear end on that one!"

"Yeah, well I guess I'm a slow learner."

Officer James led her back to the holding cell, undid the cuffs and locked her in. She was ready to collapse. Her anger had finally exhausted itself. Now she was just cold, wet, and hungry. She started to flop down on the cold cement bench in the cell, but as soon as her butt hit cement, she jumped like hotcakes hitting a sizzling griddle. She couldn't believe her bottom was still so sore, damn Chris and his switch! But she also knew she

couldn't stand much longer either, so it was with grateful relief that she saw the sergeant coming with blankets and a couple of pillows. She wrapped the blankets around her, and then sat on both pillows, pulling her knees up to her chest and resting her head on them.

Part of her believed Michael wouldn't dare leave her in lock-up all night, but then she recalled the anger in his face when Chris unceremoniously dropped her in front of him. Maybe she really had crossed the line this time—both literally and figuratively. *No, she thought, I'm not letting them off the hook! No matter what I did, there's no way I deserve to be behind bars, especially after Chris already set my ass on fire. I thought there were laws against cruel and unusual punishment!* Now she was getting angry all over again. It was going to be a long night!

Back at the crime scene, Michael just shook his head as he watched the patrol car take off with Marisa in the back seat.

Chris looked at him and grinned, "A night in a cell—that's a pretty good one Captain Craine! I applaud your ingenuity."

"And from the stiffness in her walk, not to mention the wince when she sat down, I must assume Agent Barry that you made quite an impression on her backside." he joined in Chris' amusement at the situation. "Of course you know, as we stand here patting ourselves on the back, she's probably plotting our demise—she looked pretty pissed! I'll tell you Chris that woman of yours is a real pistol!"

"What do you mean mine, buddy!?" Then he stopped as the light bulb went on. "Aw, hell, now I understand. I appreciate your honorable intentions Michael, but you got it all wrong!" he laughed, as yet again he and Marisa were mistakenly coupled up.

"Got what all wrong?" Michael looked really puzzled now.

"Let me guess, you backed off from Missy because you thought she and I were together?"

"Look Chris, I'm not going to lie to you, I am attracted to that little firebrand—Lord knows why—but I don't..."

"Poach on another man's territory?" Chris finished for him, and then really laughed out loud.

"What's so damn funny?" Michael said, the frustration growing in his voice.

"Marisa told me about your encounter—the part you left out, you know, the kiss?"

"Hey it was a mistake—I know that, I'm sorry man. If you want to deck me for taking advantage of her vulnerability—I wouldn't blame you."

"The only reason to deck you, is to knock some sense into you! Marisa and I grew up together—we've known each other all our lives. I do love her—like a sister! At least now I know what the heck she was talking about when she said the last thing you said before you walked out was something about poached eggs!"

That broke through Michael's dazed look, and he had to laugh too remembering his last words that weren't even really meant for her, but said more to himself. "Boy, have I been an idiot! No wonder she's been cold as ice—she probably figured I rejected her, instead of nearly killing myself holding back. And I'm certainly well on the road to getting back in her good graces, by putting her in jail!" They both laughed again. It was an odd site—two cops laughing out loud at a grisly crime scene, but the other officers didn't give it a second thought. There were all different ways of coping with the horrors of the job, and a joke here or there was one of the most harmless.

"Listen Michael, Marisa has a hard time not wearing her every thought and feeling on her face. If the expression she had when she talked about that kiss is any indication, I'd say you won't have too much trouble turning things around—assuming you really want the challenge! Marisa's the

greatest—but she’s an incredible handful. I swear she can find trouble in an empty room with no windows and the door locked!”

“Amen to that!”

“Seriously, the other thing is, there are a lot of people watching out for her. Hurt her, and you’ll answer to me, among others!” Chris never looked more serious.

“Well, the last thing I need is trouble with the feds—so I promise to watch my step. I really do care for her, I just didn’t realize it until I worked my way around some other hang-ups—and managed to get past her exasperating challenges of every rule I have in the precinct! Hey, not to change the subject, but what exactly brings a fed out here to my murder scene?”

“Ah, very good question.” The look on Chris’ face changed dramatically—he was all business now, serious business. “I guess I can’t ignore or dismiss this any longer. The fact is I’ve been doing some profiling of crime patterns in the region, and I’ve come up with something disturbing. Let me see if I can tell you about your body, even though I never actually got down close to scene, because I caught Marisa. Victim is a young woman probably late 20’s, dark hair, blue eyes, killed violently and dumped here. The body’s been here two days and there was a red rose placed in her hand. How’d I do?”

“Right on the money—we better go some place and talk.” Michael said grimly.

“First I’d like to get a close look at the scene. Come on, I’ll brief you on the way down.” As they hiked down to where the body was still being processed, Chris told Michael about the pattern of killings he’d uncovered. A single young woman killed every three years on All Hallows Eve and dumped in a wooded area. The women were killed different ways, no sexual assault or abuse, just killed and dumped. The killings went back 12 years, all four had been killed in different counties and

towns, and with the three year spread, no one had ever made the connection. Also because they were all small town investigations, in fringe areas around Pittsburgh, they didn't get much media attention.

"So, you're saying we've got a serial killer on our hands, and this is victim number five?"

"I hate to jump to conclusions, but it looks possible. I was about to request a task force to integrate the cases. When I heard your call on my car scanner, I figured given the timing I better check it out. I knew if I was right, there was already a body dumped somewhere in the region."

They spent another hour at the crime scene, and then headed back to Chris' office to look over the case files he gathered so far and map out the logistics of a joint federal/local task force investigation. They both knew it would be a nightmare of red tape with so many different local departments involved. It also would be a bear to keep quiet, but they both agreed, the only way to avoid scaring off this killer would be to let him think no one had made the connection among the murders.

Chris and Michael worked till almost 5 a.m. and then went to a corner diner for breakfast. They both looked pretty ragged with no sleep, a day's growth of beard, and muddy clothes from the crime scene.

"Well, I think I'll go home, shower and change, and then see if Marisa's cooled her heels long enough."

"Better you than me! I'd make sure my gun was loaded before I went in to face that hellcat!"

Michael laughed. "If she's half as tired as we are, I don't think she'll give me much trouble."

Less true words were never spoken!

Michael walked into the station house an hour later, dressed casually and looking pretty laid back compared to his usual 'Captain Craine' spit and polish. The desk sergeant looked up surprised, both

by his early hour and attire. He had never seen the Cap look relaxed.

"Morning Cap—in early this morning, sir?"

"Morning Sarg—just came in to check on our prisoner in the holding cell. Figured I'd see if she's had a change of attitude overnight." He smiled to himself, almost looking forward to the encounter with a humbled Marisa.

"Well, uh, I don't know about that Cap. I wouldn't recommend opening the cell right away. She's been spitting fire pretty much since she got here."

Michael laughed, "I'll be careful not to get burned Sarg, toss me the keys."

Michael walked back and found Marisa pacing and muttering irritably. She was quite a sight with her hair a tangled mess, mud on her clothes, and her eyes flashing anger.

"Good Morning, Miss Shaw. And how was your night in our cozy guestroom here?"

Marisa stopped at the sound of his voice, slowly turned to look at him, her eyes narrowing like an alley cat about to pounce. She sounded a little like what you'd imagine that alley cat would if it could talk as it sized up its prey—a deadly calm tone that suggested serious trouble if it was not obeyed.

"Craine, let me out of here right now." she hissed. "If the station lawyer arrives before you unlock this cell, I promise you I will file every misconduct charge in the book against you!"

"Really? So, you've contacted your boss, and told him you violated police lines again? Well, I guess that saves me a dime." Michael knew from his conversation with Kyle Wheeler, that he had threatened to suspend her if she ever pulled that stunt again. "And of course, if you're going to sue us, we'll have to make all those charges I had you arrested under formal—so we're not accused of violating due process."

Somehow all the times Marisa had played out this confrontation in her mind over the last six

hours, Michael had never called her bluff. She couldn't believe he'd actually charge her, but in the back of her mind, she was worried he just might! So, she decided to soften her appeal—maybe a little remorse would help.

"Michael, you made your point. I learned my lesson. Can you please just let me out of this hell hole?"

"That's a little better. But first I've got to have your word on two things. Number 1—no more crossing the line without permission."

She sighed heavily, her anger quickly being replaced by pure exhaustion. "Fine, no more crossing police lines... unless it's..."

"No more, period!"

"And the second thing?" she snapped.

"You absolutely can NOT report anything you saw at that scene last night—nothing more than what you had at 11, until we officially release it."

"Oh come on—that's not fair! I spent a night in jail, with a very sore ass, I might add, for that information—now you want me not to use it? No way!"

"Fine, I guess you'll just have to stay here until we're ready for a news conference. Of course that will mean formally charging you. And I think I'll make that announcement at the newser too, just as a deterrent to your colleagues." He knew he had her—she wouldn't risk a public reprimand in front of other police reporters, who would like nothing better than to make their competition look bad.

"Fine—no reporting on the details I saw until they're officially released. But at least you've got to give me more than I had last night."

"Marisa, there's nothing to report right now, without compromising the investigation—and I think you already know that. Come on, I'll take you home." He unlocked the door and she walked stiffly by him.

"I'll just grab a cab, thank-you very much. One trip in a police car is plenty!"

He caught up to her and took her arm. "You really think you're going to find a cab downtown at this hour? I said I would drive you."

She twisted her arm out of his grip and turned to face him. "And I said NO! Now I suggest you leave me alone before I add harassment to my list of complaints against this department." She stalked out of the station house, and to Michael's amazement found a cab immediately.

What she'd clearly forgotten was she had no purse—that meant no money, no keys, and no ID. When the driver pulled up to her house and turned to tell her the fare, it hit her. As she was about to stumble through an explanation, Michael pulled up behind the cab, paid the driver, and then opened the cab door to assist her out.

"Looking for this perhaps?" He held out her purse and jacket. She glared at him—that old saying 'if looks could kill' came to his mind as he met her gaze head on. She climbed out of the cab, spurning his offer of assistance, grabbed her purse and marched past him to the front door. She was fumbling for her keys when she heard a jingle behind her. She turned to see Michael dangling them. As she went to grab them, he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her close. Then he kissed her hard, capturing her mouth and every bit of breath she had.

At first she was too startled to resist—and that was her undoing, she couldn't help but respond to his demanding lips and tongue. But as the punishing force of the kiss lessened, she came to her senses—she wasn't going to be rejected twice. She pushed back and then brought her hand up with lightning speed to slap him. It connected with his jaw in a sharp crack that echoed through the quiet morning. Her eyes got huge and she backed away as surprised as he was that the blow had connected. He recovered first.

"Nice right cross, Marisa. But I believe I warned you what would happen if you tried that again!" he



said in a menacing tone. He grabbed her arm, swung her around and held her in place with a muscular arm over her back and around her waist, bending her over slightly. He delivered a quick dozen smacks to her rear end, which normally would have only caused a mild sting, but she was still tender from the switching Chris gave her the previous night, so they hurt.

"Ouch! Michael, stop that hurts!" He released her almost before she finished her plea. She turned and looked at him pitifully, her lips still swollen from the kiss. "I hate you!" she said in a childlike voice, slowing rubbing her behind.

He chuckled, "No you don't—but you know, just once I'd like to kiss you without having to spank you too. Ah, well, I guess we'll just have to keep working at it!" He winked at her, then unlocked her door and tossed her the keys. "Go take a shower and get some sleep—you look like one of the street people we haul in, darlin'."

He was half way down her walk toward his car before she pulled herself together and gave in to her temper. She reached down and grabbed one of the flower pots on her front stoop and hurled it at him. Fortunately, he saw it coming and ducked, so it crashed harmlessly on her driveway.

He laughed out loud, "Temper, temper!" he teased.

She let out a screech of anger and went inside the house, slamming the door.

He smiled, rubbing his jaw, thinking he didn't remember love being quite so violent the first time around. He got in his car and headed home—he needed a couple hours sleep too, before tackling the new day, and a new murder investigation. Although it was clearly a ridiculous thought, it did cross his mind that he'd have an easier time dealing with a serial killer than Marisa Shaw!

Marisa meanwhile, leaned back against the door she had just slammed, completely drained. She slowly slid to the floor, wincing as her smarting

backside hit the wood floor, but too tired to move. She just sat there, emotionally and physically fried. The phone rang and she let the machine pick up. She heard Ron's voice checking to make sure she got home OK, since when he called the precinct house the sergeant told him she had been released.

Still she could muster no energy to move. She must have dozed off because when she looked up at the grandfather clock it was chiming 8 a.m. She finally got up and headed into the bathroom. Nothing appealed to her more than a long soak in a hot tub, and bed for at least a few hours. When she looked in the mirror, she had to laugh. Michael was actually being kind, comparing her to a street person—she looked like a wild woman with her hair sticking out in every direction, all her make-up washed away by tears, and mud smudged on her face, not mention caked on her clothes. She stripped, ran a hot bubble bath, climbed in and promptly forgot about the rest of the world.

Marisa was jarred out of her pleasurable lack of thought or feeling, when the phone rang again and she heard Dr. Sanders' voice on the machine.

"Marisa, it's Marlane Sanders, call me as soon as you get this message. I've found something unusual in these case files—which I'm guessing isn't a surprise to you. We need to talk about this right away." She left her work and pager numbers. Marisa had almost forgotten the reason she had tried to see the crime scene in the first place last night. She climbed out of the tub and thought, so much for sleep. She got dressed, and put in a call to Marlane, telling her she'd be right over.

By the time Marisa drove into the Pitt parking lot by Dr. Sanders' building, she was actually feeling human again. She grabbed coffee and a bagel at Tony's Deli on the way, and almost could ignore the fact she'd had virtually no sleep and was stiff all over from the cold, hard cell. She was definitely anxious to hear what Marlane had to say, especially after last night.

Marisa arrived at her office and was immediately shown in by the department secretary. The women greeted each other warmly, even though it was their first meeting in person. They recognized kindred spirits in each other. Then they got right to work. Marlane had the files spread out on the conference table in her office. She went right to the murder cases.

"I'm guessing you didn't want to predispose me to any conclusions, so that's why you didn't say anything about the similarities between these two murders." Marlane started.

"I also kept thinking in my head, 'come on, what are the chances', given how I ended up with these two cases. It was so random!"

"True, but there are too many similarities to put down to coincidence. Looking carefully at these files I'm convinced they're connected."

"Marlane, I've got to tell you what happened last night." Marisa related the story of the third murder, leaving out the parts about her spanking and spending the night in jail. "The only thing that's weird is the first two are six years apart and now this one's only three years after the second. Aren't serial killers usually precise about their patterns? I've only been able to read a little about them since I've been working on these files."

Marlane was very disturbed by Marisa's news, but not surprised. "Marisa, did you tell the police last night about your discovery?"

"No."

"We shouldn't wait. They need to know this information right away. I think it's very likely there are more bodies buried out there somewhere. Remember, you weren't looking specifically for cases like this, you just stumbled on these two—now three. Six years is a long time between killings for a serial killer, but I'm betting if we search news and criminal databases, we'll find more cases."

Marisa shuddered at the thought of more victims, but it made sense. She was surprised she

hadn't thought of that. But she was very uneasy about going to the police yet. "I'm just not sure I'm ready to take this to the cops yet. It's so speculative—I'll either get laughed at as an amateur sleuth, or shutdown completely in my investigation. How about waiting till we search for other cases and check out the rose connection?"

"If there wasn't a new case, I'd say a week or two wouldn't matter. But the police have a hot trail to follow—the first 48 hours of any investigation are critical. We've got to let them know what they might be looking for. It's the right thing to do Marisa, and I'm obligated to as a consultant for the FBI. I'm sorry."

"No, no, it's OK. Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to keep things from anyone, I just have a rocky relationship with the cops right now. I guess I could take the info to my friend Chris Barry—he's the one who recommended you—do you know him?"

"No, we've never actually met, but I know his reputation, and he obviously knows mine. I understand he's doing liaison work in Pittsburgh now. I'd love to meet him, why don't we tell him together?" Marlane asked hopefully. She really did want to meet Agent Barry because she'd heard so much about him.

Marisa smiled at the anticipation in Marlane's eyes---*Hmmmmmm*, she thought, *this could be interesting*. But all she said was, "That's a great idea—and as you said time is of the essence, so let me see if he's available for lunch. How does that sound?"

"Works for me, I don't have to teach until 3 this afternoon."

Marisa called Chris at his office, but got his voice mail. So she paged him, adding their agreed on 911 emergency code, and left him the message to meet at 'their place' in an hour. As Marisa and Marlane headed out with all their files, Marisa's cell phone rang.

"That will be Chris, too worried to wait an hour. Hello, Chris." she answered.

"Are you OK—what's wrong? Why the 911 page? Hey, how did you know it was me?" Chris' words tumbled out full of concern.

Marisa smiled, feeling safe just knowing he was there for her like this. "I'm fine, but knowing your overprotective nature, I knew you wouldn't wait till we got to the park to find out what was going on! You're so predictable."

"I'm relieved to hear you're OK, so why scare the life out of me with the emergency page Missy—and this better be good, young lady!"

She could hear his anxiety being replaced with irritation. "Chris it is really important—it's about the body found last night. I think we have some vital information in the case."

Chris let out an exasperated sigh, "Marisa I can't believe you didn't get the message last night not to go poking around police investigations! Hell, Michael should have left you in that cell and thrown away the key—at least then we'd know you couldn't get in any more trouble!" Chris suddenly stopped his tirade, paused, and then asked, "who's 'we' Marisa?"

"Dr. Marlane Sanders. We're both on our way to meet you with information that could be key to the case. And by the way, if Michael, or anyone else, ever tries locking me up again, I will sue everyone from the Chief all the way down to the lowliest beat cop!" With that parting shot Marisa hung up. She was not going to let her temper get the best of her again. She turned and looked at a shocked Marlane. She just smiled.

"Chris is really looking forward to meeting you." she said sweetly, as if nothing had happened. Marlane just laughed at that, and sat back thinking this could be a quite entertaining meeting despite its serious nature.

## Chapter Six

Chris just stared at his cell phone for a moment. "She hung up on me! That brat actually hung up on me!" He shook his head, reminding himself once again, she was one of a kind. *Thank God for that!* he thought chuckling. Then he started to think about what she said, and got worried all over again. He figured he better call Michael and see if he could join them. He had a bad feeling about what Marisa had 'discovered'. He dialed Michael's direct line.

"Craine," Michael answered sounding stressed.

"Sounds like your day hasn't improved any since this morning. It's Chris, and I'm afraid I've got more bad news about our intrepid reporter!"

"Sorry Chris, didn't mean to sound so short, it's just that setting up this task force is proving as complicated as we thought it would be. So, you talked to Marisa this morning? Let me guess she decided to sue me after all? It's OK, I've got grounds for a countersuit—attempted assault with a deadly flower pot." He smiled for the first time since he left Marisa this morning.

"What?!"

"It's a long story, let's just say, you were right and I was wrong. There was nothing humble about Miss Shaw's attitude this morning! But I can say I managed to release her and see her home with relatively minimal damage to either of us! So, tell me, how angry am I going to be after I hear about her latest exploits?" he asked with a sigh of resignation that was becoming familiar whenever he discussed Marisa.

"I'm only guessing here, but I think she have made the connection between last night's body and at least some of the other murders."

"Dammit—how is that possible? Hell, she's only been out of jail a few hours!"

"I think she knew before last night and probably defied our orders to stay behind police lines to check out her theory. You see she's been working

on a series of reports on cold cases in some of the smaller communities around here. I hooked her up with a criminologist from Pitt. Well I just got a 9-1-1 page from her, so I called and she told me she and the criminologist, Dr. Marlane Sanders, want to meet me with vital information on the case. That's got to mean she uncovered at least a couple of the murders while she was digging around old files, and then made the connection to last night's case."

"We've got to head her off—if this gets out our whole investigation is blown. Not to mention the panic it could cause. When are you meeting—I want to be there." Michael's stress level just jumped a couple of notches—he really did hate reporters, even ones he was falling for!

"That's why I called. We're meeting at Joe's Hot Dog stand down by the Point—it's an old favorite of ours from when we were kids. You know the one?"

"Figures you guys would pick a retired cop vendor as one of your favorites! Yeah, I know it—only place in this town to get a decent chili dog outside of the stadium. I'm on my way. It'll take me about 15 minutes to walk down."

"Then you should arrive about 10 minutes ahead of us—see ya in a few."

Michael arrived at Point State Park first. He went over to say hello to Joe, but decided his stomach wasn't up for a chili dog after no sleep, and too much caffeine all morning. Joe had been on this corner for more than 20 years now. He was wounded on the job and had to take disability retirement. With his settlement from the department he had bought this little mobile hot dog stand, and quickly got a reputation for great dogs, and good information. He was an eagle eye—nothing happened in the park that he didn't know about.

Michael could just imagine Big By and John Barry bringing their kids here for hot dogs and soda, while Joe regaled them with tales, real and imagined, of the goings on in the park. Joe could

make up these fantastic fairy tales that had their own Pittsburgh twist. He was as much a Pittsburgh police legend as any man on the force.

After talking briefly with Joe, Michael sat down on one of the park benches. He didn't have to wait long. He soon noticed Marisa walking toward Joe's with another woman. The two were talking animatedly. He grinned as he thought about her reaction to his being there. He didn't have to wait long for that either. As soon as she spotted him she stopped short.

"Shit, I can't believe it!" she cursed to herself.

Marlane stopped too, surprised by the sudden outburst. "Marisa what is it?"

By that time Michael had walked up to meet them. "Hello again Marisa—you're looking... oh... a little less muddy than this morning!" Marisa seethed with annoyance at Michael's calm, casual approach. The last thing she wanted to deal with right now were her mixed up feelings about Michael Craine! He simply ignored her and turned to Marlane. "You must be Dr. Sanders. I know of your work, but I don't believe we've had the pleasure. I'm Michael Craine—captain of the downtown precinct." Michael held out his hand.

Marlane couldn't help but smile at the undercurrents between Michael and Marisa. She guessed this must be the 'rocky relationship' Marisa had mentioned. "Marlane, please. It's good to meet you, Captain."

"It's Michael."

"And I'm Chris, Chris Barry. Not that we're all introduced..." Chris had walked up behind Marisa and Marlane, and as soon as he spoke, he got the evil eye from Marisa. She was clearly not happy that Michael was here, and wasted no time saying so.

"What the hell is HE doing here?" she demanded.

"Good to see you too, Missy!" Chris said sarcastically and then turned to shake hands with



Marlane. "Nice to finally meet you, Marlane." He turned back to Marisa and said firmly, "Marisa, enough! It's time to set aside this petty squabbling. This is a murder investigation—Michael's murder investigation!"

Marisa blushed at Chris' chastisement, and backed down. In a calmer voice she plunged ahead. "Actually it might not be. What I mean is it might not be just a Pittsburgh case." Michael and Chris exchanged looks, and knew she had it.

Marlane picked up the explanation. "Marisa brought me some old case files to examine. There are two other murders of young women in other communities that are remarkably similar to each other and what we know of last night's death."

Chris didn't give anything away in his expression, but said evenly, "Let's head over to that picnic table and see what you've got." Marisa looked at him surprised—she expected more of a reaction. Then she looked at Michael—same stone face. *What's going on here?* she thought as she walked over to the table.

Marisa spread the files out and she and Marlane went through everything they'd discovered and concluded. When they finished, she knew they'd made a strong case. In fact hearing it all laid out, it was stronger than she realized. But when she looked into Chris' eyes, she still saw no reaction. No surprise, no disbelief or dismissal—just a strange resignation, and a touch of admiration. Then it hit her.

"You already knew about this!" she accused, jumping up. "How can you justify keeping quiet? You have the blood of that girl on your hands!" She was livid, and gathered up her files to leave. "I refuse to play along with your cover-up! This story's going on the air tonight." Marlane put her hand out to stop Marisa.

"Marisa, please wait. Let's hear them out." But Marisa pulled her hand away and shoved the files

into her bag and turned to leave. Michael was right there—a solid barrier keeping her from moving.

"You arrogant little brat! How dare you make an accusation like that?! You may not know me that well, but you sure as hell know Chris well enough to know we'd never hold back information that could affect public safety." Michael was holding her arms in a death grip. His heated words immediately deflated her anger. She looked from Michael's fuming expression to Chris' disappointed and hurt look, and realized once again her temper, rather than her brain had engaged her mouth. She slumped down onto the picnic bench.

"I am SO sorry. Michael, you are absolutely right. I know BOTH of you well enough to never think such a thing. I guess the last 12 hours are really catching up with me." Michael saw her stricken look as she rubbed her arms where he had gripped her, and realized she wasn't the only one overreacting. He squatted down and lifted her chin so their eyes met.

He said softly, "I think they're catching up with all of us." He tenderly wiped away a tear that threatened to spill down her cheek. "I'm sorry if I hurt you when I grabbed you." She shook her head no, but still didn't trust her voice to speak. He gathered her in his arms.

Marlane stood and went over to Chris. She put a hand on his shoulder and whispered, "I think we should give those two a minute." They walked over to a large tree nearby. "You three certainly have an interesting relationship." she said, smiling at him.

Chris chuckled at that. "Yeah I guess it would seem a little unusual to an outside observer. Marisa and I practically grew up together—we're closer than most siblings. Michael is sort of a new player. He's a great cop—I like and respect him. But he and Marisa—now there's trouble. Whenever those two come together it's like fire and magnesium—big flash that burns hot and quick!"

"Well, there's chemistry and then there's chemistry!" Marlane laughed. Chris found the musical sound of it warmed him. He thought she was attractive and very intuitive. Suddenly he was thinking about a little chemistry of his own. When she looked up into his eyes, there was a definite connection they both felt—that subtle spark of electricity that passes when two people recognize a mutual attraction.

Chris reached for her hand. "I think we ought get back and sort this mess out." Marlane gave him her hand and shook her head in agreement. They walked back to the table where Michael was explaining to Marisa that he had just found out about the other murders last night and Chris had only made the connection in the last few days. Marisa jumped up as Chris approached and threw her arms around him.

"Forgive me, please?" He put an arm around her.

"Always." Then he reached around with his other hand and gave her a couple of sharp swats to her behind. "But next time, Missy, think before you spout!"

Marisa pouted, rubbing the renewed sting in her butt. "I guess I deserved that. But at this rate between you and Michael, my poor butt's never gonna recover." Then she realized Marlane was standing right there, and blushed. Marlane simply raised an eyebrow and smiled. She didn't want to speculate on the funny little tingle she felt down deep as she watched Chris smack Marisa's rear and heard what she said.

Michael brought everyone back to reality. "The question now is, what next? Marisa, I know you've worked hard on this and I respect what you uncovered, but you can't run this story."

Marisa's face fell. "Michael, how can I not? This is a huge story! Even if I wanted to hold it, which I don't, there's no way my boss will agree. I'll keep some of the details out, like the rose, but the story

has to run." She was no longer defiant, but pleading for their understanding.

Chris tried next. "We can't tip this guy off that we've made the connection among the murders. We'll never stop him if we do. Right now he's feeling confident, probably even a little cocky, but he'll run for the hills if he finds out we've tied the murders together. Right now we've got three years to stop him."

Marisa looked sharply at Chris, and Marlane flinched at his words. He had just confirmed what she suspected, and she knew Marisa had picked up on it too.

"Why do you say three years? There were six years between the two we uncovered. There are more aren't there?" Neither Chris nor Michael said anything. Chris couldn't believe his blunder. "Answer me!" she demanded.

Chris sighed and figured he had no choice. "Yes, but before I tell you any more, Marisa, we have to agree this is ALL off the record."

"I don't need you to GIVE me anything. My next step was to look for other cases anyway—I found two, make that three, and I'll find the others. This is not a question of on or off the record. I brought this to you, not the other way around!"

Marlane could see the discussion was escalating again. "Slow down. This is not getting us anywhere. Michael what is the next step in the investigation? Are you putting together a task force?"

Michael looked hard at Marisa and then answered Marlane. "OFF THE RECORD, yes. I've been on the phone all morning contacting the local departments and trying to get together the investigating officers on each case."

"Joint local/federal?" she asked.

"Yes."

Chris jumped in, "Marlane you could be a big help on this if you'd work with us." Michael agreed, thinking if she's working for us, she can't go on TV

and talk about it. It was almost if she read his mind.

"And then of course I couldn't be part of Marisa's reports. Isn't that why you asked?" she responded sarcastically.

Chris was defensive. "That wasn't what I was thinking!" But Michael didn't pull any punches.

"Well, it was EXACTLY what I was thinking! Dammit, Marisa, you've got to see what a mistake it would be to put this on TV. Stop thinking like a reporter for a minute, and start thinking like the investigator you were when you uncovered this in the first place!"

No one said anything for a while, the frustration of not being able to make their point heard was discernible on all four faces. Finally Marisa got up and looked at Chris. "Can you take Marlane back to her office?" she asked quietly.

"Of course. But Marisa we've got to know. What are you going to do?" Chris asked.

"I don't know. I need time to think." She turned and walked away toward her car.

Chris started after her, but Michael held up a hand, and followed instead. He caught up to her and simply fell in step beside her, not saying anything. After about half a block Marisa spoke without looking at him or breaking stride.

"Please Michael, no more. I meant what I said. I need time to think, and I need to do it without pressure. You know you can't stop me, if I decide to go with the story. All you can do is come after me once it airs—but no judge will grant you prior restraint." She stopped at that point and looked at him. "I promise I will call you with my decision. You can come try and talk my boss out of it at that point if you want, but I've heard what you have to say. I'm asking you now, please back off." Her eyes showed nothing but anguish, her voice seemed almost dead. Michael knew he couldn't push anymore.

He took her hand, brought it to his lips and lightly kissed it. "Just do what your gut tells you, and you'll make the right decision." Then he turned and walked back to the others. Marisa watched him go, wondering if she'd ever feel the warmth of his lips tenderly touch her again, if her gut went against him.

Marisa was sitting in her car, feeling numb when the shrill beep of her pager brought her back to the present. She looked at the number and message and saw it was her boss—his direct line, with the message, "CALL ME ASAP, KYLE". She let out a long breath and realized it was time to come clean with him. The only conclusion she'd come to was this was not her decision alone to make. She needed to talk with someone who had more experience. She was only a couple of blocks from the station, so she headed in to work.

She walked into the newsroom and was immediately accosted by Ron. "Are you OK? I've been trying to get a hold of you since early this morning! The cops said you were released, but I couldn't find you."

Marisa reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "Thanks Ron. You're a great partner. I'm good, but I gotta go face the dragon."

"You're gonna tell Wheeler you crossed police lines? Man, I've spent the whole day dodging the boss, so I wouldn't have to answer questions about you. Now you're going to spill the beans!"

Marisa had to laugh. "Ron, I love you, babe! Did you get anything good last night?"

"Just the usual—flashing lights, cops wandering around and the black bag shot. Nobody would talk. I think Jen's working the story for dayside, and I know she wants to talk to you."

"OK, I'll check in with her. Hey, thanks Ron. You're a good guy."

"Just take care, Marisa. I'll tell you, you scare me sometimes! And I don't scare easy." He winked

at her as he headed to the news desk where the assignment editor was bellowing his name.

Marisa figured she'd drop her stuff off at her desk, check messages and then go talk to Kyle. She still needed a few more minutes to pull herself together. But as she turned to head back to the reporters' pit, Kyle saw her and motioned her to his office, mouthing the word, 'now'. Marisa walked slowly, as a reluctant child approaching a parent for punishment. She walked into the office, and sat down. Kyle sat on the edge of his desk and just looked at her for several minutes.

"I paged you almost 15 minutes ago," he said calmly.

"I was close so decided to just come in rather than call. I wanted to talk to you face-to-face."

"That's pretty brave given where you spent the night, and why!"

Marisa looked up startled that he already knew what she was about to confess.

"A word to the wise—don't ever assume I won't find out something like your spending the night in jail. I'm like Big Brother—eyes and ears everywhere!" he paused, his expression changing from chastisement to concern. "You look like hell Marisa, did you get any sleep at all?"

"Not really. It was a pretty uncomfortable night, and I was mad as hell. Kyle listen, I know you warned me about violating police lines, and I'll take my lumps on that one—suspension or whatever you decide. But first hear me out. We've got a decision to make, and I need your help. I just don't know what the right thing to do is."

He could see she was torn up over whatever she was about to say. He sat down in the chair next to her, "Marisa, whatever it is, we'll figure it out. Just tell me."

She sat back, relaxed a little, and told the whole story, skipping only the spanking Chris gave her. "So, I left it with Chris and Michael that I'd call with our decision. What should we do? It's an incredible

story, and I feel strongly we need to warn women who fit the profile, but I don't want to ruin any chance the cops have of catching this sicko."

She looked up at Kyle with pleading eyes that begged for an answer. "Marisa, you've worked the cop beat for a long time here and at your other stations. Tell me what your gut says."

She smiled at the question, thinking back to Michael's last words. She closed her eyes for a moment and reached down deep for an answer. She was surprised when one came to her so strongly. "Hold it." Then she was even more surprised at Kyle's response.

"I agree. But we hold it under our terms. And those terms are that you have complete access to the task force investigation, and can follow its progress. We won't broadcast anything until they get the guy, unless it breaks elsewhere, but we get to ride shotgun on every step. You'll have an incredible series of stories on the hunt for a serial killer."

"That's the perfect compromise! Michael and Chris will hate it, but too bad. They'll have to go for it. Kyle, you're a genius. I'll call Michael and give him our terms."

"Actually I think it should come from me. We'll get him over here for a discussion and sign all the appropriate releases. We'll work your schedule out as we go. I'm still going to need you on the street reporting, especially for the rest of November sweeps. But I don't want you working yourself to exhaustion. That won't help either of us! Now, let me make one thing VERY clear. You will do exactly as you're told—no Lone Ranger acts, no grandstanding, and no defying anyone on the task force. This is going to be a dangerous investigation, and I want you out of the line of fire at ALL times. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir," she answered meekly.

"I mean it Marisa—I will pull you off this assignment so fast, it'll make your head spin if I get



the slightest report that you're putting yourself or your crew at risk."

"I got it. Can I request Ron to work with me?"

"Yes, and you can tell him to stop skulking around trying to avoid me. I would only ask him to rat you out as a last resort!" Kyle was grinning. "Now get out of here before I change my mind about suspending you! I'll get on the phone to Captain Craine and get him over here. And Marisa, once that meeting's over—you're going home and getting some sleep."

"No argument there boss!" Marisa literally skipped out of Kyle's office. She felt as if a huge burden had been lifted off her shoulders. She knew Michael and Chris wouldn't be happy having her in the middle of everything, but she thought they'd go along to keep the story off the air. She decided to call Marlane and tell her the news. If she really did join the task force they'd all be working together. Marisa couldn't imagine a more challenging group, or a more exciting assignment.

An hour later Michael and Chris were seated across a conference table from Kyle and Marisa, listening as Kyle laid out their terms for holding the story. Neither said anything as he spoke, but the looks Marisa got spoke volumes. She was going to hear about it big time later. When Kyle finished, he made it clear there was no room for negotiation. Either, Marisa and her crew, got full access or the station would continue its own investigation and run the story as soon as they had it all.

Michael was the first to speak when he was done. "I don't like it, but I also don't see that we have much choice. We'll agree to access to any task force meetings, investigative materials and case files. But she gets no where near stake-outs or surveillance, unless we have a protected site. And she DOES NOT go in when we make an arrest. Those situations are too dangerous for a civilian."

"But..." Marisa started to protest and was cut off by Chris.

"And that goes for any crew as well. We get to determine when a scene is too dangerous."

"Those are our terms, and they also are non-negotiable!" Michael was spitting out his words through clenched teeth, knowing he was painted into a corner.

"Agreed. Believe me gentlemen, I do not want my people getting hurt. But we uncovered this story, and we want it." Kyle rose and offered his hand to Michael and Chris who also rose and shook it begrudgingly. They knew they were out maneuvered, but they also knew there was nothing they could do about it now.

Michael turned to Marisa, eyes flashing, but voice perfectly calm. "The first task force briefing is tomorrow morning at 8:30, downtown at Chris' office."

"I'll be there." They started to walk out, but Kyle's voice stopped them.

"One more thing, Captain Craine?" Michael turned back to Kyle. "If you ever throw one of my reporters in a cell again, you damn well better be prepared to take the case to court, because I WILL come after you with everything I've got!"

"Mr. Wheeler, if I ever have to throw one of your reporters in jail again, you won't be able to keep the case out of court, because I'll throw the book at her" he looked pointedly at Marisa, "or him," he added after a slight pause. "Good day." Michael stalked out of the conference room and right out of the newsroom. Chris gave Marisa one more look, and then softened slightly and winked at her before he followed Michael out.

Kyle smiled at her after they left. "You're going to have your hands full working with those two. I must say, they both seem quite concerned about your welfare. Is there anything I should know before we embark on this partnership?"

"Not really—they're just like a lot of the cops downtown. Overprotective of Big By's little girl! Chris is almost like a big brother, we grew up

together—his Dad and mine came up through the ranks together. Michael and I, well, we're like oil and water—we just don't seem to mix very well." She had a sad look as she said the last, and Kyle definitely got the impression Marisa wished things could be different.

"OK, I'll take your word on this. For now, check in with Jen to see how her follow-up story's coming, and then GO HOME! And I better not find out you stopped anywhere on the way, young lady. You need sleep. I can't afford to have you crash on me now."

It took another couple of hours to brief Jen and then Ron, and pull all her files and notes together for the next day's task force meeting. But then Marisa did exactly as Kyle ordered her to, and was very grateful for it. All the way home she was anticipating a nice long bubble bath, ordering take out and curling up with a good book. However that lovely image was crushed as she pulled into her driveway to find Michael and Chris sitting on her front porch, waiting for her.

## Chapter Seven

Marisa put the car in park and looked up at the two men in her life sitting on her front porch. Their expressions were hard to read, but she knew two hours ago at least one of them was pretty pissed at her. *I just can't fight anymore—I'm SO tired*, she thought. And then it crossed her mind they might be here to punish her for forcing her way on the task force—another serious spanking in less than 24 hours! *No way, they wouldn't dare!* But her abused bottom definitely twinged at the thought. Finally she put her head down on the steering wheel and decided she'd just stay in the car!

Michael and Chris watched the whole play of emotions on her face, and laughed as she laid her head down. "Gee, Michael she doesn't look very happy to see us!"

"You're right, I can't imagine why—we've been apart for a whole two hours."

"Just how long do you think she'd sit in that car if we let her?" Chris asked.

"Well you know her better than me, but from what I've seen she's pretty damn stubborn." Michael answered.

"You are right about that. We better go get her." They walked over to the car and Chris knocked on the window. Marisa turned her head slightly and opened one eye to peep at them.

"Go away."

"Now that's no way to greet guests." Chris said.

"Especially guests bearing groceries!" Michael continued.

"If you think I'm cooking for you guys, you're crazy—now go away. I've had enough of both of you for one 24 hours." Marisa popped back, her head still resting on the steering wheel.

"Believe me, we aren't letting you anywhere near the kitchen. This is our treat!" Chris said, and then turned to Michael, "Under no circumstances ever let her cook for you!"

"Got it! Come on Marisa, we've got the fixings for Caesar salad... fresh garlic and parmesan."

"And steaks from the Strip—just begging for the grill."

Marisa actually sat up, "Mushrooms?"

Chris grinned, "Would I bring you a steak without mushrooms?"

"Plus we've got corn-on-the-cob."

"Real butter?" she asked.

"But of course, and to top it all off—your favorite red wine—Rosemont Shiraz," Chris declared triumphantly.

"What's the catch?" she asked suspiciously.

"I'm hurt!" Chris claimed with exaggerated drama.

"Me too." Michael chimed in and then looked at Chris, "Tough audience, she's still not laughing, or unlocking the door. I could go get a police jimmie."

"Like you two haven't given me reason enough to be suspicious of cops bearing steaks and wine! I seem to recall two hours ago, you looked ready to strangle me."

"Look you out maneuvered us, plain and simple. To the victor go the spoils! We just wanted to show you there were no hard feelings." Michael countered.

"And," Chris added, "we're really happy you made the right decision, even if it's going to cost us your pestering on the task force."

"Pestering! Did it ever occur to you bozos I might actually be able to help!?" She shook her head in mock frustration.

"You know, Missy, this is a blast chatting away in your driveway, yelling so you can hear us through the window, but I'm starved. How about we go inside where we'll provide a little less entertainment for the neighbors?"

"So you guys are really here just to cook dinner? No ulterior motives?"

"We swear on our shields!"

"OK, but I'm still not coming out until both of you promise that no hand, paddle, ruler, switch, belt or anything else, swats, spansks, or in any way touches my ass tonight!"

They laughed out loud at that, and then looked at each other, put their right hands up in a pledge and said, "Scouts' Honor."

While Marisa gathered her purse, keys and files, Michael looked at Chris and whispered, "Were you ever a boy scout?"

"Hell no, you?"

"Nope, never!"

"So much for pledges!" and they grinned, each taking an arm to escort Marisa into the house, grabbing the grocery bag on the way.

Once inside the guys took her stuff, helped her out of her jacket and set her down on the couch, lifting her feet and taking off her shoes.

"Now, you are not to move from that spot. Just sit back, relax and enjoy our slaving away in your kitchen." Chris said.

"You better be careful, a girl could get used to this!"

"One time deal, so enjoy!" Michael said as he headed out to her patio to start up the grill. "Can you believe we're still grilling out in November? This weather is unbelievable. Hey Marisa, where's the gas for the grill?" Michael called out and turned to hear her answer, but she was right there. "I thought you were told to stay put young lady!"

"I thought you might need this." She was carrying the propane tank. Their eyes met and the electricity flashed. Neither moved for a minute, not wanting to break contact. Finally Michael took the tank and started fussing with the grill.

"Michael, are you really not mad at me anymore for forcing my way on the task force?" she asked softly, almost afraid to bring it up.

He stopped playing with the grill and turned to her. "Marisa, I was never angry that you'd be working with the task force, I was angry that once

again you so cavalierly put yourself in a dangerous position."

"Oh," she said somewhat contritely.

"Yes, oh. You know, since I'm not allowed to touch your butt for any reason tonight, it's a good time to try that thing we talked about this morning."

"What's that?" she asked cautiously.

Michael reached for her and brought her close, their lips just a breath apart. "Kissing without a spanking." His lips captured hers with the hunger of a man eating his last meal, and she responded with an equal urgency.

"Well I see things are heating up out here, even without a fire!" Chris came out with a glass of wine for Marisa and a beer for Michael. The couple broke their lip lock to glare at him, but Michael didn't let Marisa out of his embrace.

"Don't you have water to boil or salad to toss out in the kitchen?" Michael growled. Marisa pulled away laughing.

"It's OK Michael, at this rate we'd end up eating raw steak! I'll go set the table, so as not to further distract the grill master."

The three of them talked, joked and laughed a lot through dinner. They carefully avoided the subject that they all knew would consume them starting early in the morning. After all the tension, anger, frustration and concern of the last 24 hours, they all needed a little down time, and a chance to get back on positive footing with one another.

After dinner the guys did the dishes, not letting her lift a finger to help. By then it was late and Chris and Michael both said it was time to go—they all needed sleep. Chris left first, giving Marisa and Michael a little time alone. Michael took her in his arms and they gave in to their desire with a kiss that set them both on fire.

"If I don't leave right now, I won't leave," Michael said finally, his voice husky and sensual. "I

know this will be complicated, Marisa, but I want to see you."

"Very complicated. But making the complicated simple is what I do best. Good night, Captain. See you tomorrow morning."

As he walked down the street to his car, and Marisa closed her door and leaned back against it, their thoughts were amazingly similar. What are we getting ourselves into? The question had a lot of different answers, and they both knew not all of them were good—but they also knew they couldn't deny the powerful attraction between the cop and the reporter.

*He watched intensely, with hateful eyes, as first one and then the other man left the evil house of temptation. She was too good for cops, just like her mother. His jaw clenched and he muttered under his breath threats and curses. But he was patient. He waited until well after he saw all the lights go out in the house, as well as the neighbors' homes.*

The next morning Marisa got the first rose. She opened her front door to grab the morning papers and the flower box was sitting on her porch. She smiled wondering how Michael had managed to get flowers delivered between 10pm last night and 7am this morning. She opened the box and found a single perfect red rose bud, just ready to open. The card said only:

*As its beauty opens to the world, so does yours to me.*

She was so touched by the words, tears welled up. She also was surprised at yet another side of Michael—the romantic.

She headed down to the station to pick up Ron and then they went to Chris' office. She noticed that Ron brought the digital camera gear which was much more compact, and usually used exclusively by the investigative unit.



"I figured it would be a little less intrusive, and I have a feeling these folks aren't gonna be too happy about us being there." He looked over at Marisa and could see the signs of nerves he'd learned to recognize after the months they'd worked together. "Hey, don't worry kiddo, you'll charm 'em! Come on, I know this is serious stuff, but you've got to admit it's pretty damn exciting being on the inside of something like this." He was trying to distract her and get a smile, and he was finally successful.

"Yeah, you're right Ron, I know this is a horrible series of crimes, but I can't help feeling the same way. What is it about us newspeople? Are we all weird for getting an adrenaline rush at other's tragedy?"

"Marisa, you know better than that!" Ron scolded her. "It's not the tragedy it's getting the story—that's the rush. We need that to deal with all the terrible things we have to cover. It's as much a coping thing as anything."

"I know, you're right again. We're here." She looked over at him. "Ron, you're not that much older than me—how come you're so wise?"

"Just common sense, kiddo. Let's go in there and wow 'em." He flashed her that impish grin of his, and her last vestige of nerves disappeared.

They headed up to Chris' office and his assistant directed them to the conference room on his floor. They tried to ignore the questioning and disparaging looks they got as they walked through the maze of FBI offices with camera gear. Ron leaned over and whispered to Marisa, "You'd think they'd never seen a video camera before!"

Marisa laughed and whispered back, "They probably haven't on this floor—we're talking the FBI here! When was the last time you saw an agent on TV?"

"Good point!"

They walked into the conference room and the casual conversation among those who'd arrived already stopped cold, as they just stared. Marisa

gave Ron a quick glance, steeled herself for a tough reception and said, "Morning all. Chris, OK if we set-up in the corner there?"

Chris walked over to Marisa and said quietly, "You sure know how to make an entrance! Look how about no cameras this morning—give us a chance to explain why you're here and what you'll be doing."

She was ready to argue with him, but thought better of it. She'd wait and fight her battles over something more important. "You get this one, but I will expect payback at some point!" She smiled at him and motioned to Ron to grab a seat for now. Michael and a couple more officers she didn't know walked in, and then Marlane came in behind them. Marisa was greatly relieved to see her, and smiled warmly. Marlane came over and sat next to her.

"Boy am I glad to see a friendly face in this crowd. I've had warmer receptions at a Rush Limbaugh convention!" Marlane just laughed, but she was happy things had worked out.

"Marisa, I'm really glad you decided not to go with the story. It was the right decision, and I think your information gathering and processing skills will be valuable on this team."

"That's assuming I'm allowed to be a member of the team, rather than just an outside observer."

Everyone was seated by that point and Michael stood up to get things started. He quickly went around the room and introduced everyone. In addition to the foursome and Ron, there were officers from each county sheriff's office or community police department where there had been a murder and a couple of detectives from Michael's precinct, plus an FBI forensic expert. Marisa noted that there were two other previous murders in addition to ones she had uncovered and the one in Pittsburgh. After briefly introducing everyone Michael was going to turn the meeting over to Chris, but he didn't get that far.

The Washington County deputy butted in, "I don't mean to be rude Ma'am," he said to Marisa and then turned to Michael, "but why in the heck is there a TV reporter here?" There was a comment of agreement from the officer in Butler County, the location of the other old murder that she hadn't known about.

Before Michael could answer, the Westmoreland County deputy piped up. "I'm guessing she's here because she made the connection, just like Agent Barry, going through cold case files. Am I right Miss Shaw?"

"So she blackmailed her way onto this task force?" snapped the Butler County officer.

"Hey, Hank that's pretty harsh," said the Westmoreland deputy. "I've worked briefly with Miss Shaw on choosing some cold cases to profile, and she was a complete professional."

"We've seen her work here on the air—I agree with Wyatt there, she's a pro. And she grew up around cops—her Dad was a longtime Pittsburgh captain. She'll be cool. So's Ron—he knows how to work a crime scene without getting in the way," one of the Pittsburgh detectives added.

"I don't care if she's Barbra Walters! No reporter belongs on a criminal investigation task force. She'll only be a pain in the ass, and as soon as the story breaks our investigation is in the crapper!" Hank responded.

"That's enough!" Chris shouted. "We are ALL professionals here and we will ALL treat each other accordingly. Marisa did not 'blackmail' her way onto this task force. She came to Captain Craine and me with the evidence she had uncovered right after this week's murder to help, not broadcast a story. We..."

"Don't Chris." Marisa stopped him and got a very unpleasant glare in return. "I appreciate the defense, but if we're going to work together, it might as well be on open and honest footing. Yesterday morning at this time, I had every

intention of blowing this story wide open. Dr. Sanders here, who I was working with, convinced me to go to Agent Barry and Captain Craine and tell them what I had. Even after I did that, and they made the case to keep the story quiet, I still wasn't completely convinced it was the right thing to do. It was my boss who agreed to keep it under wraps, in return for allowing me full access to everything this task force does. So, you're stuck with me—and I can either get in the way, or help. It's up to you."

No one said anything for several minutes, and then Michael finally spoke up. "Any other objections to the make-up of the team?" he asked. There was a tense silence. "Fine, then I'll turn things over to Agent Chris Barry who will actually coordinate the efforts of the task force."

Chris explained that the four officers from the outlying jurisdictions would be paired off to review each other's cases, including going back through all the evidence collected, re-interviewing witnesses and visiting the scenes where the bodies were found. The two detectives from Michael's precinct would work the Pittsburgh homicide. Marlane and Marisa would go through the case files, any other records databases, as well as any friends and family statements, new or old. They'd input everything they could find on the victims to create a database they could search for anything they had in common other than similar looks. They needed to find out why these women were chosen, and how the killer was exposed to all of them.

Marisa explained that she and Ron would visit all the communities and tag along with the officers of some of the interviews and the site visits. At the groans she received, she added, "Look at it this way, you can use our original story idea of profiling cold cases as a cover for re-investigating these murders, especially the really old ones."

Michael agreed, "That's actually a good idea, we don't want to raise any suspicions as to why we're suddenly putting new resources on these cases."

Then Michael explained that e-mail accounts had been set-up for everyone to file reports, and there would be a morning conference call and once a week meetings.

"I expect to hear from each one of you every morning on the phone, and every evening by e-mail. Remember the slightest detail could make all the difference, especially as we're developing these victim profiles, so don't leave anything out." Chris said, and then paused to look directly at each person around the room. "Ladies and Gentlemen, we have serial killer to catch. Three years may seem like a long time, but we have no guarantee that he'll stay to his current schedule, especially since he's now moved from small, rural communities to Pittsburgh. This guy is good, very good—we've got to be better, and that means we need every one of you with all your skill and experience."

He then looked pointedly at Hank and the Washington County deputy. "It also means we're a team—this is not a competition and there are no solo heroes or unwelcome members. We work with and for each other, not against one another." He then turned his visual radar to Marisa and Ron, "and everything shared among task force members is highly confidential—not to be shared with co-workers, friends and family, or anyone else associated with your cases."

Chris adjourned the meeting encouraging everyone to hang around for a little while longer to talk informally and get to know each other better. He distributed case books with all five case files, including scene photos to everyone. He then approached Marisa and Marlane who were chatting with two other officers.

"Bill, Wyatt, I need to steal Marisa and Marlane to show them the office where we've set-up computers and the database programs." They headed down the hall to another office, and Marisa sensed Chris was not happy with her.

"Chris, I didn't mean to..."

"It doesn't matter what you meant to do, Marisa. Once again your mouth got in the way of your brain!" he snapped.

Marisa stopped and turned to face him. "What the hell does that mean? I was just being honest—you were about to lie to those guys."

Marlane stepped between the two of them and put a hand on each person's chest pushing them apart. "OK, time out—each fighter to their corner! I see what Chris was talking about when he said you guys are like brother and sister—you sure as heck fight like siblings." She turned to Marisa, "Marisa you know better than to break ranks like that and undermine Chris in front of the rest of the task force! Cops take chain of command seriously." Then she looked at Chris, "and you, Agent Barry, know damn well she's got to earn these guys' respect on her own, and you shouldn't try to make excuses for her—it looks like she can't hold her own." Then she crossed her arms in front of her chest and stood there with a disgusted look at both of them. Chris and Marisa looked at each other, and then at Marlane and cracked up. She started to laugh too.

"Yes mother!" they both said to her.

"Can we please get back to work!" she responded, turning on her heel as if she'd had enough of both of them, but she was grinning and shaking her head as she walked into the office.

They discussed the set-up and the software. Both Marlane and Marisa had used similar programs. But Marisa also suggested that they might be able to use a database comparison program she knew the investigative unit at the station developed to take data from different database formats and merge it, and then search and cross reference any item in the merged files.

They all looked up as Michael and Ron came in followed by one of the people from the graphics and documents department who was bringing in their

crime board. It was a huge bulletin board that tracked the cases from the first to last in a timeline with brief profiles of each murder, and pictures of the victims and crime scenes. It was the first time any of them had seen the cases laid out that way and there was a heavy silence as the board was wheeled in and placed at the head of the room. A placard at the top of the board said "The Rose Murders".

After what seemed like an eternity of silence, Chris said, "How about we get out of here for a while and catch an early lunch?"

Michael was the first to respond, "Can't, I've got a meeting with the Chief to brief him on this whole thing." He looked at Marisa, "but I'll take a raincheck! How about dinner?" he asked and then looked at the others and added, "for two!"

Chris popped back, "Sorry Michael, you're just not my type!" They laughed and Marlane agreed to lunch, but Marisa and Ron begged off, saying they had to get back to the station.

Marisa whispered to Michael, "Can't do dinner tonight, but I did want to thank-you for my surprise this morning—I don't know how you managed it."

Michael was about to ask what she was talking about when his pager went off and he had to make a phone call. The others headed out, so he never got an answer, and promptly forgot about it as the latest crisis down at the station house captured his attention.

After Chris and Marlane headed to lunch and Michael raced back to the precinct house, Marisa went back into the office and stared at the crime board. Ron followed her after a few minutes.

"It's really chilling seeing it all laid out like that." he said quietly. But she didn't respond and had a strange look on her face. "Marisa what is it?"

"I don't know Ron, there's something about these crime scene photos that's bothering me. I know it sounds weird, but there's like this bizarre familiarity that I can't quite put my finger on." She

shook her head and turned away from the board. "Don't mind me, I'm just letting my imagination run wild. So, how about a quick trip by the drive-thru on the way back to the newsroom?"

"God, the crap you eat!" They laughed and headed out at the building, but not before Marisa gave one more backward glance at the crime board.



## Chapter Eight

The next two weeks flew by. The amount of data that came in was overwhelming. Marisa and Marlane were having a tough time keeping up with the new info, uploading the case files and still managing to do database searches of their own. Marisa and Ron also had been out to all but one of the communities shooting video of the places where the bodies were found and interviews with family and friends, following along as the cops re-interviewed everyone.

She had put off going to Butler County as long as possible since Hank still hadn't warmed up to her. But finally he and Wyatt, the Westmoreland County officer were headed out to talk to the victim's family, so Marisa and Ron needed to come along. When they got there, they used the same cover story that had been working very well in other communities, that the station was doing a series of profiles on old, unsolved cases.

Hank started the questioning, and even Marisa had to admit, he was good—very compassionate and patient. Once he finished, Marisa said she just had a few additional questions. He glared at her, but said go ahead.

"Mrs. Miller, first let me say how sorry I am about your daughter, and I really appreciate your talking to us. Maybe, just maybe, we'll scare up someone who knows something. You know, when we report on crimes like your daughter's death, I think we spend too much time talking about how the person died, rather than how they lived. If you would, share with me some of the small details about Beverly—the things few people might know, but things that made her who she was."

Mrs. Miller smiled through her tears, "Dear, nobody's ever asked me that question. It's always how do feel about your daughter's death, never how I felt about her life." Then the anecdotes came pouring out—habits and hobbies, fears and joys, all

the little things that make each person unique. Marisa drew her out with supportive comments and a few little stories of her own. Hank and Wyatt couldn't believe the wealth of information they were getting.

Once they finished and packed up, they headed to their separate vehicles, but Hank followed Marisa. He put a hand on her arm, "Marisa, when I'm wrong, I say I'm wrong. I've spent a lot of years interviewing suspects and witnesses, but that was pretty amazing what you got with one question. Sorry, I've been such a bastard around you."

Marisa smiled and winked at him, "Aw Hank, I knew you'd come around eventually! See ya Wednesday." Then she was off.

Task force meetings were Wednesday mornings at 10. Now that everyone was comfortable with each other it was basically a free-for-all discussion and debate. All the information was reported daily in their e-mail reports and conference calls, so the meetings became the time to kick around theories and work on a suspect profile. The group discussion was fast-paced and challenging. While the task force was getting frustrated at not finding the link among the victims or the clue that lead them to a suspect, they did think they were getting close to a profile of what type of person this guy was.

After the meeting, those who could stick around went to lunch together, to talk about things not related to the murders. One of the big topics was always the relationships between Marisa and Michael, and Chris and Marlane. If any of the four of them was at lunch they took an unbelievable amount of teasing, and were interrogated unmercifully—of course, what did they expect from a bunch of nosey cops.

The truth was both relationships were moving very slowly, mainly because none of them had a lot of extra time. In addition to the task force work, they had other job responsibilities. Marisa was the worst. She'd work all morning on task force stuff,

either the computer databases, or shooting with Ron out in the field. Then she'd check her other contacts on her beat and head into the station at 3pm, to work through the 11pm news. Kyle had every good intention of giving her some time off the daily grind, but it was November ratings, one of the most important sweeps periods, and the Assistant News Director, Andy Kemp, kept telling her he just couldn't swing it in the scheduling.

Chris and Marlane had managed to squeeze in a couple of romantic dinners, but Marisa and Michael's schedules just seemed programmed to keep them apart. The only thing that kept the romance alive was that Marisa had received two more beautiful rose buds with special messages. But since practically all of their conversations and correspondence was in front of other task force members, she never really got to thank Michael. She just hoped her brilliant smile on those mornings sent the message that she loved them.

Marlane had invited the other three to dinner at her place on Saturday night, and then they were going to see the Pittsburgh Symphony. Marisa was really looking forward to a relaxing evening. Michael was picking her up, and then she hoped maybe he'd spend the night instead of just dropping her off. Keeping the desire and electricity between them under wraps, except for a few stolen kisses, was driving her mad.

Friday the Assistant News Director dropped a bombshell into her plans. "Hey Marisa, don't forget, you're up this weekend."

"What? Andy, no, it can't be my weekend on the reporter rotation!" she whined.

"Sorry, but it's been on the schedule for two weeks. I tried to opt you out because of that special project, but it didn't work. Everybody pulls extra duty during ratings, you know that." During sweeps periods they assigned an extra reporter to beef up coverage on weekends, and all the reporters took turns covering the shift. Marisa's

number was up. She checked in with the weekend assignment editor to find out what was going on, and found out at least she'd get to work a day shift, but there were two different stories she'd have to cover on Saturday, so it would be a run and gun day. She figured she could probably get done in time to at least make the symphony, but dinner was out.

She called Marlane and Michael to let them know. Marlane was sympathetic, but Michael was angry. "Dammit Marisa you're working yourself into the ground! Tell them you can't work this weekend."

"It's not that simple, Michael. Look, I'm sorry about Saturday night, but it can't be helped. I'll meet you guys at the symphony." and she hung up. She just wasn't in the mood to argue with Michael, especially when she pretty much agreed with him, but knew she didn't have a choice—it was her turn.

Saturday turned out to be a nightmare at work. She was sent out with a new photographer and they had camera problems on the first story—so she had to piece something together with very little video and only 1 interview. Then the second story took twice as long as it should have, so she was crunched to meet her deadlines, get both stories done for the 6pm news, and still make her live shot.

As she headed back to the station after the 6pm live shot, the last thing in the world she wanted to do was get dressed up in the clothes she'd brought and head to Heinz Hall for the concert. But Michael was already angry she had to miss dinner, so she figured she better go. She changed into a simple, but elegant black cocktail dress that really extenuated her height and figure. Michael was always saying he could never get enough of her long, shapely legs, so she hoped the dress would stave off some of his irritation. But no matter how much fussing she did with her hair and make-up, she couldn't glamour over the exhaustion etched onto her face.

She arrived at the theatre with only minutes spare. She had been determined to shake off her bad day, but got to the theatre district and couldn't find a parking place anywhere—so she just decided to hell with it and parked illegally in an alley. Surely on a Saturday night they wouldn't tow.

Michael whistled appreciatively at the dress, but when their eyes met he could see the fatigue her smile couldn't hide. They all saw it. Chris was getting worried about her, and he could see that Michael was concerned too. But no one said anything, they just went into the theatre.

After the performance, they walked to a bistro around the corner from Heinz Hall for a nightcap. Marisa was quiet while the others talked animatedly about the wonderful performance and other things. Whenever one of them addressed her she gave short, clipped answers, almost to the point of being rude. Finally, she got up to leave. "Look, I'm sorry I'm just not good company tonight. And I have to be back at work early tomorrow—so I'm gonna call it a night."

Michael stood, "Marisa, why don't you let me drive you home, you look like you're ready to collapse on your feet."

"I'm fine—stay and enjoy the rest of the evening."

"I'm walking you to your car at the very least!" he said quietly. Marisa missed the warning in his tone.

"Fine!" she snapped. "Good night Chris and Marlane—sorry I missed dinner." With that she stalked out of the bar area with Michael at her heels.

Once they were outside he grabbed her arm and swung her around to face him. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

"I had a bad day, OK. What?! I'm not allowed to be in a bad mood once in a while?" she was practically yelling at him.

"A bad mood is one thing, but you've been downright rude, and I don't think any of us deserved that! I know you're tired but..."

"Oh, just leave me alone!" She pulled out of his grasp and headed for the alley where she had parked.

Michael stood there on the sidewalk for a moment, furious with her. He took a deep breath to try and calm down and went after her. Then he saw where she was heading and couldn't believe it. But before he could let her have it for parking alone in the dark maze of alleys she'd chosen, he heard a loud, "Godammit! My car's gone—somebody stole my damn car!"

Michael was now in the alley, barely containing his anger. "It was probably towed, Marisa. This not only a damned dangerous place for a woman alone to park, it's also illegal!"

"And your fucking cops have nothing better to do on a Saturday night, than tow my car! That's just great!" she was screaming at him and he had had enough. He picked her up, kicking and yelling, and hauled her over to the nearest back steps he could find. Completely ignoring what he might be sitting on in his good suit pants, he sat down, and flipped Marisa over so she was face down, and then clamped one leg over her kicking legs. She was fighting for all it was worth, but she was no match for his strength. He managed to take off his suit jacket and roll up his sleeve while still holding her down.

She was throwing every name and four letter word she knew at him, but he was silent—fully focused on the task at hand. He slid her skirt up to the middle of her back and then pulled down her pantyhose and panties. The force of the first blow shocked Marisa into a momentary silence. Michael was angry and she was going to feel every bit of his wrath. He brought his hand down again and again in rapid fire spansks against her bare buttocks. SMACK! SMACK! "Ooowww! Let me go damn you!"

SMACK! SMACK! "Stop! Ouch!" SMACK! SMACK! "Ooohhh, that's enough—let me up!" SMACK! SMACK! It took more than two dozen hard smacks before her tone changed, but still he didn't let up.

"Please, Michael, no more" SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! "I'm sorry! I can't take anymore! Please!" She was sobbing now, and her bottom was throbbing. Both of them were startled when they heard another voice.

"Is there a problem here? Do you need assistance miss?" It was a patrol officer who had heard the ruckus and came into the alley. Marisa was distressed enough without the utter embarrassment of another officer seeing them like that. But Michael seemed completely at ease when he responded.

He pulled his badge out of his jacket pocket. "Everything's fine Officer Levin. I was just reinforcing the parking laws with Miss Shaw here."

"Uh... sorry Captain... didn't realize it was you. Um... I'll just be on my way then..."

"First, do me a favor and check with dispatch. Find out if there was a navy blue Ford Explorer towed from this alley tonight, would you?"

"Sure thing Cap."

While the officer checked on his radio, Michael looked down at Marisa. Her face was almost as red as her butt. "Will you please let me up?" she whispered harshly.

"Nope."

"MICHAEL!"

"Captain, sure enough a truck fitting that description was towed. It's in the impound lot. Should I have 'em release it?"

"No, that's alright, we'll pick it up in the morning. Thank-you Officer Levin—and I trust that there will be no discussion of this at all."

"No sir, good night sir, and uh... good luck?"

The officer double-timed it back out onto the street. Michael chuckled, at least his anger had diminished, but he wasn't through with Marisa yet—

she had a lot to answer for. "Now, where were we..." and his hand came down yet again on her bright red backside.

"Oh, please Michael, no more. I'm so, so sorry."

SMACK! SMACK! "Sorry for what young lady?"

SMACK! SMACK! "Ow! Sorry for my attitude!"

SMACK! SMACK! "AND?"

SMACK! SMACK! "Oooohhh, please! Sorry for parking in a dark alley!"

SMACK! SMACK! "AND?"

SMACK! SMACK! "I don't know what else. But please, please Michael stop." She was completely limp across his lap and her tears were flowing freely. He stopped, and turned her over to cradle her in his arms.

He rocked her gently and spoke softly. "Marisa, I'm worried sick about you. You're exhausted. You've got to take some time off or you're going to get sick. I don't want you working tomorrow."

She didn't say anything, just cried, and before he knew it, she had fallen asleep right in his arms. He carried her to his car, drove her home, and tucked her into bed, and she never peeped. He left her a note that he'd be by in the morning and they would go down and get her truck.

*His eyes glowed with hatred as he watched the cop carry her into the evil house. He would have to free her too, soon. He might not be able to wait till the special day.*

RING! RING! RING!

What was that noise invading her dream? Marisa slowly came awake to the insistent ringing of the phone. She rolled over and felt like she was waking up from a three day drunk. Her head felt about three sizes too big, her mouth had that burlap, scratchy feeling, she ached all over and her butt still stung when she laid on her back.

She finally grabbed the phone and looked at the clock. 7:00AM. "This had better be important!" she managed to grumble.



"Marisa, it's Wes. I'm sorry to call you early, but we got a bad fire in Sewickly. I need you to meet the photog there ASAP." Wes was the weekend assignment editor. "Marisa are you there? Are you OK, you sound terrible! Please don't tell me you're sick. I'll never be able to get someone to cover on a Sunday morning!"

"Wes, I feel like shit—but for you, I'm dragging my ass out of bed. You need to have the photog come get me though—my car was towed last night." Marisa knew she was going to regret this, but she also knew Wes was right. He'd have a hell of a time getting anyone to come in and cover for her. If he brought in the regular weekend reporter that early, there would be no one to cover the night shift and report for 11pm. She hoped a shower and a couple of aspirin would make her a new woman.

Twenty minutes later she was ready to go, not feeling much better, but ready nonetheless. She had seen Michael's note and scribbled a response that she got called in early. She vaguely remembered his order not to go to work today, and she was glad she hadn't agreed. At least she wasn't breaking a promise—although she knew he was going to be pissed. *Well, I'll just have to deal with that later* she thought absently rubbing her backside.

She opened the door and there it was—another flower box. By now she knew there would be a beautiful rose bud inside. She waved at her photographer to give her a minute. She brought it in and put it in the vase with two others that were still alive. Maybe he wasn't completely furious with her after all. The card on this one said:

*Your beauty and life complete my circle*

She wasn't quite sure what that meant, but she scrawled a "Thanks Michael" under the message and set it up against the vase. Then she was out the door, leaving it unlocked for him when he came.

The photog briefed her on what they knew on the way. It sounded like a bad one. He told her the station was sending a live truck as soon as they got a hold of the on-call photographer. They would want her live during the Sunday morning show every half-hour, as soon as things were set-up. Marisa groaned at the thought—the morning show Sundays went from 7 to 9am.

They got to the scene and found firefighters still working the blaze. The house was likely to be a total loss. There were several neighbors gathered around in tears—she knew this was not going to be good. As they got out of the news car, a light drizzle started, adding damp to the cold. It was as if the weather reflected the grim scene. All of it combined to make Marisa miserable.

Fifteen minutes later she was about to do her first live shot for the morning show. Her photog had shot some video and she had live interviews set-up with the fire captain on the scene and a neighbor. As she started her live shot, describing the scene and talking over some of the video, someone came up to the captain and whispered a message. He sadly shook his head and then turned to Marisa. She could see on his face that he'd just received bad news and with exchanged glances got the message that she could ask him about it—so she started right out questioning him about the people living in the house. He slowly described the family of 5 and then stunned her when he said they'd just received word the mother and two of the children had died at the hospital. The third child was hanging on, and the Dad was out of town on business, coming home to tragedy. The neighbor standing on the other side of Marisa waiting to be interviewed was obviously shocked at the news, so Marisa made a spot decision not to put her live on TV in her grief.

Marisa continued doing live shots throughout the morning show, updating the story. And sounding and feeling worse by the hour. By 9am she could

barely talk, her voice was so hoarse, and her throat was killing her. Not to mention the fact that she was burning up. Her photographer asked several times if she was going to make it.

Wes called after the last live shot to tell her she did a great job.

"Yeah, right! I sounded like a sick frog! OK, what's next? Please tell me I can go home and climb into my nice warm bed!"

He laughed, "I do hope you're kidding! Listen, Marisa, I know you don't feel well, so how about gathering what you need for a reporter package, and I'll let the producer know you won't be live. You can keep the live truck out there, and just write and edit right in the truck, and then I'll have someone take you home. How's that?"

Marisa sighed heavily, "If that's the best deal you're offering, I'll take it. We'll probably need a couple more hours here shooting and getting info—then we'll be ready to put it together. Hey, see if you can find out some background on this family, and where the Dad works. I want to know where he might be coming back from."

"Will do—hang in there kiddo. Oh, by the way, some guy named Michael called wanting to know where you were. He sounded kind of irate, so I didn't tell him anything. He was also ranting about your leaving your cell at home. Just thought I'd warn you."

Marisa groaned, "Wonderful. Thanks Wes—keep him at bay if you can, or you might not have a reporter to finish this story."

Marisa was really dragging her way through the story. But she was getting done, slowly. Then at noon she got the call that nearly made her quit her job. The evening producer came in and demanded that she stay to be live at 6pm. She did everything to talk her out of a reporter live shot—the photog even offered to stay and set-up a live picture the anchor could talk over leading into her package—but the producer was adamant. It was ratings—

every other station would have a live reporter—Marisa had to stay and go live.

In the meantime, Wes somehow managed to find out the father was due back on a 3pm flight. Marisa knew she needed to get to the airport to at least try and talk to the man—she seriously doubted she'd get anything, the man was bound to be devastated. She hated these interviews with victims' families, like every reporter did. But she also knew that many times family members just wanted someone to talk to, and sometimes it was easier to talk to a stranger than loved ones who simply felt awkward and didn't know what to say. Some viewers probably looked at these interviews and simply thought reporters were callous, but she knew many times they were cathartic for a person caught in the middle of a tragedy, not of their own making.

She called in and said she was heading to the airport and they'd go live from there. Again the producer freaked out insisting they get back to the fire scene for the 6pm live. She tried to explain they'd lose 45 minutes of writing and editing time traveling back from the airport, but the producer wouldn't hear it. She was young and inexperienced, and trying to prove herself with kick-ass shows for ratings.

So Marisa and her photog hauled out to the airport. She knew there would be a police escort waiting to greet the father, and she hoped she'd know the officers. She lucked out, and they agreed to let her briefly talk to him—no camera unless he agreed. When the father came through the gate, she recognized him by the shell shocked look on his face and the grief in his eyes. She approached cautiously with the officers. They introduced her.

"Mr. Lindon, first let me say how incredibly sorry I am for your loss. I know it probably hasn't even really sunk in yet, and if you want me to go away—just say the word and I'm gone."

He looked through her, almost as if she was transparent. Then he seemed to focus and recognize her. "You work for WKXT—we watch that station."

"I'm glad. If you would like to talk about your wife and children at some point, I'm a good listener. I'd like to know a little bit about who they were."

"OK. I can talk about them." He seemed to be in shock and Marisa wasn't about to roll a camera, but then he seemed to snap out of it and told her it was OK to bring her camera. He wanted to show her pictures. Then he just started talking, like the families of the murder victims. There was something about Marisa that just made people want to talk to her. A couple of times he completely broke down, but she promised she wouldn't use any of that on the air.

When Marisa and her photog left the airport, they had an incredible story of love and loss. Marisa furiously re-wrote her story focusing completely on the father and his loss. She called into the station and told the producer she'd have to set-up the live shot with the basic facts of the fire, because the focus of her piece had changed. They were really going to be pushing it, but they'd make deadline. The producer fussed, but not for long. Marisa stood her ground--it was rare for a reporter to stand-up to a producer, but Marisa had had enough of this woman.

By the time the story was written and the tape edited, it was 5:45pm. They fed the package into the station using the live truck and Marisa tried to pull herself together for the live. She was absolutely wrung out—her fever was raging, she could barely talk and she wasn't even sure she could stand long enough to get through the live shot. But there was one thing about the news business and newsmen—the show must go on.

Michael meanwhile had been fit to be tied all day. He spent the day on an emotional slingshot firing back and forth between anger and worry. The

only thing he knew for sure was Marisa wouldn't be sitting for a long time. The spanking he gave her last night was nothing compared to the butt blistering she had coming tonight.

When the newsroom wouldn't tell him where she was, he finally got smart and thought to watch the morning show. He had caught her last live shot and couldn't believe how bad she sounded. She was flushed and hoarse and had none of her usual spark. He went directly to the fire scene and was planning on hauling her ass home and into bed, but he missed her. She had left to shoot another part of the story. So he went to the office and waited, and finally at 6pm saw her live shot. He immediately headed back to the scene.

When the producer said she was clear off the air, Marisa deflated like a punctured tire. She barely made it back into the truck before collapsing. Her photog called in and said she was definitely done—there would be nothing more from her tonight. At the same time Kyle was on the phone with Wes, chewing his butt for putting her on the air that sick. When he was told the situation, his tirade shifted to the producer, who quickly learned that a kick-ass show impresses no one if it kills the reporter in the process.

Marisa knew she had produced a hell of a story—it was gut-wrenching. But as sick as she was, she just couldn't deliver it properly and it lost a lot of its impact. She also knew she was really in trouble when she was handed the phone in the truck at the same time Michael pulled up, screeching tires and all. On the phone was her boss who chewed her out for not being at home in bed. There was no mention of the exclusive, emotional father interview, just concern about her health. She barely hung up the phone and was confronted by Michael.

"Let's go, now!" his tone was low and controlled, but just barely.

She looked at him and plead with her eyes for understanding. She felt so lousy, she couldn't stand to argue with him—right now she just wanted tender loving care.

"Michael please..." she whispered. Then she turned to her photog and asked if everything was cool for her to leave. He unceremoniously picked her up and dumped her into Michael's arms.

As he headed back to his car with her, he growled in her ear, "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't blister your butt right here, right now."

He could just barely hear her answer, her voice was so weak, "Because I think I'm about to die." Michael just frowned at her lame attempt at humor and carried her to his car despite her weak protests. He got behind the wheel and just sat there for a minute, trying to calm down. Finally he looked at her. Her head was back and her eyes closed. He put his hand to her forehead—she was burning up.

"Marisa, what were you thinking going to work today? Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"Please don't scold now, Michael—just take me home."

"We're going to Urgent Care, and once the doctor's through with you—you and I are going to have a long, discussion about taking care of yourself." But she didn't hear a word he said, she was out cold.

## Chapter Nine

Marisa woke up in an examining room disoriented and surrounded by people. They were talking to her but she couldn't make sense of their words. She tried to get up but several pair of hands held her down. Finally one soothing and familiar voice broke through, "Missy you're OK—relax we're in the clinic. They're just taking care of you. It's OK—don't fight the nurses, they're here to help you feel better."

She relaxed at the sound of Michael's voice. Things started to come into focus, and her symptoms hit her hard—the fever, the chills, sore throat and aches all over. She felt absolutely awful. Then she saw a nurse coming at her with an I-V and started to panic. Michael came close and again calmed her down with soothing words and massaging hands. She barely felt the needle go in.

The doctor came in with that paternalistic frown that said, she was about to get a lecture along with her diagnosis. "You don't take very good care of yourself, Miss Shaw."

"That's about to change!" Michael interrupted sternly.

"That's good because you were a prime candidate for this 48 hour flu bug that's going around. Right now you're running a fever of 102 and you're severely dehydrated from lack of food or drink today. Judging by the circles under your eyes and the way that suit hangs off you, I'd say you're not getting much sleep and not eating right. You're not even giving your body a fighting chance. We're going to give you a strong dose of antibiotics, along with something to help you sleep in your I-V. Then Mr. Craine can take you home. You'll feel like a different person in two days, but keep taking the antibiotic prescription for the full 10 days."

The doctor turned his attention from Marisa to Michael, "Mr. Craine, I'm telling you this, because I have a feeling Miss Shaw here would be back at



work tomorrow, if we left her on her own. She's going to feel a lot better in 24 hours, but she should stay in for at least two days so she doesn't relapse." He addressed Marisa again, "Two days of bed rest, lots of fluids, and no stress, and you'll be good as new, Miss Shaw."

Normally Marisa would have groaned at the thought of two days in bed, but she felt so lousy, bed was the only thing she wanted. Michael noted her lack of argument and figured she must feel pretty bad. Once her I-V ran its course, he bundled her up and carried her back out to his car. She fell asleep almost immediately, so just like the night before, he carried her inside her house, and tucked her into bed. Her face looked peaceful for the first time today.

As he gazed at this woman he cared so much for, and was so frequently frustrated by, he wondered once again, what was it that drew them together? Their careers certainly weren't compatible, and their backgrounds were very different. She was beautiful in a natural sort of way, but it was her personality that captured him. She had that special charisma that couldn't be ignored—wouldn't be ignored. He had to admit, as exasperated as he got at her, he loved her feisty spirit and intense emotions. He sighed, shook his head and resigned himself to a night on the couch, although what he really wanted was to climb in bed beside her and hold her close.

He walked out to the kitchen in search of a beer. He noticed the roses for the first time and felt a pang of jealousy—who was sending her roses? He saw the card setting against the vase and decided it wasn't snooping since it was out in the open. He read the card and saw Marisa's "Thanks Michael" jotted down underneath the strange message. *"I didn't send her roses—so who the hell did? Great, just what I need, another reason to worry about Missy!"* he thought with another heavy sigh.

When he picked up the vase to take a closer look at the roses he noticed other cards. He spread them all out on the table and read the messages.

*As its beauty opens to the world, so does  
yours to me  
An American Beauty pales next to my  
Pittsburgh Beauty  
Soon I will rescue you from the evil and it  
will be just us  
Your beauty and life complete my circle*

Michael read the cards over and over again—looking for any clue as to who might have sent them. There was no florist listed on the card, only a red rose and the typed message. He figured it must have been printed off a computer because the typeface was elegant and feminine, almost as if it had been hand written in cursive writing. Two of the messages were beautifully romantic, but the other two were a little strange, and in fact Michael found the one about a “rescue from evil” downright sinister. He was definitely concerned. He decided to call Chris and see if he knew anything about anyone else in Marisa’s life. He felt a little guilty prying, but his concern overrode his guilt and pride.

Chris picked up after just one ring and was glad to hear Michael’s voice. He’d been about ready to call Marisa and see how she was doing. He had seen the 6pm liveshot too, and like Michael, was shocked by how bad Marisa looked and sounded. He had called the station as well to find out when she’d be back so he could pick her up, and that’s when he had been told that some police guy was on his way out to the fire scene to get her.

“Hey Michael, I was just about to call you guys and see how our girl was doing. She looked like hell on the air tonight.”

“No kidding! She’s sick as a dog, and had no business going to work today, let alone spending the day outside in the damp and cold. She’s got a

nasty 48 hour flu bug, but the doctor said as long as she stays down for the next two days she should be fine."

"Good luck keeping that one down for two days!" Chris laughed.

"Don't laugh buddy, I have every intention of enlisting your help! I figured we'd take shifts babysitting, so we could both also get some work done and share the bitching and moaning when she starts to feel better!"

"Gee, sounds like great fun!"

"Don't I know it! Actually she was so sick tonight, she'd didn't complain once when the doctor made his diagnosis and lectured her on taking better care of herself. But listen, that's not the only reason I called. I'm concerned about something I found here at the house tonight."

"What's up?"

"I hate to ask this, but do you know if Marisa's seeing anyone else?" Michael held his breath waiting for Chris' answer—he wasn't sure which he wanted to hear—yes there was someone else and he should be jealous, or no there was no one else and he should be very worried.

"Not that I know of—hell she's been so busy, she's barely had time to see you. So what's got the green-eyed monster peaked over there?"

"It's not jealousy!" Michael retorted a little too quickly. "OK, maybe a little jealousy. But more concern." He then told Chris about the roses, and the cards.

Chris said, "Well, if she wrote 'Thanks Michael' under the one message, she obviously thinks you sent them. So I'd say that pretty much rules out another romantic interest. Maybe it's a fan."

"It could be, but that one message about rescuing her from evil is a little ominous don't you think?"

"Yeah, that is kind of bizarre. There's not much we can do about it tonight. But when Marisa's up, ask her about it, and we'll decide what to do next

based on what she says. In the meantime, I'd suggest getting some sleep yourself. I'll check in with the office and take the morning task force conference call and then I'll be over to relieve you so you can get downtown for a while. Don't worry, Michael, we'll take care of her."

"Yeah, you're right. She's surrounded by cops half the time anyway, I guess it would be tough for any wacko to get at her. See ya in the morning."

Michael hung up the phone in time to hear Marisa stirring. He went into her bedroom and found her tossing and turning, delirious with fever. He held her until she settled back into a peaceful slumber, and then went back out to the kitchen for that beer he had originally wanted an hour ago. He was up and down several times during the night calming Marisa's fevered dreams, and finally just crawled into bed with her, and held her till morning.

Marisa's fever finally broke about 6am. She awoke to find herself drenched with sweat and weak as a newborn colt trying to stand for the first time. She felt like she'd been flattened by a semi-truck, but that was a lot better than last night when she would have sworn that truck was rolling back and forth, battering her body! She was also surprised to find strong secure arms wrapped around her giving her that cozy feeling she hadn't felt in a long time. She took a quick survey and found she was dressed in her underwear and slip and her bed partner was bare-chested, wearing only his jeans. Michael appeared dead to the world. She very slowly turned in his arms to face him.

Marisa managed a thin smile as she thought this was not exactly what she had in mind for their first night sleeping together. Her next thought really surprised her. In his sleep, with his hair tousled and his expression at peace, he had a charming little boy look. It was the last descriptor she ever imagined using for Michael Craine. It was the last thought she'd have before falling back into an exhausted sleep with her head nuzzled on his chest.

That's how Michael found her about an hour later when he woke up. He touched her forehead and was relieved to find the fever had broken. He loved waking up with her curled up against him. *At least we fit together one way!* he thought wryly. Then he reluctantly began the process of untangling himself from her, so she could sleep and he could call into the office.

After he let the precinct house know he probably wouldn't be in until after 10am, he started scrounging around the kitchen to see what Marisa had available for breakfast. Michael was actually quite handy in the kitchen. Since he hated to grocery shop at those superstores, he frequently stopped down at the Strip and picked up the ingredients for that night's dinner—avoiding grocery stores all together. As he rummaged through Marisa's frig he decided she didn't cook much for herself. Everything was pre-prepared out of a cardboard box, and frozen. But he did manage to find enough fixings to throw together one of his famous omelets.

Just as he was putting together a tray to take into Marisa he felt a pair of arms wrap around him from behind. He was so startled by her silent approach he jerked, spilling hot coffee on his bare chest and then jumped back nearly knocking her over. She immediately let go and jumped back herself, then dissolved into laughter as he steadied her to keep her from falling.

"I see someone's feeling better!" he said with much sarcasm. "But I don't recall giving you permission to leave the bed, my dear—let alone sneak up on me, and scare me into spilling hot coffee all over myself!"

She was still laughing, but had to sit down as a wave of dizziness swept over her. Michael was immediately at her side and then suddenly she was cradled in his arms, and being carried back to bed.

"Michael," she tried to protest, but she was still laughing.

"Hush, you—you're going back to bed and that's that!"

"OK! OK! I just came out to see what smelled so good. God it's so nice to feel well enough to have an appetite."

"Yeah, well, just don't get any ideas, young lady! The doctor said two days inside resting, and that's exactly what you're going to do." Michael's tone of voice made it clear there was to be no argument, and she was still too weak to put up much of a fight. *But later...* she thought.

He plopped her down on the bed and helped her out of her robe, relieved to see she had changed out of her sexy underwear into a warm, flannel nightgown. He didn't know how much longer he'd be able to keep from ravishing her if she continued to look as alluring as she did in that black silk slip, bra and panties.

"I'll bring you some breakfast in—don't move, or I promise you the next move you make will be over my knee!" Michael warned. She of course pouted in return.

"You wouldn't really spank me in my weakened condition would you?" she teased.

"Just watch me, brat!" he said grinning at her cute little pout. Then he sat down on the side of the bed. "Seriously Marisa, how do you feel this morning—you were really hurting last night."

"Right now I feel kind of wasted, like I just ran the New York Marathon wearing lead sneakers. I'm still pretty achy and my throat's sore, but at least I don't feel like I'm burning up from the inside out with a head that's about to explode."

"You'll feel even better after we get some hot food in you and more antibiotics. I'll bring your tray, then I'm going to grab a shower if it's OK, and I'll run out and pick up your prescription. Chris will be by later this morning to stay with you while I check in at the station house."

"I don't need constant attention. My guess is I'll probably sleep the day away anyway—so go to work, I'll be fine" she said sounding very sincere.

"Yeah, you'll be fine till you start to feel better, then we'll have to tie you down. Truth is I don't trust you to take care of yourself—so there!"

"Now who sounds bratty?" she asked.

For that he gave her a good swat on the rear as she turned on her side and curled up to get back under the covers.

"Hey, none of that!" she exclaimed, rubbing her bottom under the covers.

"Actually, I should give you a lot more of that for the stunt you pulled yesterday! I swear Marisa, you're your own worst enemy." he said in that patient, but frustrated tone of voice he had mastered.

"Michael you have to understand..." she didn't get any further before he cut her off.

"Marisa, there's nothing to understand—you were exhausted and sick, and you should not have gone anywhere, but especially not to work a 7<sup>th</sup> day!"

"But..."

"No buts. I have a hard time believing your boss is such a tyrant he'd expect you to work as sick as you were, especially an extra shift like that."

Marisa just sighed, quickly tiring and knowing she'd never be able to explain the TV news business to Michael. And even though her boss had chewed her out royally for coming in so sick, she also knew the fire story was a big one, and if she hadn't done it, Wes would have had to page some other reporter and that would have delayed getting a reporter on the scene several hours—the story wasn't going to wait. Even though police work was far from a 9 to 5 job, it was still difficult for him to understand the 24/7 demands on newsmen.

Michael looked into her weary eyes, and decided the rest of the lecture could wait. She needed food and more sleep. He brought the tray in from the

kitchen, but she was already asleep by the time he got back. He took it back to the kitchen, figuring he'd eat now and fix something fresh for her when she woke up. At that point Chris called to say he was delayed at FBI offices with a complication in an old case. Michael said he was going to the precinct house anyway since Marisa was sound asleep.

He went to the pharmacy first, got her prescription and left it in her room with a note and some fruit and juice on ice, and headed to the office.

When Marisa awoke again it was nearly noon. She was finally starting to feel human again, and she was starving. She took a pill, ate the fruit Michael left, and then lay in bed, still wrung out, but also bored. She decided to grab her laptop and see if she could start to get caught up on some of her task force database searches. She stayed in bed working, figuring if Michael or Chris showed up, she could quickly hide the computer under the covers and pretend she had been just resting. Knowing what worry warts they were, she knew if they found her working, even in bed, she'd get yet another lecture.

Marisa smiled as she thought of the two overprotective men in her life. It was hard for her to admit, as independent as she was, how much she needed and wanted the secure, loved feeling she got from the way they bullied, cajoled, scolded and even spanked her into behaving and taking care of herself. She knew that no matter how hard she tried, she would probably never overcome her pattern of always letting everything and everyone else come first—before she took care of herself. She tended to act first and think about consequences later, which usually made the consequences all that more unpleasant because with Chris and Michael around, they usually included some form of chastisement.

Her backside tingled as she considered their preferred method of chastisement. What are the



chances that I would end up with a 'big brother' and a boyfriend who both think spanking an adult woman is not only acceptable, but a damned necessity!?' she thought. Of course the last time her Dad had put over his knee, she had been 20—technically an adult, although as she recalled, she wasn't acting much like one that day. She would never forget the look on his face when one of his officers brought her home after an all-night beer bash the cops had busted for underage drinking. All the officer said was, "Cap we figure you'll be a hell of lot tougher on her than we would." And then he'd turned to Marisa and wished her luck. Boy had she needed it that morning. He had taken his belt to her and she really learned the meaning of 'not sitting for a week'. But the thing she remembered even more than the hard spanking was the relief from the guilt she had felt when she saw the disappointment in his eyes.

As much as she hated and rebelled against the pain and humiliation of a spanking now, she began to realize she also needed the release and wanted someone else to take charge when she found herself spinning out of control. That's probably why none of her few relationships before Michael had ever worked out—the guys never really tried to understand what she needed from them. They just assumed she wanted to be in charge of everything outside of work, like she was while she worked. She needed a man even stronger than she was, and then she chuckled as she thought about how long it had taken her to realize that with Michael. She smiled again as she thought, *But I'll be damned if I'll ever let Michael OR Chris know that!*

Marisa figured all this self-analysis was probably a good thing, but it wasn't getting any work done, and that was what she had set out to do. So, she fired up the laptop and started to review the profiles they had set-up of the victims so far. They had gone through dozens of items in their lives looking for any link—jobs, education, work-out routines,

hair styling, restaurants, dates, shopping, hobbies, religious affiliation, medical records, even pets. But there was nothing! There was no place these women's paths crossed. If indeed they were truly chosen at random, based on nothing more than looks, it could become impossible to get this guy unless they caught him in the act.

Her next tact was to try some public databases like criminal records, driver's license bureau, and charitable contributions. She had access through the database search program the investigative unit used at work. She logged in and set-up her searches. It would take a while for them to be processed, so she went back through the profiles she and Marlane had cross-referenced from the case files and the new interviews with family and friends. There just had to be something they were missing! As she looked again at the crime scene photos she had scanned into her computer—she again had that funny feeling that there was something almost familiar about those pictures, but she couldn't get a fix on what it was.

About an hour later her computer beeped indicating the database searches were complete. There was nothing on any of the victims in the criminal records. The charitable contributions showed all of the women had given to some organization, but there was no more than one or two that gave to the same organization. Then she looked at the driver's license bureau check—Bingo! She couldn't believe it. She quickly checked the dates with her timeline. They matched perfectly. All five women got speeding tickets within a month of their murders—state police tickets! *Oh my God—it's a cop!*

She sat back and leaned against the headboard of her bed, eyes shut, trying to let this new information sink in. It was possible that one state trooper had issued all the tickets since troopers were rotated around to different areas of their assigned district. He would have access to each

woman's address and other personal information. Who better than a cop, to know how to cover his tracks at a crime scene? She had to get access to the individual records on these tickets and find out if they were all stopped by the same trooper. But how to do that without raising suspicion? She needed to talk to Chris and Michael right away. *No, I can't do that. They're cops too—they'll never believe it could be one of their own. I've got to get more proof. Marlane! I've got to talk to Marlane—she's the only one I can rely on until I know more.*

*He was watching, not knowing she was getting close. But he knew the time was close. He could see her in her bedroom, working, thinking, so beautiful. She was so much like the first. She would be the last—the circle complete. He looked down at the rose—number five--soon, very soon.*

## Chapter Ten

Chris had his cop radar on as he drove up Marisa's street. The more he thought about Michael's call last night, the more concerned he became. What florist didn't plaster its name all over the card that came with flowers? It was the best advertising they could get because lots of people kept cards long after the flowers died. If there was no florist listed, then that meant there was a good chance this creep was delivering the roses in person. If it was the same delivery person every time, she might get comfortable enough to invite him in—that could be dangerous.

As he scanned her street he saw several cars parked along the curbs—only a few of the row houses had driveways like Marisa's, so that wasn't unusual. But he decided to take down license plates anyway of the cars in a one block radius and check addresses. Better safe than sorry. He slowed way down and started writing. As soon as he slowed down he heard a car engine. He looked up and saw a nondescript sedan pull out at the end of the block and drive away. It was too far away for him to get the plate number, but he jotted down the rest, and hoped none of Marisa's neighbor's called the cops on him for casing the street! He turned around at the end of the block and headed back to Marisa's house.

He knocked on the door and then used his key to let himself in, calling out as he got inside, so she wouldn't get out of bed where he hoped to find her. Marisa was about to call Marlane when she heard Chris. She scrambled to save her work and managed to slide her laptop under the bed just before Chris walked in.

"Hi kiddo! Wow, you look a lot better than you did last night on TV. How are you feeling?" he asked as he bent over to plant a kiss on her forehead.

"Stay back—I'm probably still a cauldron of hazardous germs!"

"It's OK, I never get sick—you know that! Solid steel immune system!" he grinned and sat down on her bed, popping out a handful of daffodils from behind his back.

"Oh Chris, thanks, my favorite flower!" She gathered the bouquet and took a deep breath of their fragrance. "The smell of Spring. I love them."

"I'll have to tell Michael, you're a cheap date when it comes to flowers."

"Don't you dare! He's been sending me single red roses, and I'm feeling very pampered by them and the deep, romantic messages that come with them." she had a very satisfied smile on her face as she said it, but Chris' face changed dramatically. *Damn, Michael obviously didn't get a chance to tell her before he left!*

"What's wrong? You got something against roses? Or is it romance you're opposed to?" she asked still teasing him.

"Marisa we need to talk about the roses. But first I want to know how you're feeling."

She looked at him, obviously puzzled by his statement. "I'm feeling much better, thanks, now what do you mean 'we have to talk about the roses'? You can't just drop a line like that and move on buddy! Now spill!"

"Honey, Michael didn't send those roses."

She actually laughed, "Of course he did! Who else would send me roses with messages like..." she slowly trailed off, realizing the answer to her own question. Chris reached out for her hand and they were silent for a minute. Then she pulled away and shrugged it off. "OK, so Michael's not as romantic as I thought. No biggie—it just means I've got a fan who likes to send roses. It's nothing to worry about—it's certainly not the first time some viewer has sent flowers or candy or some other token to a reporter."

"Marisa, how many fans have sent you roses to your home, with cards intimate enough you thought they came from someone you knew?" Chris was speaking softly, but his intense look said 'take this seriously'. "I want you to tell me everything you can about the roses."

"You read the cards?"

"Michael did, last night. He found the one with your note scribbled underneath the message, and then found the others under the vase. He didn't want to wake you last night, so he called me. I'm guessing you two didn't get a chance to talk about them this morning?"

"No, our conversation was brief before I fell back asleep. When I finally woke up he had left for work, with a note saying you'd be by later and he'd be back tonight."

"So tell me everything you can about the roses—how and when did you get them?"

Her tone now matched his in seriousness. She had never really been stalked by a fan, like some of the anchors were on occasion. Reporters usually didn't get that kind of attention. She was quickly deciding she didn't like it. "They came one at a time, always sitting in a box just outside my door in the morning as I left the house. Let me think for a minute. The first one came... I remember it was there the morning after that day we came together on our discovery that we had a serial killer... you know, the morning after you guys came over and cooked dinner."

"Do you remember which message came first?"

"Oh yeah! Let's go out and look at the cards and I'll put them in order for you." She started to climb out of bed, but Chris held his hand up to stop her.

"You stay in bed, I'll go get them."

"Come on Chris, I've been good all day. I need to get up and move around—it's not like I'm going out to run five miles—just a short walk to the dining room!"

"Bringing work to bed is not being good!"

"Dammit, how did you know? What? You can read minds now?" she asked in a huff.

He laughed, "No sweetie, your computer power cord and phone line trailing out from under the bed were a dead giveaway."

"Damn you FBI guys for being so observant! But hey, I was in bed and I did sleep till after noon. Then I got bored, so I just checked my e-mail—no heavy stuff." she lied.

"You are truly a brat, you know that! Alright, slippers and warm robe, and we'll get you out of this bedroom."

"Yes, Daddy." she said in her best little girl voice, which in turn earned her a good swat on the rear when she bent over to get her slippers.

"Oww! Stop that!" But she stood up too quickly and was hit with another dizzy spell. Chris grabbed her to steady her and then eased her back down on the bed. "I'm OK—just popped up too fast. I guess I'm still weak from fighting this bug." She tried to get up again, but Chris' firm hands on her shoulders kept her down.

"You can sit up, but you're staying right here in bed, young lady. I'll go get the cards, and the food I brought, and bring them in here." She immediately pouted and started to whine, but he shot her one warning look that said it all. Stay in bed or else, and she knew very well what the 'or else' meant.

He came back in a few minutes later with a tray of food and the cards. "Chris, I love you! Cheese steak sandwiches and coffee from Tony's! I'm starved."

"Well, that's a good sign. If you had turned down a Tony's cheese steak I would have been really worried." They settled down on her bed and ate, while she put the messages in order, and then they discussed what they could mean. She said she had thought the one about 'rescuing from evil' had seemed a little strange, but they were hot and

heavy into the serial murder case, so she just figured he meant when it was all over, he'd take her away somewhere.

"I just thought he was being poetic!"

"Sorry. If it's any consolation, I think he does wish he had sent them. He was definitely jealous last night when he called me to sheepishly ask if I knew of anyone else you were seeing."

Maria's eyes opened wide with surprise. "He was really jealous, thinking someone else was sending me roses?"

"Yup, he even admitted it—but don't you dare tell him I told you. I'll deny it!"

"Hmmmm, now there's something I might just have to keep in my back pocket."

"Keep it up young lady, you're making my palm itch to spank that bratty bottom of yours!"

She put her hands up to ward him off, "OK, OK, I won't tell—I was just kidding! I wouldn't embarrass him like that. But I must admit I do like knowing he was jealous! Even if it is jealousy over a crazed fan!"

Chris turned serious again, "Listen Marisa, I don't want you to worry about this. We'll check it out and find out who's behind it. Just be careful when you're coming and going. We'll have a patrol car make extra swings around your neighborhood, especially at night. But I don't want you coming home from work alone—it's always after midnight. Michael or I will come and get you."

"Chris, that's not necessary, I can get someone from the station to drop me off. You guys start your days so early, you don't need to be chauffeuring me around late at night. I promise I won't come home alone—I'll call if I can't get a ride."

"OK, just be aware of your surroundings, and we'll take care of the rest."

They finished eating in an uneasy silence. Chris had tried to be reassuring, but she knew him well enough to know he was worried. And if he was



worried, she was worried. Suddenly, opening the door to get the morning paper was something she would dread instead of look forward to.

Michael arrived back a couple hours later, and apparently had the same idea as Chris, because he showed up with fresh brats from Joe's stand and more of Tony's coffee. They all laughed, as Marisa managed to wolf down another meal. Chris stayed for a little while longer and then left. Michael walked him out and she knew they were discussing the roses, but for once, she didn't want to hear what was said.

When Michael came back in she didn't want to talk about anything or think about anything, so she begged him to let her come out and snuggle up on the couch and watch some TV. They did just that. She loved cuddling in his arms, but refused to kiss him. "Who's gonna take care of me if you get sick too?"

"Darlin' if I were gonna get your germs, I got them last night. Now kiss me, woman!"

She couldn't argue with that logic, and soon they were lip locked in a long, passionate kiss. He would have loved to carry her into the bedroom and really ignite the sparks between them, but she was still recovering, and he was exhausted. *Hell*, he thought, *it might just kill us both!*

She pulled away as he was grinning like the Cheshire Cat. "And just what's so amusing Mr. Caine?"

"That's Captain Craine to you! And just where do you think you're going with those lips of yours, Miss Shaw?" He gently brought her back to him, his lips softly touching hers, and then his tongue reaching deep, almost touching her soul. She was completely lost to him, and he to her. It took every ounce of control he had to finally pull back. Then he whispered, "Not like this darlin'—I want you strong and well when we make love, because I guarantee once we start, we won't stop!"

"For once we agree completely, Captain!" She smiled and settled into his arms, her head on his chest, feeling warm and secure.

They watched the news on her station, and then she was ready to go to bed. She finally convinced Michael he didn't need to stay the night. He looked so tired, and she knew he needed a good night's sleep in his own bed. So, she called him a hypocrite for ragging on her to take care of herself, when he was just as bad. He knew she had him on that one, so agreed to leave. He said he'd drop by on the way to the station house in the morning. Then he swung her up into his arms and carried her into the bedroom, gently laying her on the bed.

"Good night darlin', sleep well, sweet dreams!" he said and then he was gone. She heard him check the locks on the doors before he left. Then she fell asleep almost immediately once she heard the front door close.

Marisa woke up early Tuesday morning feeling rested and much stronger. She still had some lingering congestion and a cough, but her throat didn't hurt and she wasn't achy all over. She also didn't feel dizzy when she got out of bed. This was going to be a much better day. She even considered calling in to the station and saying she'd be at work this afternoon, but then she thought about the doctor's orders, and Chris, Michael and her boss' responses, and decided another day at home wouldn't be so bad. Besides, she wanted to pursue the lead she'd uncovered last night on the serial murders. But first she wanted a nice long hot shower.

After she showered and dressed in warm, comfortable sweats, she went to get her morning papers. She opened the front door and stopped cold, the color that had flushed her face the last 48 hours drained away. Michael drove up to see her staring at something on the porch with a distressed look on her face. She looked up as he pulled in the

driveway and he could see fear in her eyes. He raced out of the car and up the walk.

"Marisa what is..." He was brought up short by the sight of a flower box at her feet. He stepped over it to pull her back inside. He took her in his arms—she was shaking.

"Marisa, we're gonna find this person—don't worry, nobody's going to get to you as long as I'm alive." He said it with such ferocity; she looked up into his eyes, and took strength from his confidence. She stepped back from him.

"I'm sorry—I don't know when I turned into such a wimp. I'm sure it's just some lonely guy who saw me on TV and is living out some weird little fantasy. I'm fine, really. Let's go see what clever little message he sent this time." She started back out the door, but Michael gently took her arm and guided her over to sit down on the couch.

"Marisa, it's OK to be scared. In fact, it will probably keep you safe—you'll be more alert. I'm going to call one of my crime scene guys to process the box and then we'll see what's inside. Since you're up and dressed, and obviously feeling a whole lot better, why don't you make some coffee?" He knew it would be good to get her engaged in some task, instead of dwelling on the box. But as she headed out to the kitchen, she stopped at the dining room table grabbed the vase with three of the other roses and was ready to throw the whole thing in the trash when Michael stopped her.

"We'll get them out of sight, but as evidence, not as trash." He carefully took the vase from her shaking hand and placed it out on the porch with the box. When he came back in she was trying to grind coffee beans, but her hands were still shaking. He came up close behind her and put his hands on her shoulders, gently massaging away the tension. She leaned back into his strength and let him take her weight and her fears.

"I'm glad you're here." she whispered. They stayed like that until they heard the doorbell.

"That should be my crime scene investigator. You stay here and get that coffee going—I think we could all use a cup. I'll go talk to her." She hated to lose the warm support of his body, but stood away from him and went back to work on the coffee beans, with steadier hands.

When she brought out fresh coffee 15 minutes later Michael was talking to a young woman in a lab coat and gloves who was dusting the box for fingerprints.

"Have you opened it yet?" she asked.

"Just about to. Marisa Shaw, this is CSI Jean Wells."

Jean looked up from her work, and smiled. "Nice to meet you Miss Shaw—I'd shake your hand, but I'd just cover you with black dust."

"No problem, and it's Marisa, please. Do you want me to go get the cards from the other deliveries?"

"Oh, yeah. Where are they, I didn't see them on the table."

"Chris and I were going over the messages last night, and he wanted me to put them in order of delivery."

"That would be helpful to know." Jean said. "I'll bag and tag them individually with the dates of delivery. I'll also need to get a set of your prints Marisa to match against the other cards. We already have the Captain's on file."

"You'll also need to pull up Chris Barry's. He's with the FBI and his should also be on file. The other four cards will probably have all three of our prints on them."

"Well so far, this box is completely clean. I'm ready to open it now." Jean opened the box and inside as expected was a single red rose bud with a card setting on top. She dusted the card, and it was also clean, so she handed it to Michael. He read the message.

*Another rose to bring you another piece of  
my heart*

Marisa came back with the other cards and saw Michael reading the latest. She peered over his shoulder. "Well at least he's back to harmless romantic messages. I gotta tell you when Chris told me you didn't send these, and then we read back over the cards, I was a little freaked out by that one message about evil rescues."

"Well, what the heck did you think I meant when you thought I was sending the roses? I mean that is a little out there—why didn't you ask me about it, or for that matter, say anything about the roses?"

"We haven't exactly had much time alone in the last few weeks, and I felt like the roses were something intimate, just between us. I tried to give you special smiles and silent thank-you's. As for the evil rescue message, I just figured you were poetically saying we'd go away somewhere after the case was over. I mean, the other messages were so beautiful, I decided you were entitled to one bad." she smiled sheepishly. Michael just laughed and shook his head at her.

"Come on, let's get you back inside. The last thing you need is to get chilled. Do you really feel as well as you look today?"

"It's amazing what a shower will do, huh? Yes, I do feel much better and stronger today. In fact, I was thinking, maybe..."

"NO—you're not going anywhere, and especially not to work!" Michael's anger flared and then he paused, took a deep breath, and started to continue, but Marisa jumped in.

"OK, I got it—no need to shout. How about a refill on your coffee?" she asked casually—too casually.

He came across the room to her and turned her to face him, tightly gripping her arms. "Marisa, I'm deadly serious. You ARE NOT GOING ANYWHERE!"

She pulled out of his arms, more than a little annoyed. "I heard you the first time, Michael. Lighten up—I've got stuff I can do around here anyway. So just chill out!"

He relaxed a little, realizing he probably overreacted. He smiled and moved closer, tipped her chin up, kissed the end of her nose, and whispered, "Sorry darlin', but you have to admit your track record doesn't exactly inspire confidence. And I would hate to come back tonight and have to give you a spanking you won't soon forget for disobeying doctor's orders!"

"I promise, I'll be good. Now don't you have a precinct to run?"

"Yes, indeed I do. As soon as Jean's finished, we'll get out of your hair. Just make sure as you're doing 'stuff' that you make time for a couple of naps. If you want to go back to work tomorrow, you need get more rest today. Don't wipe out your recovery by overdoing it, OK?"

"Yes, Dr. Worry Wart!" she sent him a mock salute.

"Smart aleck, brat!" He went back out to check on Jean's progress. Marisa went back into the kitchen for another cup of coffee. She wanted them to leave so she could call Marlane and talk about her disturbing discovery last night.

As soon as they left Marisa was on the phone to Marlane. She explained that she found something in her database search and wanted to bounce it off someone, and asked if Marlane would come over so they could discuss it.

"I'm confined to the house for one more day, or I'd come see you."

"So I heard, how are you feeling? You certainly sound a lot better than you did on the news Sunday night! Everyone on the task force is worried about you."

"Jeez—is there anyone in Pittsburgh who didn't see my imitation of death warmed over!?"

Marlane laughed, "I don't think so, but if they missed it, it was the lead headline in the 'Post-Gazette' yesterday!"

"Very funny! So can you come over—I really need to talk with someone about what I found, and I don't think I'm ready to bring it to the rest of the task force."

"What about Michael or Chris?"

"Marlane, this is too sensitive to talk to ANY of the cops about without more information. I only hope I'm way off base."

Marlane picked up on the urgency in her voice. "I'll be there in a half-hour!"

Marisa had her computer all set-up when Marlane arrived, and she went through everything she'd found. Marlane immediately realized the implication, just as Marisa had.

"Our killer could be a cop." She paused letting the statement hang in the air for a few minutes and saw that Marisa had made the same conclusion. "Now I see why you didn't want to talk to anyone else yet. They'd all reject it outright, that one of their own could do this."

"We need to find out if the same trooper wrote all the tickets, and if so, we need to check this guy out before we can take this to the task force. But how do we get those files without raising all kinds of red flags?"

"Not a problem. I have a colleague at Pitt who works with the state police all the time compiling all kinds of stats for them. He's always requesting files for some project or another. I'll just ask him to request tickets for September and October across the region in the years we need. We'll explain that we're looking at which areas are the worst for speeding, and we want to control for variation among troopers, so we need the complete files, or at least the names of the issuing officers. I'm sure he'll do it and then we can select out the specific ones we need. What do you think?"

"Perfect! With the request coming from someone else, the task force isn't directly connected at all. And if we get one name, police personnel files are public record, so we should be able to get access, no problem."

They talked excitedly about their plans, grateful to finally be contributing, even if no one on the task force knew yet. Marisa also told Marlane about her own personal case, and asked her opinion about the person who might be doing something like that. Marlane agreed that it was most likely some lonely viewer fantasizing a relationship.

"Usually these guys are harmless, but I'd stay alert. It is a little disconcerting that he's delivering these roses to your home, rather than to work. Have you had any phone calls?"

"No, but Michael wants to tap my phones just in case. I said OK to my phone here at home, but I can't have the cops tapping my work or cell phones. I get tips all the time on those lines. If any of my sources found out the police had my lines tapped, they'd never call again."

"Let me guess, Michael loved that response!"

"You mean Mr. Overprotective? Oh yeah, that went over real well!" They both laughed. "Marlane, I'm going to ask you something that's probably going to sound off the wall and totally paranoid, but I've got to voice it to someone. I know Michael or Chris would probably go into orbit if I ask them. Please feel free to tell me I'm delusional, in fact, let me encourage you to do so."

Marlane looked closely at her friend and could see real fear in her eyes. "What is it—something's really bothering you."

Marisa couldn't look at her—she didn't want to see her immediate response in her eyes as she asked the question that had been haunting her the last 24 hours. "You don't think there's any connection between our murder case and these roses I'm getting do you? I mean look at these victims." She brought up her scanned photos of the



victims on her computer screen. "I do fit the visual profile pretty exactly, and here I am getting individual roses... I know it sounds crazy, but I..."

Marlane took her hands firmly and said with all confidence, "NO, Marisa I don't think there's a connection. We're no where near his next kill zone—and serial killers don't stray from a pattern like that. Also, I don't think you're crazy or paranoid for asking. We're into this case up to our eyeballs, and we're desperate for connections. It's perfectly natural that you'd see one here. Besides, you haven't gotten any speeding tickets lately have you?" She smiled as she said the last.

"No thank God, Michael would have my ass!"

"I can believe that. Both Michael and Chris are a little old fashioned when it comes to how they treat women, don't you think? I mean, I have to admit, it's kind of nice to go out with such a gentleman, but sometimes..."

"Mr. Overprotective?" They both laughed at that. Then Marisa turned more serious.

"I have to tell you, Chris is a great guy—but you're right about his values. He does have a very protective nature, and some very traditional notions about handling women he cares about. He definitely doesn't tolerate brats or risky, self-destructive behavior—which of course is my constant downfall!"

"What do you mean, 'doesn't tolerate'?"

Marisa blushed, "Let's just say, he's a man of action—swift action! So... all these questions... I take it things are progressing well for you two? Come on, girlfriend, give me the dish!!"

Marlane laughed at the way Marisa had maneuvered around her question and thought how nice it was to have a real women friend. She worked with so many men in her field that she didn't have much contact with women like herself. "Well... I'd have to say that... Yes things are definitely progressing—but beyond that, I don't kiss and tell!"

"Ah HA—so there has been kissing! Sounds like our Mr. Barry hasn't always been the perfect gentleman!" Marlane just laughed at her.

"You know, you two are just like brother and sister!"

"We look out for each other—although Chris would never admit it's a two way street! I'm happy for both of you, I think you're really a good match for each other."

"Me too. Now I better get going on these files—it'll probably take a few days to get the info. You do know that we're both probably going to be in big trouble when Michael and Chris find out what we've been doing on our own."

"Yeah, well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it—for now, let's just find out if we even have a bridge!"

"You got it! Are you going to the task force meeting tomorrow?"

"Yeah, the doctor said I only had to stay in for two days—and I feel so much better today, I'm sure I'll be out about tomorrow."

"Just don't overdo it—or you'll be right back in bed."

"Yes, Michael!!"

"Sorry—but I was worried about you. You looked so wiped out Saturday night, and then when I saw the story Sunday night... Well, I'm just glad you're feeling better and taking it easy. Is there anything you need?"

"Nope! I'm good—see you tomorrow."

## Chapter Eleven

At the task force meeting the next morning, Marisa was welcomed back, although she'd only missed two conference calls. But if she had thought Michael and Chris were overprotective she hadn't seen anything yet. It turned out working with the task force guys was like suddenly having a room full of big brothers. They were all fussing over her, scolding her for wearing herself out and warning her they'd have their eye on her. She probably got four different home remedies for the flu. But it was sweet to see their concern, especially given how most of them had reacted at her initial inclusion on the task force. What a difference a few weeks had made!

Once the meeting got going in earnest, Marisa and Marlane were both relatively quiet—not adding their usual two cents to the discussion. There was a growing concern that most of the re-interviews were wrapped up, the case files all entered into databases and cross-referenced, and still not a clue about who the killer was. Marisa and Marlane shared a nervous look. They both knew it was going to be very tough to stay quiet about what they'd found.

After the meeting, Marisa begged off lunch saying she was going home to take a quick nap before heading into work, which was roundly applauded by the guys. Chris had been watching Marlane during the discussion and approached her afterward.

"Going to lunch?" he asked.

"I gotta pass today Chris—meetings and stuff on campus." She started to leave, but he took her arm to stop her.

"Is everything OK? You were so quiet in the meeting today—usually you jump right in the fray."

She was startled by his perceptive observation. "Yeah, um... everything's fine. I've just got some

stuff from the university on my mind. Sorry—I'll be more focused next time."

"There's nothing to apologize for, I was just concerned. Anything I can help with?" He definitely sensed she was being evasive, which was not at all like her—he'd never met a more straight forward woman.

"No really, I just need to get back for a meeting with a colleague—research project, you know. I'll talk to you tomorrow morning on the call. Take care, Chris." She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and was gone. He stood there for several minutes with a very puzzled expression on his face.

The next couple of days seemed to move in slow motion for Marisa. She was having a hard time concentrating on anything except the speeding ticket connection among the murders.

With the November ratings ending on Thursday, everyone in the newsroom lightened up. The station had done well, winning the 5pm and 11pm newscasts, and coming a close second at 6pm and in the mornings. The mood was jubilant and Kyle was generous with his praise for everyone's hard work.

Despite her lackluster on-air performance, she still received great feedback on the fire story. The father had not talked to any other reporter that day or since, but he had written a lovely note to Kyle saying how impressed he was with her compassion and sensitivity, and how much he appreciated the dignity and humanity she gave to this tragedy in his life. One rival reporter from another station even told her his boss had thrown a fit that 'Marisa Shaw, sick as a dog, could still report circles around anyone in town!'. She got a good laugh out of that one.

But even with the stress easing up at the station, Marisa was still tense. She was on edge waiting to find out if the speeding tickets would lead to a cop suspect, and she was uneasy that they still had no idea who was leaving her the roses. Every

morning she went to the door with a knot in her stomach. She had told Kyle about the roses and notes, and had gone through a long session with the station security people who were experts in handling over-attentive fans. They coordinated with the police, and made sure she had an escort home each night.

She was glad when Friday rolled around, and she had a weekend ahead with no specific plans. Maybe she and Michael could do something normal like go to dinner or a movie.

As she walked to her desk Friday afternoon, lost in thoughts of a real, ordinary date, the assignment editor bellowed at her from the news desk.

"Shaw—what the hell are you doing here? Glutton for punishment?"

She walked over to the news desk. "What do you mean, what am I doing here—it's 3pm... actually 3:15pm—I figured you were getting on my case for being late"

The Assistant News Director walked up behind her. "What he means is you're supposed to be off today, remember? You get the next Friday off when you work the extra weekend shift." Andy said laughing at her dropped jaw.

"Yeah, but I was out sick Monday and Tuesday—I just figured... I mean, well, I thought you'd..." she stammered, completely surprised.

"Cancel your Friday? Hey, I'm not a total monster! We're out of sweeps anyway—so go home! I can't afford your overtime as it is!"

"Seriously, a Friday off?"

"Take it before I change my mind!"

"I'm outta here!" She practically skipped out of the newsroom.

On her way home a plan began to take shape. She knew exactly how she wanted this evening to end up. She made a few calls, went home to change, and then to her favorite restaurant in Station Square for take-out. She was relaxed and happy for the first time in more than a week.

Michael finally left the station house about 6:30pm. He was looking forward to a quiet evening. It had been a hell of a week. He was getting very frustrated at the lack of progress in their serial murder case. He was also bothered that they still didn't have a clue as to who was sending Marisa the mystery roses. And of course there was Marisa's illness earlier in the week—she was back on her feet, but she still seemed tense. He tried to write it off to the roses, but he couldn't help the feeling that there was more going on. Oh, well, this weekend he was going to forget everything, and like Marisa, had the hope they could spend some time together—not a cop and a reporter, not two members of the task force--just two people desperately attracted to each other.

When he walked into his condo, in a restored building in the old section of Regent Square, he was greeted by a table set with candlelight and flowers, soft music, and wonderful smells coming from the kitchen. "Hello? Who's here? Marisa??"

There was no response, and as far as he knew Marisa had to work. He also knew she didn't cook! But when he looked in the kitchen, he saw several take-out boxes. *Well that at least explains the delicious aroma!* he thought.

He called out again, "Marisa are you here? What's going on?"

Then he heard a very soft, sexy voice coming from his bedroom, "Back here, Captain."

He practically ran back to his bedroom but stopped short at the sight. There was Marisa stretched out on his bed wearing only one of his dress uniform shirts, complete with captain's bars and his police hat. She was propped up on one elbow and her gorgeous long legs reached almost the length of the king size bed. Her hair was long and loose, shimmering in the candlelight. He had never seen a sexier woman in his life.

"Hi there." she said smiling at the heat in his eyes.

"Hi yourself!" He leaned against the doorway. Neither of them said anything for a couple of minutes. He just stood there drinking in the sight of her, and getting more aroused by the second. She actually blushed at the intensity of his gaze.

"Well, are you just going to stand there, Captain?" she finally asked in a low, husky voice.

"Actually, I was just thinking what a naughty, naughty girl I have in my bed."

"Really? I could always leave."

"Oh, I would be seriously derelict in my duty if I just let you go." He started toward her slowly. "I mean look at what we have here... impersonating a police officer, breaking and entering, solicitation..."

"I guess you'll just have to keep me under house arrest."

"Given the overwhelming evidence, I'd say we can skip the arrest part and go directly to the sentencing phase." He was now standing at the edge of the bed. He reached out, she took his hands and he pulled her up off the bed into his embrace. Their kiss was deep and passionate.

"And just what sentence would my crimes bring?" she whispered as he released her lips and started nibbling on her neck.

"Definitely at least a weekend of incarceration in my bed, and" he reached around behind her, pulled up his shirt and lightly slapped her bare bottom, "and a fine of a couple dozen spanks to bring a nice rosy color to those delicious bottom cheeks of yours." He slapped her again, a little harder this time. She squeaked in protest, but couldn't deny the warm tingling feeling that was building on top of the heat he was raising with his other hand massaging her breast and his soft butterfly kisses on her neck.

She moaned at his ministrations and then had a desperate need to feel his bare flesh. She flung off his jacket and literally ripped open his shirt to run her fingers up his chest. Buttons flew as the offending material dropped to the floor. She could

feel his arousal grinding against her as he pulled her even closer. Then there was only their exploding passion as they tumbled onto the bed and released all the pent up sexual energy between them. They made love with the wild abandon of two people who can't reach deeply enough inside one another. They fit together like two lost puzzle pieces and rode the rhythm of their ardor to sheer exhaustion.

As they lay back finally, their sweat-covered bodies glistening in the candlelight, neither could speak for several minutes. No words were needed, and none could describe the heights they'd reached. Michael turned on his side and propped his head up on his elbow so he could look at her face. He gently traced an invisible line down her cheek and then softly kissed her.

"You know," she purred, "I never knew we had earthquakes here in Pittsburgh."

"New fault line—just discovered." he said as his fingers played her body like a finely tuned piano. They made love again, this time slowly and softly, savoring each new sensation and treasure of each other's bodies. Eventually they drifted off into a dream-filled sleep.

Marisa awoke to the warm secure feeling of being snuggled into Michael's muscular chest, held fast by sturdy arms. She stayed like that for a while, listening to the rhythm of his breathing, and thinking about the power and tenderness that was all encased in this one man. The sexual electricity between them was so fierce it almost frightened her. No man had ever come close to the inner passion Michael had drawn out of her tonight. She had to smile as she thought about what he had said earlier in the week when she was still so weak from the flu—about waiting until she was strong and healthy. *Thank God we did—I'd be dead right now if we had tried that Monday night!*

"Just what's so amusing, Missy?" He kissed the top of her head, as he played with a wisp of her hair. She told him what she was thinking about and



he chuckled, telling her he had thought the same thing that night.

"I don't know about you, but I'm starving. And I brought ribs from Panatello's, with all the fixings." She started to untangle herself from him, but he was holding firm.

"I'm not ready to let you out of bed yet, young lady. Remember you are my prisoner!"

"Well, if I can't satisfy my hunger out in the kitchen, I guess I'll just have to settle my cravings elsewhere." And with that she reached down and bit his shoulder hard enough to leave light teeth marks. He was so surprised he released her, but he recovered quickly and managed to grab a wrist before she could scramble off the bed.

"Oh, so we're playing rough now are we?" They tussled, laughing until he managed to have her flipped over his lap. He smacked her bottom with a half-dozen stinging spansks, and then started slowly rubbing out the sting. He increased the intensity of his spanking, but she was so aroused the pain registered more as pleasure—the warmth in her bottom suffusing her whole body from the inside out. After a couple more rounds of smacks and slow sensual rubbing—he brought her to climax with his fingers right over his lap. She then took the role of aggressor and guided him to release inside her.

"You, my dear, have a magnificently spankable bottom." he whispered in her ear. "I'm definitely going to have to keep it that nice shade of deep pink."

"As long as you do it the way you just did, be my guest!"

"I would always do it that way if you didn't give me so many reasons to really spank that naughty, reckless child you let run your life much too often!" Marisa caught herself just as she was about to whine that she was NOT a child, but a fully grown, independent woman. She started to laugh and he was laughing too as he watched the play of

expressions on her face when she realized she was about to prove his point exactly!

They spent the whole weekend locked away in their own private world—making love and small talk in equal amounts, as they really got to know each other in all the little ways lovers do. There was no mention of work, stories, cases, or anything to do with their professional lives. Just time spent together finding out what each other was all about in their hearts and souls. Neither mentioned the word love, but they both felt themselves falling hard and fast in that direction.

Nothing intruded on their cocoon of isolation until late Sunday night when Michael's phone rang and her beeper went off—about the same time. She watched his face on the phone as she searched out her own cell phone to call the station. She saw a look she'd only seen once before, on her father's face when one of his officers had gone down. Her feeling of dread was confirmed as soon as she talked to the overnight producer who told her two cops had been shot in a convenience store robbery they stumbled onto and tried to stop. One was dead, the other critical—the clerk had also been shot, and the two suspects were dead.

Normally Marisa would have kicked into her reporter routine immediately, but her first thought was for Michael. These were men under his command. There was nothing worse for a precinct captain, than losing one of his officers on duty. She reached out to him, gently massaging his shoulders—all the relaxation of the weekend was gone, replaced by a taunt anger that shuddered through his entire body. She wanted to comfort him, but she could tell he was already gone from her, barking orders into the phone and mentally in full captain mode.

They dressed silently, each making the transition from intimate lover to professional, now with adversary agendas. As they left his condo,

each heading for their own vehicle, Marisa tried to break the silence.

"Michael, I..." but she trailed off not knowing what to say, especially since in a matter of minutes she'd be one of many reporters shouting questions at him, demanding answers he couldn't give.

He looked at her directly for the first time since he'd hung up the phone. He saw the pain she felt for him and simply said, "I know." Then they each headed off to the same destination, but with very different jobs to do.

It was nearly 1am when Marisa arrived at the scene and hooked up with the overnight photographer who had been on the scene since minutes after it happened. He had been cruising, listening to the scanner, and was only 5 minutes away when he heard the code for officer down. His name was Dick Grey and he had incredible stuff, including an interview with the clerk as she was being wheeled into the ambulance.

With all her contacts at the downtown precinct Marisa was able to find out who the officers were fairly quickly. She said a brief, albeit selfish, prayer of thanks that they weren't officers she knew well. After a couple of hours she made the decision they needed to move to the hospital. Nothing more was coming from the scene tonight, and she knew she couldn't go with the names until she had confirmation their families had been notified. That was only going to come from Michael and he was at the hospital. Besides that's also where all the cops who weren't working the crime scene would be.

She and Michael both were working on pure adrenaline. He had the difficult task of dealing with the families, and the rest of the cops in his squad. His number two stayed at the crime scene, working the case. Michael gladly would have traded places with his deputy, but tonight that wasn't his job.

When Marisa and Dick got to the hospital, a police reporter from another station was already there. Marisa groaned as she saw Rick Weber. He

was an obnoxious ass, who made all reporters look bad. The man simply had no class and zero sensitivity at crime scenes. He antagonized the cops and had turned off more than one victim's family from talking to any of the media.

"Well, well. Marisa Shaw—what a surprise. I hear you guys were first on the scene. Must be nice, huh Dick to get tipped-off right from the top? Or should I say from between the sheets? Come on Shaw, go tell lover boy we need some Goddamn sound! Or is Cranky Craine only doing exclusives these days?" he asked snidely.

Marisa let him have with it with all the emotions that had been building up through the night. "Weber you are such an asshole! Not that it's any of your business, but Dick was first on the scene because he heard it on the scanner, and did what any good journalist would do. Not that you'd have a clue what that would be. You know, I've always wondered which you were less of—a journalist or a human being. I think I just decided it's a toss up. Why don't you just go find a slimy rock to crawl under?"

Marisa had barely gotten out her last word when Dick got right in his face and said in a soft, menacing voice, "And if you ever make another sleazy comment about Marisa again, I'll flatten you, so you'll fit back under that rock." Rick visibly shrunk right before their eyes and then turned on his heel and left. Marisa and Dick high-fived each other—it was the only bright moment in a grim night, that was about to get worse.

All the media were kept away from the waiting area with the families and cops. Marisa did manage to get a glimpse of Michael as he embraced the widow of the officer killed. He had been a young rookie, only married a year. Marisa's heart went out to her. She had a momentary flashback to a similar night she spent in this same waiting room, surrounded by cops, hoping for some positive word about her father—it never came. She briefly saw

the anguish in Michael's face as he tried to comfort the young woman.

All too soon Sam rolled around and it was time to start doing live shots for the morning show. A second crew was live at the scene now, and that reporter covered what had happened, using Dick's great video. Marisa concentrated on the conditions of the other officer and the clerk, and told the story of the officer and two suspects killed. She'd actually gotten a lot of information about all three—all the work on database searches she was doing for the task force paid off at other stories, because she knew just where to go to get information. She wove the story of three lives violently intersecting--two young punks just beginning a path of crime, and one young officer just beginning a path of crime fighting. She had so much more information than any other reporter, one would have thought she'd been working the stories for days rather than just hours.

In the second hour of her morning show lives, the hospital PR person, who was a childhood friend, came up to her with the news that the second officer had died. Marisa hadn't been reporting his name yet, because she couldn't get confirmation that the family knew he'd been shot. Her friend told her his family was there, so Marisa went with the story, including his name and the background she'd been able to dig up. She was barely clear of her liveshot when she felt a viselike grip on her arm, and she was swung around to face a raging Michael.

"What the hell are you doing?" he shouted.

"Michael, I... you're hurting me, let go." she spoke softly, not wanting to create any more of a scene than he was already doing. She motioned off Dick who heading right for Michael.

Michael abruptly released her, but she could tell he was furious. "Dammit Marisa we haven't gotten to Bill's wife yet—she doesn't even know he was shot, let alone killed!"

"Oh my God. But Lynne said the family was here." Marisa was stricken.

"Some of his family yes, except his wife does temp nursing, and is working an overnight shift somewhere, but we haven't been able to find out where yet. Geez Marisa, you of all people should know not to release info like that without confirmation from me! I swear if she finds out from your broadcast, I will blister your ass till you can't sit for a month!" Michael just turned and stalked off. She had never seen him so upset and angry, and she was just as upset with herself. She was horrified at the thought Michael had put in her mind of the officer's wife finding out about her husband's death on TV. That was her worst nightmare. But she trusted Lynne implicitly, and had no reason to question the information. That was the problem—she never came right out and asked if all his family was informed and if she could go with the name.

Marisa went through the rest of the morning somewhat numb. Lynne finally came down when she heard Michael had really lit into her, and told her that the police had gotten to the wife and told her—she didn't hear it on TV. But that was small comfort to Marisa who couldn't get the picture of what might have happened out of her mind.

After the noon show Marisa was relieved by two other reporters who would report the story developments for the early news, and then she would come back and pick it up for the 11pm that night. She talked to Kyle about what had happened, but he told her she made the right call given the credibility of the information she had. Somehow that didn't do much to ease her guilt.

She didn't see or hear from Michael at all the next two days, except at news conferences she was covering. He was holding up well publicly, but she could see the haunted look in his eyes and longed to comfort him. There was just no time, and she still felt terrible about what had happened that morning. He was working practically 24 hours

dealing with the shootings and arrangements for two police funerals. It was decided to have the formal services on Wednesday, because Thursday was Thanksgiving. Police funerals are incredible spectacles, with officers coming from across the state to take part in the procession of flashing lights, dress uniforms, bagpipes and rifle salutes. Marisa remembered the procession for her father's funeral was five miles long.

Marisa worked a dayshift on Wednesday to cover the funerals, but didn't get home till after 9pm because she and Ron worked on a special retrospective package about the officers for the 11pm news that night. When she drove up, she saw Michael sitting on her front stoop, still in full dress uniform, his head in his hands, looking as if the life had simply drained out of him. She rushed to him, knelt down and just held him as tightly as she could. They stayed like that for several minutes and then she pulled him up and guided him into the house.

Once they were inside, he stopped her fussing with his jacket and gloves and tipped her face up to meet his eyes. "I need you," he whispered. "I need your spark to know I'm still alive." He wiped away the tears threatening to escape down her cheeks at his words. Then he lifted her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom where she let him undress her and take her to bed, making slow, gentle love. Finally he fell asleep cradled in her arms.

*He watched as she took the cop inside. His blood boiled—it was happening again. Just like the first. He couldn't let it happen again. He waited all night but the cop never left. Before dawn he angrily tossed the rose onto the street, the petals ripped off the bud and the card torn in half, and drove off. He couldn't wait much longer.*

## Chapter Twelve

Marisa was up early Thanksgiving morning. She managed to slip out of Michael's arms without waking him. She was pleased to see his face relaxed in sleep. She went out and made coffee and then looked out over the city on this sunny, but cold morning. She had to admit she was worried about seeing Michael this morning. Last night he had needed her desperately for simple affirmation that life would go on after the hellacious three days he had been through. But there was still the issue of Monday morning between them. He had been so angry when he confronted her, and then they'd had no time to talk at all. Last night was the first time she'd seen him in an unofficial capacity since Sunday night. The truth was she still felt guilty about what had happened. She always prided herself on being sensitive to victims and their families. And she had to blow it on a cop's family of all things!

She was so lost in thought she didn't hear Michael come out into the living room. He came up behind her and put his arms around her. She jumped in surprise.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I was disappointed when I woke up alone." He was nuzzling her neck, and whispering in her ear.

"I... um... didn't want to wake you. You were so wiped out last night. Did you sleep, OK?" She was tensing up under his touch, instead of relaxing.

"You know I did." He turned her around so he could look into her eyes. "Thank-you." he said softly.

She evaded his direct gaze. "You're welcome. How about some coffee? It's freshly made." She slipped out of his arms and headed to the kitchen. He frowned, confused by her reaction, and followed her into the kitchen.

"Marisa? Is something wrong?" he asked concerned.



"No, no, I'm fine. Um, you still up for going over to the Barry's this afternoon? I know they really want you to come. Marlane's coming too. John might be a good person to talk to about, you know..." Even to her own ears she sounded jumpy and rushed.

When she tried to pour his coffee, her hand was shaking slightly.

She hadn't realized how upset she'd been over the whole incident, and how scared she was that Michael wouldn't forgive her. He took the coffee pot out of her hand, firmly gripped her arms and turned her to face him. He was shocked when he tipped her head up to look at him and tears glistened in her eyes.

"Missy, honey, what is it? Talk to me." The compassion in his eyes and sweetness of his tone were her undoing. Her tears flowed unchecked and she tried to get away from him, but he pulled her into a tight embrace instead, stroking her hair and whispering comforting words. He let her cry and when she finally seemed settled, he led her to the couch and set her on his lap.

"Now, are you ready to tell me what that was all about?"

The words started tumbling out. "Michael I'm so sorry—I was afraid you'd never forgive me. I was so reckless, and you were so angry. I was horrified that Bill's wife might have gotten the news from my broadcast. I swear I've never done anything like that before. I just... well it was Lynne and we have such a history I trusted her—but it wasn't her fault. I never asked the right question. And I know your experience with reporters... and I... Oh, God, I'm so, so sorry." she was crying again.

"Missy, I'm the one who's sorry. I had no idea you were still so upset about this. I guess we never had a chance to talk about this since my explosion at you Monday morning. It's OK, I understand what happened. Chris told me all about your friendship

with Lynne and then I knew you had good reason to go with the information. I'm sorry I overreacted."

"You didn't overreact. I screwed up—I was just thinking about the story. That's not right—it's not me."

"Marisa, let it go. You made a mistake, but it was an honest mistake. And nothing happened. We got to Bill's wife—she never heard your broadcast." He could tell his words weren't getting through. She was wracked with guilt over her mistake, and that guilt had just festered for three days because she hadn't been able to talk to him about it. Last night she had been his lifeline—now it was his turn to be there for her. He knew exactly what she needed.

He firmly set her off his lap onto the couch. "Don't move," he ordered. Then he headed back to her bedroom and came back with her mother's antique mahogany hairbrush. Her eyes opened wide at the site of it. He sat back down and without a word pulled her across his lap, raised her robe up over her back and brought his hand down hard on her bare backside. She didn't struggle or cry out as his hand came down in sharp smacks over and over again. She just whimpered, which nearly broke his heart—but he knew she needed this to release her guilt.

When her bottom was thoroughly reddened, he stopped and briefly rubbed out some of the sting. Then he started talking to her. "Marisa, I want you to understand, I'm not spanking you because I think you did something to deserve it. I'm spanking you, because you need to let go. I'm not angry with you, but you're angry with yourself, and you can't forgive yourself. I'm going to give you 20 strokes with the hairbrush now—it's going to hurt like the devil, and you'll probably have bruises for a couple of days. But I want you to take it like a good girl, and then forgive yourself."

Marisa had never been spanked with a hairbrush before and was unprepared for the sharp, focused

pain as Michael peppered her bottom with hard smacks of the smooth oval. It quickly became difficult to stay still—she cried out in pain and then finally, exhausted, lay limp over his lap, feeling the release she so desperately needed. He gently rubbed her back and then lightly stroked her torched backside, eliciting a hiss of pain. He helped her up, grinning slightly as she gasped when the material of her flannel bathrobe fell down across her throbbing buttocks.

He carried her into the bedroom, took off the robe and gently laid her on her stomach. Then he got some cold cream from her bathroom and set about cooling down her red-hot cheeks. "That should help relieve some of the heat, and cut down on bruising. Are you OK, Marisa?" he asked so softly, she almost didn't hear him. It was hard to concentrate on anything other than the fire in her rear end.

She turned her head to look up at him, and smiled through her tears. "This is probably the only time I'll ever thank you for lighting a fire on my butt. I love you, Michael Craine."

He laid down facing her and dropped a feather-light kiss on her lips. "I love you too Missy. I'd say we've got a lot to be thankful for this day."

It was Marisa's turn to wake up disappointed she was alone in bed a couple of hours later. She rolled over and immediately hopped up as her very sore bottom hit the mattress. *I'm going to bury that hairbrush someplace where no one will find it!* she thought grimacing. She also realized sitting for Thanksgiving dinner was going to be very uncomfortable.

When she came out into the dining room, she found a note from Michael saying he'd gone home to shower and change, and he'd pick her up around 2:30pm to head over to the Barry's. He had added a P.S. that he hoped their dining room chairs were padded!

Thanksgiving dinner at John and Sally's was exactly what everyone needed. The smells of roasting turkey with all the fixings, a warm fire crackling in the fireplace, the comforting site of John and Sally working side-by-side in the kitchen, and the love and laughter of family and friends. Marlane was already there when Michael and Marisa arrived. As people tend to do, they were all congregated in the kitchen. John told stories of some of their past Thanksgiving gatherings when Marisa and Chris were younger—including the year John and her Dad had decided they were going out at the crack of dawn to hunt for wild turkey for that night's meal. Fortunately Sally and Marisa's Mom had figured the likely success of this venture, and bought a bird which was roasting when the guys returned with nothing more than sheepish grins.

Marlane and Michael thoroughly enjoyed the stories of mischief and mayhem while Chris and Marisa growing up, much to their chagrin! The awful events of the week just slipped into the background of warm memories and good company. After dinner Marisa was glad to see Michael and John slip away out back for a while. She knew John would be a good sounding board for Michael—he was the only one who truly knew what Michael had been through this week. Sally and Marlane were in the living room laughing at Chris' baby pictures, completely embarrassing him. And he and Marisa had volunteered for K-P duty.

"So Marisa, was someone a little too bratty this morning?" Chris asked with a gleam in his eye.

Marisa blushed, but just kept washing dishes. "Come on kiddo, you had ants in your pants during the whole meal. I haven't seen that much squirming since the time we both had to sit on those hard pews at church with sore bottoms for acting up that Sunday morning! Now talk!"

She laughed at the memory and then squealed when he snapped a towel at her behind. "Owww! OK, you asked for it!" She splashed him with dirty

dishwater, soaking the front of his shirt with greasy water.

"Now, you're really gonna get it!" He started toward her and she took off around the other side of the island in the kitchen. They were faced off on either side of the island, Chris dripping all over the floor and Marisa laughing and taunting him, when John and Michael came inside. Marisa ran to Michael and crouched behind him begging for protection. John just shook his head. They all dissolved into laughter when Sally called in from the living room asking if any dishes were getting cleaned out there or was she going to have to come back and crack the whip.

Nothing broke the spell of the carefree family gathering until Michael and Marisa were ready to leave. Marlane pulled Marisa aside and handed her a disk. "I finally got the files we needed," she whispered. "I haven't had a chance to look up the specific tickets we need yet, but here they are. You know I'm on a plane first thing in the morning for that conference in Chicago. I'll be back early Monday morning. If you find what we think you might find—don't wait Marisa. Tell the task force right away. If our suspect is a cop, he's even more dangerous than we thought." Marisa shuddered at that thought, but agreed. This was not something they should pursue alone.

Marisa was quiet on the ride home. Michael had an early morning, so they decided he would just drop her off. While she'd miss him tonight, she was relieved that she would be alone, so she could take a look at the files on the disk.

Once she got into it, it took her a couple of hours to figure out how to get to the info she needed. Different information from tickets was stored in different places, depending on how it would be used. When she finally worked her way through the complex system of files and had the information up on her screen, she just stared. There it was—all five tickets listed under one

trooper's name, Richard C. Wise. She was stunned. She realized that down deep she never really thought this lead would pan out, but there right in front of her was a suspect—a cop suspect. She also had that strange sensation again—that there was something more that she should know, but she couldn't get a handle on it.

She decided she had to reveal everything during tomorrow's conference call. Just the thought of that conversation made her nervous. She knew the other members of the task force would be angry that she and Marlane had kept this information quiet when everyone was so frustrated at the lack of leads. Michael and Chris were going to be especially pissed, and probably a little hurt, that the women hadn't even trusted them enough to confide the information. She was going to try and fudge the timeline to make it seem they'd only discovered this connection a few days ago rather than more than two weeks ago. But she had a feeling the guys wouldn't buy it—they knew how hard it was to get state police data.

It was after 1am and Marisa was too exhausted to think about it anymore. Somehow in the morning she'd figure out a way to present the information that would cause the smallest backlash against herself and Marlane. She smiled slightly at the thought that at least by the time Marlane got back the guys would have cooled off, so maybe she'd escape their wrath. However Marisa had no doubt that sometime in the near future her bottom would again pay the price for her decisions. She unconsciously rubbed her backside which was still tender from the hairbrush this morning as she walked down the hall to her bedroom.

*He had a wicked smile on his face as he watched her close her laptop and turn out the lights. That smile would have been wiped away if he had known it was his name she was staring at so intently. But he only thought--no cop tonight—tonight he could imagine that she was all his. He could visualize her*

*undressing and the thought of her beautiful body aroused him. She was almost as perfect as the first one. But the first one had belonged to another—so she had to be rescued. This one would be all his soon. He waited another hour and then, cloaked in the darkness of a moonless night, left her the last rose.*

Marisa had a restless night, her dreams filled with nightmarish imagines of the crime scene pictures from the murder case files intermingled with nightmares from her teenage years after her mother was killed. She woke in a cold sweat from one dream she hadn't had in ten years. The vivid image of her mother's body covered by a sheet with a stain of red over her heart where she'd been stabbed—just her hand sneaking out from under the sheet... *my God I never made the connection before* Marisa thought with growing horror, *she had a rose in her hand. That's what was bothering me about the crime scene photos of the bodies. It wasn't that the victims looked like me, they look like my mother. They were all killed on the same day as my mother—All Hallow's Eve.*

Marisa couldn't believe she'd never made the connection before. She started to think about the dates of the killings. The first one was 12 years ago—three years after her mother's death. She sat on the edge of her bed, numbed by the thoughts racing through her head. It couldn't be—it just couldn't be that she was chasing the trail of her own mother's killer. And what of this state trooper Richard Wise? Had their paths crossed? She certainly knew her mother never would have gotten a speeding ticket. She smiled as she remembered how many times she had nagged and teased her mom for being the world's most conservative driver.

She had to know more. She couldn't possibly bring this to the task force now. As soon as she did, she'd be shutout—too personally involved they'd say, just like they said to her father 15 years ago when he tried to get involved with her case.

But just like the murders that followed, there was no clue as to who had killed her mother or why... until now.

Marisa jumped, startled as her alarm went off. She'd been sitting there almost an hour, and now it was 9am. The task force conference call was just a half-hour away. It would be the toughest acting job of her life, but she had to keep the others at bay until she knew more. She went to the kitchen and made coffee hoping she could shake off some of the shell-shocked numbness she was still feeling. At precisely 9:30am the phone rang, and she was connected to the conference call. There was the usual rounds of good mornings, how was Thanksgiving, and glad it was Friday comments. It was the first conference call this week because of the murders of the officers and the holiday.

Marisa listened as the other task force members went through any new developments and waited anxiously for her turn—still not sure what she was going to say. Since she was on her cordless phone she decided to go grab the paper while she listened. And there on her front porch was all the diversion she needed. She froze at the sight of the flower box. At that moment Chris asked for her report, but there was silence.

"Marisa are you there? Marisa??"

"Oh God, no. No, please not now." she whispered

"Marisa! Marisa what's wrong?" Chris asked sharply. The others on the call also started calling her name. But she couldn't hear them. It was all too much—she couldn't deal with this threat too right now. She dropped the phone and started to close the door, and then simply collapsed onto the floor.

Chaos reigned on the conference call, everyone talking and shouting at once until Chris bellowed for quiet. "I'm on my car phone and not far from her place. I'm on my way right now. Michael, get the closest patrol officers there ASAP, and I'll meet you



there. We'll check in with the rest of you as soon as we know what's going on."

He hung up and wished he had a flashing light for his car. But he still managed to make it to her house in about five minutes. Two patrol cars rolled up right behind him. He raced to door that was ajar, and stopped short as he saw the flower box. He instructed the officers to get a CSI called in and not to disturb the box or the area around it. Then he pushed the door open, only to find it partially blocked by Marisa who was now sitting up, shaking her head trying to clear the fuzziness and figure out what had just happened.

"Marisa, honey, slide over so I can get in." She looked up bewildered, but as his words penetrated her frazzled brain she complied. He stepped inside and knelt down to see if she was alright.

"What happened? Did someone hurt you?" he asked in a calm, soothing voice, as he checked her over for injuries.

"No, no. I don't know what happened. I was on the call and then..." She looked out the open door and saw the flower box, and again lost all the color in her face. Chris squeezed her hands tightly to bring her attention back to him. "I... I guess I must have seen the flower box and just was overwhelmed that he was back. I mean there haven't been any in a while. I thought it was over. I... man I can't believe I fainted—what a wimp huh?" she tried to laugh, but it came out with a hysterical edge.

Chris helped her up. "Are you sure you didn't hit your head or anything when you fell?"

"No. I'm fine really. It was just so unexpected, that's all. With all that's happened this week, I really had pushed this stalker guy way back in my mind. I wasn't prepared to find another rose. I'm so sorry I freaked everyone out—I really overreacted." This time her smile looked a little more genuine. At that moment Michael raced in and was greatly relieved to see her up and smiling. Chris released her hands and she melted into

Michael's strong and comforting arms. Even if they didn't know the full reasons for her distress, there was no one she'd rather have with her at this moment than these two men.

"It doesn't appear she's injured, but it's still probably a good idea to get her to a doctor to be checked out." Chris said to Michael.

"That's not necessary, guys, I'm fine, really." she responded as they both glared at her.

"Marisa, I've never known you to faint dead away like that, and it's happened twice now in the last few months. It can't hurt to have a doctor look you over."

"I agree with Chris."

"Of course you do, you're both endowed with the same overprotective gene!" she laughed, but agreed she'd try and get into to see her doctor today. Then the CSI came in holding the rose and card. It was the same woman who had been out here before.

"Morning Captain, Miss Shaw, Agent Barry. It looks like our same guy. This rose bud and card were in the box, and there's no indication of a florist." She looked uncertainly at Michael as Marisa reached out to take the card. He nodded and she released it. Marisa read the message and shivered. It was the most ominous so far.

*I coming for you soon, very soon, my  
American Beauty*

Chris gently took the card from her hand and Michael guided her to the couch and sat her down. He turned her face to look at him and saw something rare in her eyes, fear. She didn't say a word, but simply laid her head on his broad chest and he enveloped her in his strength, whispering words of comfort while his eyes glittered with anger toward the man who had cowered this strong woman he loved.

The CSI approached them and asked Marisa if she was up to answering a few questions. She sat up and agreed. Michael used the opportunity to get up and confer with Chris and the other officers. They all agreed she shouldn't be left alone in this house his weekend. The problem was Chris had to fly to Washington, D.C. this afternoon to testify and didn't expect to be back until Monday, and Michael was scheduled to go on a captain's retreat set-up by the chief. Neither could miss their long planned trips.

"I guess we could put her in protective custody in a hotel, but she'd fight that tooth and nail." Michael scowled.

"I've got a better idea. She can stay at my parent's house this weekend. Since I'll be in D.C. the extra bedroom is free. I know they'd love to have her and what safer place to be than a cop's home?" Chris said. They all agreed that would be the best idea. After she was done answering questions, Chris and Michael told her to pack a bag, and explained their idea. She had forgotten that they'd both be gone this weekend, and readily agreed that spending the weekend with John and Sally was a good idea.

Michael stayed while she showered and changed for work, and then packed a bag for the weekend. He wished she wouldn't go into the station today, but she said she really needed the distraction, and after the last week he'd been through, he could understand.

Once she was ready and packed he drove her to work, apologizing for about the tenth time that he had to go on this retreat. And she tried to tell him for the tenth time that she understood and would be perfectly fine at the Barry's. He promised to call every night and said he'd be back late Sunday night. They kissed passionately and she went into the station.

Michael drove off to the precinct house feeling a little better that her color was back and she seemed

much better than when he had arrived at her house this morning. But he still felt guilty as hell about leaving this weekend. He knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything during the retreat because he would be worried about her, but he also knew it was mandatory that he go. The chief required that a new captain practically be on his or her deathbed in order to miss it.

Chris was going through exactly the same guilt as he talked to John about having Marisa stay the weekend. He had even tried to call the federal prosecutor in D.C. to see if his testimony could be delayed a few days, but the answer was a resounding, NO. The court was going into session over the weekend specifically so he could testify in the special courtroom designed to protect the identity of undercover law enforcement officers. John tried to reassure him that they'd take good care of Marisa, but even though he knew his parents would die before they let anything happen to her, he was still worried. He didn't want anything to happen to them either. The one consolation was he knew that his Dad was a good cop.

As Chris and Michael both headed to their offices to catch-up on last minute things before they headed out, the reason for their concern was proving it was justified. Richard Wise was out on the PA Turnpike in his patrol car watching drivers speed by and then hit the breaks as they saw his car in the median. But he wasn't thinking about them, he too was focused on Marisa and forming weekend plans of his own. *Soon, very soon, you'll be all mine forever* he thought with a smile that would send chills down the spine of the most fearless.

## Chapter Thirteen

Marisa walked into the newsroom and was immediately waylaid by her boss. Kyle guided her into his office and sat down across from her with a very concerned look on his face.

"The police contacted us about the latest delivery. How are you doing? From what our security people tell me, this was a pretty threatening message."

"I'm doing much better Kyle, and I appreciate your concern. I just freaked out initially because I guess I thought the extra patrols and escorts home had scared this creep off." she told him.

"I have to admit I was hoping the same thing. Are you sure you should be here—not only here, but here two hours early?"

"Yeah, it's actually good to have something else to focus on. I came in early to do some task force research using the I-Team's databases if that's OK?"

"Sure no problem. What about this weekend? You're not staying alone are you?" Kyle asked with a worried look.

"Kyle, you fuss just like a mother hen! No I'm not going to be alone. I'm staying with Agent Chris Barry's parents. John is a police captain over in the Southside precinct. I think I'll be pretty safe there." she was smiling now, trying to ease his mind.

"Good, and by the way, I'm allowed to fuss over my star reporter. It's actually written in my job description. 'Keep good reporters out of trouble.'" His humor was a sign he was more relaxed now too.

"I'm gonna go get to that research. And Kyle, thanks for caring about your people like you do. We all appreciate it." she got up and gave him a quick peck on the cheek and then hustled out of the office before he could go into his 'tough boss' routine. She stopped by the news desk to let the assignment editor know where she'd be when the late news producer was ready for the night meeting. Then she headed upstairs with her laptop to the I-Team's

research area. She was in luck. The team's crack computer assisted reporting producer was there.

"Hey Ryan, I need some help with a story I'm working on. Have you got some time for me?" she asked. Ryan was the last woman you'd look at and think 'computer nerd'. She was a beautiful blonde with a drop dead gorgeous figure. She easily could have been an on-air reporter. But she liked working behind the scenes, and no one could work databases better than she could. When Marisa first started working with the task force, Ryan had taught her a lot.

"Sure Marisa—is this the same project you've been working on for the last few weeks? Do I actually get to know what's going on?" Ryan's eyes sparkled at the prospect of getting an inside peak at whatever Marisa was working on.

"Sorry, it's still very hush, hush. But I'm sort of going out on a limb and working an angle by myself, and I could really use your help since I'm on a tight timetable."

"Somehow I had a feeling you were going to say that! Alright, what do you need?"

"I'm going to give you a name and I need you to tell me everything you can about him. The name is Richard C. Wise, and all I know right now is he's a state police trooper. I'm going to do a Lexis-Nexis search for anything that might have popped up in the news. You take everything else and give me anything you can find in the next two hours." Marisa smiled at Ryan's response to her request. She knew the woman loved a challenge of any kind, and if anyone could put flesh and bones to her mystery suspect, Ryan could.

Ryan got right to work, while Marisa logged into Lexis-Nexis to look for any mention of Wise in the news. After 90 minutes all she'd come up with was a small article on a citation for bravery for pulling two people out of a burning car--hardly serial killer material. She turned to Ryan who had a stack of printed pages for her. Marisa started thumbing

through the information and couldn't believe it. Ryan had found everything from his birth certificate to his state police personnel file.

"Ryan you're a genius! We're not going to be raided by the state police and arrested for hacking into personnel records, are we?"

Ryan laughed. "No silly, state troopers are state employees which makes their personnel files public records just like every state employee in Pennsylvania. Hey did you know this guy was a city cop before he joined the state police? In fact he started out in your Dad's precinct." Those words were like icy fingers reaching in to grip Marisa's heart. She walked over to see what Ryan had up on the screen, and there was an old roster of city officers. When Ryan clicked on his name a short paragraph came up saying he graduated from Pitt and had gone to the Pittsburgh police academy before being assigned to the downtown precinct as a patrol officer. She looked at the dates. He was on the city force less than a year—in 1987, 15 years ago, the year her mother was killed. And that's when the memory kicked in.

Marisa realized why the name had seemed familiar. She remembered the argument between her parents. Her father saying something about setting Rick Wise straight and her mother saying it was no big deal, he was just a kid with a crush. *Rick—that's why the name didn't jump out at me* she thought. She had been introduced to him as Rick Wise. He had been another cute rookie her Dad brought home to dinner, but while she wished he'd notice her, he had been fascinated by her mother. A few months later she had overheard the argument. And a couple months after that her mother was dead.

Ryan looked up when she didn't get any response and saw Marisa looked white as a sheet and was staring off into space, a million miles away. "Marisa are you alright, you look like you've seen a ghost."

Ryan's voice brought her back to the present. She shook her head, trying to clear the memories and reassure Ryan. "Yeah, of course, I'm fine. I was just trying to remember if I'd ever met this guy. My Dad used to bring all the rookies home to dinner at least once during their probationary year."

"So did you?" Ryan asked.

"Ummm, no I don't think so. Listen Ryan, this is great stuff. I really appreciate the work. I promise when I can talk about all this, you'll be one of the first to know! And I owe you lunch sometime soon. I better get downstairs before the 11pm producer sends the hounds after me. Thanks again." She gathered up all Ryan's research, her laptop and headed downstairs.

"Any time Marisa." Ryan called after her, but she was troubled by Marisa's reaction to that last bit of information she picked up on Wise. She hoped she had done the right thing tracking down all that background for Marisa.

Downstairs in the newsroom Marisa went to her desk to sort through the chaotic thoughts racing around in her head. She had to settle down and focus. What else did she need to nail this down further? She decided she had to get a hold of Wise's personnel file with the Pittsburgh police and she needed her mother's case file. That meant she had to get to police records this afternoon—before 5pm. It was nearly 3:00 now, which meant the late news meeting would start any minute. She could probably scoot out right after that, and then come back and set-up her story for the 11pm news. The records room would be locked up all weekend, she had to get there today. There was no way she could sit around all weekend not knowing. It was going to be hard enough just concentrating on whatever story assignment she had tonight.

She lucked out. When she got over to the meeting the station's chief meteorologist, Tom Willman, was already there talking to the 11pm producer and night assignment editor. There was a



big snow storm expected to blow in after midnight and it could leave up to six inches of snow by Saturday morning. Tom said he was going to make a big deal of it in the early news, and he thought the producer should put him as the lead story at 11pm. The producer agreed and then told Marisa and Ron they should go out and check grocery stores and some of the big box stores to see if people were stocking up on food, and buying snow supplies. Marisa was relieved with such an easy assignment. Since all she had to do to set it up was get permission to shoot inside a few stores, she figured she had plenty of time to slip over to police records.

Marisa let the assignment desk know she was headed over to the cop shop to check out a few things, and would be back in an hour. She had her pager and cell phone if they needed to reach her. The night assignment editor even volunteered to make the calls for her to get her set-up at a couple of stores. She could have kissed him, but restrained herself. Then she headed to downtown headquarters where the records department was housed in the basement.

She was disappointed when she found out the officer on duty wasn't one she knew. But she had her task force ID, and that pretty much guaranteed access to anything. She flashed it to the young clerk who had her sign in and then waved her through and asked if she needed any help.

"No thanks, I just need a couple of files and I'll be out of here in plenty of time for you to close up on time." Marisa said smiling at the young man.

"Oh, I'm not worried about that, it's just I know where to find most stuff down here."

"Well, a young man like yourself should be worried about getting out of this dungeon on time on a Friday night!" She laughed as he blushed and then she headed back to the old cases.

Everything was well marked and it didn't take long to find October 1987. She pulled down the bin

and flipped through the files with shaking hands. When she found the one labeled 'Shaw Murder' she almost couldn't remove it she was shaking so badly. Tears blurred her vision as she opened the file and there on top were the crime scene photos. She had never seen her mother's body uncovered and the gruesome nature of the pictures turned her stomach—for a few minutes she thought she might throw-up right there. But she took several deep breaths, closed the file, and slowly regained her composure.

Once she felt steady enough, she headed over to the personnel files and again quickly found 1987. She wasn't sure which month Wise had started work, so she started in January, and finally found him in March. She opened the file and looked at the face of the man she was coming to believe killed her mother and five other women. The picture helped confirm her memory of their first encounter at dinner. Her emotions were beginning to take over this investigation and she was quickly coming to hate this man.

Marisa took both files over to the copy machine and copied everything in both. She had to record the file numbers and input a billing number to get the copier to work. She just used the task force number and had no problems. Then before she returned the files she had to record the numbers on the sign-in sheet as well. She returned the files and said good-night to the duty officer. What she didn't know was that anytime a personnel file was copied, an electronic message was sent to Internal Affairs and the captain of the precinct the person worked in—for former employees it went to the last two precincts they worked. Practically before Marisa had finished copying Wise's file, a message was sent to Michael's internal e-mail that the file had been accessed and it included the task force billing number. That notification procedure would save Marisa's life.

Marisa headed back to the station and stowed away all her new research to look through later tonight. She forced herself to wipe her mind clean of all she had learned in the last 24 hours and concentrate on the story. Working with Ron helped, he always managed to make her laugh and forget her troubles. He knew she'd received another rose this morning because Kyle had told him, and asked him to keep an eye on her tonight.

They managed to put together a pretty good story because they found people stocking up and getting ready to hunker down for the weekend as if Armageddon was coming. It had just the right mix of information and humor. She went live from a Wal\*Mart that was open 24 hours and was sold out of shovels, and rock salt. But still she was relieved when they got back to the station and she was in the security car on her way to the Barry's.

It was well after midnight when she arrived at their home. But bless their hearts, John and Sally had waited up for her. Sally tried desperately to feed her and John let her know with his quiet questioning that he was there if she needed to talk. Marisa pleaded exhaustion and said she just wanted to go to bed. So Sally took her upstairs to the spare room that Chris had been using.

"Nothing much has changed from when you used to spend the occasional weekend here honey, so you just help yourself to whatever you need. Are you sure I can't at least fix you a cup of tea?" Sally asked believing sincerely that food and drink could cure a world of problems.

Marisa had to smile and embraced the woman who was in so many ways a second mother to her. "Sally you have all weekend to spoil me. But right now I just want sleep. Thanks for letting me stay here."

"Missy you know you have a home here anytime you need it. And don't think I won't be fussing over you."

John stood in the doorway. "She's only been making all your favorites ever since Chris called this morning!" Sally blushed and they all laughed. "Come on sweetheart, let the girl get some rest. Good night Missy." He walked over and kissed her forehead and then took Sally's hand and led her out of the room, down the hall to their bedroom. Tears again sprung to Marisa's eyes as she thought about how lucky she was to have the love of two such wonderful people.

She got ready for bed, but knew she wouldn't be able to fall asleep for awhile no matter how tired she was. So she pulled all the materials she gathered on Wise out of her briefcase and began to go through it. She started with his Pittsburgh police file. He had come out of the police academy with top marks and recommendations. That got him assigned to her Dad's precinct. His 60 and 90 day reviews were good. Then there was nothing until early September when Wise was transferred out of the downtown precinct to Homestead—about as far from downtown as you could get and still be in Pittsburgh. From downtown to the Homestead precinct was definitely a demotion. There was no reason given, but it was at the request of the captain—Captain Byron Shaw. There were two reprimands for insubordination from the Homestead captain in the next two months, and then mid-November, two weeks after her mother's murder, Wise gave notice that he was leaving the Pittsburgh force to join the state patrol.

Marisa laid back against the bed headboard and tried to digest everything she'd read. Then she cleared her mind and tried to remember more details of her parents' discussion about Wise, but nothing more came to mind. It was now well after 2am and her eyes felt like sandpaper. She decided to set the files aside for tonight and try to get some sleep. She surprised herself by falling asleep almost immediately and sleeping soundly until after

9 the next morning. She felt safe here and figured that was part of the reason she slept so well.

For the rest of the weekend Marisa split her time between the files she brought and the warm company of the Barrys. It did snow overnight Friday and there were about five inches on the ground, so they all decided to stay inside with a fire roaring in the fire place and the comfortable compatibility of people who are as close as any could be without being blood relatives.

But even though Marisa was sleeping better and the dark circles under her eyes were less noticeable, both John and Sally were worried. They could tell something was bothering her, and they didn't think it was just the stalker sending her roses. John tried a couple of times to draw her out. He even warned her only partly in jest if she was keeping dangerous information to herself, he'd paddle her bottom, just like he'd done on occasion when she and Chris would get into mischief together. She had laughed at that, but in truth she wanted so badly to confide in him. However she still wasn't ready to talk about what she was beginning to believe strongly. She wasn't sure why she still felt the need to keep everything to herself, but she just knew she did. That would be a near fatal mistake.

Michael had called each night as promised and he was puzzled by his conversations with Marisa. On one hand she sounded relaxed and said she'd been sleeping well, but she also seemed quiet, listening to his humorous descriptions of retreat activities, but not adding much to the conversation. He was glad he'd be back Sunday night, and they had agreed to meet for breakfast Monday after the task force conference call.

They'd also heard from Chris every night. John had told him that Marisa was spending a lot of time going through paperwork and he felt she was holding something back, but she was looking better and seemed at least to feel safe. Chris was flying back early Monday morning and they agreed that

Sally would come get him at the airport and John would take Marisa home.

Monday morning dawned bright and cold for December. The snow glistened in the sunshine. It was a quiet ride back to Marisa's Mount Washington home. When they parked in the driveway, John put his hand on Marisa's arm to stop her from getting out right away. "Marisa, I've known you since you were just a babe at your mamma's breast. You've been fretting over something important all weekend. I also know how strong you are, so I don't believe you're letting this stalker creep get to you. That means it's something else, and I gotta believe it has to do with those files you've had your nose in all weekend. All my cop instincts tell me you're onto something dangerous. Is it a story you're working on? Is it something to do with the police, is that why you won't talk about it? Please Missy, talk to me before you get so far in over your head none of us can help you."

Marisa's eyes teared up as they'd been doing a lot lately. She was so touched by John's plea—she could almost close her eyes and imagine it was her father sitting there. "John, please don't worry. I promise I'll tell you all everything I'm working on very soon. But this is not something I can just throw out there. I need to be sure I'm right before I lay it on the line. Just trust me, and be patient a little longer. Now how about walking me to the door, and checking out the house for me."

John smiled at her attempted distraction, but did exactly as she had asked, since he'd planned to do it anyway. After a thorough walk through of all the rooms, he headed off to work. Marisa dropped her things in the bedroom, turned on NPR, and listened to 'Morning Edition' while she took out all her files and spread them out on the dining room table. She was so absorbed in her work, she never heard him come up behind her until she felt the cold steel muzzle on the back of her neck and heard the safety click off.

"Well, well, quite the little detective aren't you?" The voice was as cold as the steel touching her neck. She didn't dare turn to see his face, but she knew who it was. "I'm flattered you've gone to as much trouble to get to know me, as I have to know you."

"Mr. Wise..."

"Oh I think we know each other well enough for first names, don't you Marisa? By the way, where is the latest rose I sent you. It should be in full bloom by now."

He had just confirmed the fear she'd always had in the back of her mind, that she was somehow linked to the serial killings--the fear that this weekend had started to move to the forefront. Now she knew, it had started with her mother and would end with her. Her fear was a palpable thing--she could taste it, hear and see it--and it was blocking all other thought.

Finally she managed to find her voice, but it was so small, she gave no credibility to her words. "There's no way you'll get away with this. There's a multi-jurisdictional task force out looking for you. You've got nowhere to run."

He just laughed. "Nice try, but if that were true, someone would have arrested me while I was on duty Saturday. It's just you and I. Relax my American beauty, I'm here to take you away from this evil place. I will cleanse you of the contamination of this house and your father and the rest of those Pittsburgh police vermin." She ventured a turn at that point and looked into his eyes. What she saw there she feared more than anything--pure madness glittered in the many shades of gold and green that made up his unusual eye color.

"It's time to go to my special place. Gather up all this nonsense and bring it along--there will be no clues left behind. That's my trademark you know--no clues left behind." he sneered at her and then drew power from the fear he saw in her eyes.

She realized if they left the house, there was very little chance she'd live through this—she had to stall him. So she started to slowly gather her files and as she stuffed them in her briefcase she felt her micro-recorder that she used out in the field. She turned it on and dropped it behind one of the table legs, and prayed he didn't find it. Then she started asking questions.

"Please tell me, why my mother? She never hurt a soul."

"Ahh, now she was truly a beauty—inside and out. Much too good for the evil that was your father! We were destined to be together, but he got in the way—so I rescued her, just as I'll rescue you. You know you look so much like her—it's almost like having a second chance with her. You should be relieved, you'll be pure again." He was truly insane. Then his voice turned from a tone of almost reverence to that cold monotone that cut right through her. "Let's go, we've wasted enough time."

"Where are we going? Please tell me where you're taking me." she begged.

"To the purifying altar." He grabbed her arm, the briefcase and the laptop, and pointed the gun into her ribcage and out they went to his car parked up the street. As they were leaving the phone rang—it was the morning conference call. It was a ring of hope—at least they'd know something was wrong right away.



## Chapter Fourteen

Michael got into the office at 8am. He wanted to get caught up on everything that happened over the weekend before the conference call. He checked the weekend crime reports and then logged in to his internal e-mail. That's when he saw the automatic notice from records that a personnel file had been accessed. He also had a message about a task force billing for copies of two files. Since nobody else was around Friday night, it had to be Marisa. He had a momentary flash of anger. *If she abused her task force privileges for a story, she's in big trouble!* he thought. He called down to records and gave them the file numbers and said he wanted those files delivered to his office ASAP.

The files arrived about an hour later, just before the task force call. He glanced at them—the personnel file was for a rookie officer who hadn't been with the force even a year, and the other file... he stopped cold. It was the file on her mother's murder. *What in the hell is she doing to herself?* he thought. He had just enough time to look back at the personnel file and notice the officer was with the department the year Marion Shaw was killed. Marisa had a lot of explaining to do. Then the phone rang and he was linked to the call.

They were chatting about the weekend and the snow when he was clicked in. Finally after about five minutes Chris came on and his voice sounded concerned. "Michael have you talked to Marisa this morning?"

"No, we chatted last night, why? What's wrong?"

"I can't reach her. There's no answer at home or on her cell. I just talked to my Dad and he said he dropped her off at home around 8:30—so she should be there. Michael I think you'd better head over there given what happened Friday. We'll continue the call until we hear from you."

"I'm on my way—if she does check in, ask her about two files she copied using her task force ID."

"Michael wait—what files?" Marlane asked with a sense of dread.

"One's a personnel file and the other is... Damn, it's her mother's murder case file."

"What?" Chris yelled.

"Michael was the personnel file someone who left the force to work for the state police?" Marlane asked.

"Marlane what's this all about?" Chris cut in.

"Yeah he did. The name is Richard Wise and he left the force right after Marion Shaw was killed to go to the state patrol. Dammit, what were you two working on?" Michael demanded.

Marlane took a deep breath and ignored Chris and Michael's fury to ask two more questions. "Michael when did Mrs. Shaw die, and does Marisa look like her?"

Chris jumped in, "She was killed in 1987 and yes, Marisa is the spitting image of Marion—now I want answers and I want them right now!"

Marlane maintained her cool, and explained the connection they'd found, and the files she'd left with Marisa. "Marisa must have found out all the tickets were issued by the same trooper—this Richard Wise. Then somehow she connected him back to her parents and is now speculating that her mother was in fact the first victim. Think about it—1987—15 years ago—3 years before our first victim. All the other victims look a little like Marisa. She was even worried that maybe the creep sending her roses was our guy because she noticed the resemblance. I'd say at this point everything is connected. Michael get to her place fast. If she's been accessing personnel files, word may have gotten back to this guy."

"Jesus no... I'm gone. I'll be in touch."

"Marlane and I will meet you at her place. Hank, you're closest to state police headquarters. Get over there and find out everything you can

about this Richard Wise. I'll have a couple of folks here go through property records and find out anything this guy owns. The rest of you sit tight. Depending on where this guy might be, we may need any of you. Marlane, I'm on my way to pick you up—bring anything you have on this clue." Chris ended the call, set his computer analysts to work, and then headed over to Pitt to get Marlane. If he wasn't so worried about Marisa, he'd strangle them both.

Marlane knew she was in for all kinds of hell from Chris, but all she could think about was Marisa. God if anything happens to her I'll never forgive myself! Why didn't we just trust these guys and tell them everything up front. She was out in front of her building when Chris drove up with a few scant files. Marisa had the rest. She got in the car but he didn't even look at her. She could tell by the set of his jaw he was furious.

"Chris, I'm so sorry. I don't know..."

Chris cut her off. "I don't want to hear it right now." he snapped. Then he finally looked over at her, but her distraught look and tears didn't move him in the least. She physically flinched at the anger she saw mingled with the hurt of lost trust. "When this is all over, you and I are going to have a very long talk young lady, and I can promise you the palm of my hand will be doing most of the talking directly to your backside." he growled. Her tears slid down her cheeks. She couldn't bear to look at him so she turned to look out the window. She feared not only had she put Marisa in danger, but also she'd done irreparable damage to her relationship with Chris.

They arrived at Marisa's house about 20 minutes later. Michael came out to greet them. "All her files are gone, but she was smart enough to turn on her mini-recorder and then leave it for us. He's got her and you were right Marlane, everything's connected and it starts with her mother's murder. The guy's a total nutcase. There's no doubt about it on the

tape. The recorder has an internal clock that encodes the time on the tape. They left just before the conference call, so he's got an hour head start on us. And we have no idea where he's headed. Goddammit, I can't believe you two kept this from us!"

Marlane shrank back at the ferocity of Michael's attack. "We'll deal with that later, right now we've got to find them. Let me call in to my data analysts and find out where he lives and what he drives. We can get an APB out right away. There's no clue at all on the tape of where they're heading?" Chris asked.

"Marisa asks him, but all he says is he's taking her to the altar of purity, whatever the hell that is!"

Chris called in and got everything they'd found so far on Wise. He gave the vehicle information to Michael who called in the APB. Chris then checked in with Hank since his listed residence was a condo in Butler County. Hank had also looked it up in his file and was about to head there with some troopers and a couple of other deputies. Then Chris made sure the APB got to the other members of the task force and brought them up to date.

Marlane had been listening to the tape while they were making their calls. She pulled herself together and was trying to mentally sketch a profile of the guy. "Chris your dad was close with Marisa's dad, right?" she asked.

"Yeah, your point?"

"I'm wondering what set this guy off—why Marisa's Mom? And looking at the case file, she was killed in her home. Not killed and dumped outside. I think the first killing was personal, and the subsequent ones were a way to relive the first. Call your dad, let's see if he knows about this Wise and let's find out if he was ever a suspect in Mrs. Shaw's murder."

"How does that help us find Marisa now?" Michael barked.

Marlane was calm now and in her criminologist mode. "The more I know about Wise and his motives, the better I can profile him. Once I know who he is, I might be able to figure out where he kills his victims. From what he says on the tape, the killings have taken on some sort of ritual. He talks about the 'altar of purity'. It almost sounds religious."

They all decided to head back to the precinct house where they had access to better communications and could monitor anything that came into dispatch. On the way Chris called his dad and found out that in fact Big By had transferred Wise out of the downtown precinct because he was bothering Marion with a puppy dog crush. John said once Byron talked to Wise and transferred him there were no more problems. Wise apparently had been questioned after the murder, but his partner gave him an airtight alibi. Chris asked his dad to see if he could track down the partner, and try to shake the alibi.

When they got downtown, Hank called in and said there was nothing linking him to any of the murders in their first look through the condo, but they did find a deed for a 500 acres of farm land in Washington County, left to Wise by his mother and stepfather. They had missed it in the first property search because the last names were different, and Wise had apparently never had the title changed.

"That's gotta be it. Rural, isolated and tied to family. That's where he takes his victims, I'm sure of it." Marlane said.

"Smart move, not changing the title. That way the property wouldn't be tied to him immediately. Alright, I'll call Bob in Washington County and have him get out there right away. We'll head out from here." Chris said. He and Michael started out with Marlane following along.

"No way. You're staying right here. This guy is too dangerous." Chris said firmly.

"Look, you may need me. I've got the best chance of getting into this guy's head if we have to talk him out. I'm a trained profiler and negotiator, and there's 'no way' you're leaving me behind." Marlane responded just as firmly.

"Chris, as much as I hate to admit it, she's right. We don't have time to bring another negotiator up to speed, and he might respond to a woman if it comes to that." Michael said. He knew Chris was torn. One woman he cared about was already in danger and he knew Chris would have a hard time putting a second one in the line of fire.

"Alright, you can come. But you will do exactly what we tell you, or I swear, I'll..."

She stopped him before he threatened to spank her in front of Michael, "I get it. I promise I'll stay out of the way and will do only what you tell me."

About half way there they heard from Bob who had just arrived on the scene. "We're about 200 yards back from the house and barn because it's so open out here. Any closer and we'd be spotted. We can see Wise's car. We don't see any activity in the house though. Our telephoto lens isn't showing any movement in any of the rooms we can see. The state police tactical team wants to send two guys in to get a closer look at the house and barn. What do you think?"

Chris looked at Marlane. "What do you think this guy's gonna do if he sees cops?"

"I think he'll freak and kill her. He prides himself in the fact that he's left no clues anywhere. I believe he still thinks we don't know who he is yet. As soon as we burst that bubble, Marisa's dead." she said grimly.

Chris and Michael both flinched at the bluntness of her words. But this was not the time for sugar coating. Still no one had said the words out loud yet—that Marisa could die, and it was hard to hear.

"Listen Bob, here's what I suggest. Let's go in, in plain sight. Have one of your people pretend to be an agricultural inspector and just knock on the

door. If no one answers, try the barn. See what happens. We'll be there in about 20 minutes."

Marlane then asked if there were any other structures on the property.

"Not that we can see. The only other thing is what looks like a family crypt near a little cemetery up on the hill behind the house."

"'Altar of purity'. Crypts often have small altars. That could be it—he might take her up there for his purifying ceremony." she said excitedly.

Chris asked Bob if there was any cover near the crypt, and he said there wasn't, but from what they could see there were no windows in the building. "Hey, now that I take a closer look it does appear that the door's ajar."

"Try the house and barn first as I suggested, and if there's no one in either place, hold tight until we get there." Chris told him.

Inside the crypt Marisa was just coming around. She felt a throbbing pain in her head. She was lying on a stone slab of some kind and her arms were tied up over her head to a stake. Her feet were similarly tied. Her vision was still fuzzy, but she could see candles lit all around her and the air smelled damp and stale.

She had no idea where she was, but slowly things were coming back to her. Wise had been in her house, hiding in the basement, when she got home this morning. John had only given the basement a cursory glance, so he missed him. Wise had forced her into his car and made her drive out to a farm. She remembered her feelings of hopelessness the further away from Pittsburgh they drove. The farm was abandoned out in the middle of nowhere. The last thing she remembered was Wise taking the keys and then ordering her out of the car. Then she felt a sharp pain on the back of her head, and everything went black.

Her vision was starting to clear, but what she saw horrified her. All around the small room were pictures of the murdered women. Each picture was

surrounded by candles and had a rose underneath it. As she slowly turned her head, fighting the dizziness and nausea the movement caused, she saw the last picture was hers.

"Aaahh, I see you're awake. Do you like my family crypt?" He was holding a long wicked looking hunting knife as he came around into her field of vision.

"Please, please let me go. You're right I haven't told anyone about you. I won't—you can get away." she pleaded, more afraid than she had ever been in her life.

"No my dear. You now belong to me. I must purify you and then complete the circle." He held up a red rose and placed in her hands. "Such a thing of pure beauty, red deep as the blood that will flow to purify your soul. Each one has been purified differently—but with you I will use the same implement I used on your mother. Yes, the circle will be complete. Do not be afraid my beauty—you will be free after the purification."

He raised the knife over her heart and began murmuring unintelligible words. She screamed as loud as she could. And then there was a loud bang and a bright flash, followed by pure chaos. She was momentarily blinded by the flash and couldn't hear anything after the bang. As her vision returned she saw SWAT team members everywhere, and they had Wise down on the ground, incapacitated. She felt someone cutting the ropes that held her hands, and then she saw Michael standing over her, checking her for injuries. Chris was cutting the ropes at her feet and massaging the circulation back into her legs.

Michael was rubbing her arms. She tried to lower her arms but stopped when she felt sharp pain.

"Easy Marisa, you were tied up for at least an hour. Let me get the circulation going before you try to move. Tell me where else you hurt, honey." Michael spoke with such tenderness Marisa's tears



flowed again. She was so sure she'd never see him again.

"Don't cry sweetie, it's all over—you're going to be just fine." Chris soothed.

"OK, let's try to sit you up—easy does it." Michael supported her head and Chris held her shoulders. As soon as Marisa started to rise dizziness overcame her and she almost passed out.

"My head... he hit me in the back of the head with something. I was unconscious... I'm still dizzy." Her voice was so weak. Chris and Michael exchanged worried looks. Michael lightly touched the back of her head until he found a huge lump. Her sharp intake of breath told him how sore it was.

"That's quite a knot you got there Missy. Are you nauseous as well as dizzy?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds like a concussion. We need to get you to a hospital."

Bob and Marlane came into the crypt. Bob said, "An ambulance should be here any minute, and we're just 10 minutes from Washington Memorial. We'll get you fixed up in no time Marisa." He winked at her.

"What say, we get you out of here." Marlane said. She looked up at Michael and Chris and then glanced around—her look sending the message the sooner Marisa was out of this chamber of horrors, the better. Michael gently lifted Marisa and carried her out of the crypt. She took a last look at the room and saw her picture next to her mother's. She trembled and felt colder than she ever had before.

As they came up out of the crypt she saw Wise being loaded into the paddy wagon. Their eyes met—hers filled with hate, his filled with madness—he blew her a kiss before he was stuffed inside. She turned away and her eyes met Chris'—there she found love and strength. Then she looked up at Michael and saw her future.

## Four Weeks Later--Christmas Eve

Michael was pacing his condo. *Where is she? Chris and Marlane will be here in 45 minutes. How am I going to get through this if I'm rushed?* At that moment his intercom buzzed. It was Marisa. He let her up and greeted her at the door.

"You're late!"

She laughed, "Merry Christmas to you too Scrooge!" She planted a big kiss on his cheek and then headed for the kitchen. "I got all the fixings for the best home made eggnog you have ever tasted." He followed her into the kitchen and just watched her for a minute. It had taken time and hours of talking and listening, but she was back. Her sparkle had returned and the haunted, fearful look was gone. She still had nightmares, but they were fewer and fewer. Her series on the task force was a major success and was being nominated for several awards. It also won her a spot on the I-Team which she was excited about. Now if he could just finish off the year with one last memorable moment.

"Marisa, leave that for now and come out here. I want to talk to you." Marisa was about to protest that Chris and Marlane would be here soon, but something in Michael's voice stopped her. He sounded so tentative, almost nervous.

"What is it Michael? You look so serious, honey—where's your Christmas spirit?" she teased. He pulled her under the mistletoe in the living room and kissed her deeply and passionately. "Wow, now that's Christmas spirit!" she said breathlessly.

Michael tipped her chin up so their eyes met. She was captured by the depth of feeling his eyes expressed. "Marisa, do you know how much I love you?" he asked quietly.

"I think so." she whispered. "I know how loved I feel with you and I know I couldn't have gotten

through the last few weeks without your love and support."

"I was only giving back what you had given to me. My heart and mind had been so closed since the death of my fiancé. You opened me to love again. When you were missing, all I could think was that God couldn't possibly steal love from me again—not this love that had grown so strong and so deep. I don't ever want to lose you." He paused to wipe the tears from her cheeks. Then he reached into his pocket and brought out the small velvet box and handed it to her. Her hands trembled as she opened the delicate box.

"Marisa Lynne Shaw will you share my love for a lifetime?" He took the beautiful antique ring out of the box she held and placed it on her finger.

"Michael it's beautiful. I love you with all my heart and yes, I'll share that love for a lifetime." He swept her into his arms and spun her around as a weight lifted off his shoulders. He hadn't realized how nervous he was until the relief washed over him when she said yes. Their celebration was interrupted by the buzz of the front door intercom. Michael let Chris and Marlane up.

Chris came into the condo with a big grin. "Well, did she say yes old boy?"

"Do you think I'd accept anything less? And just how did you find out I was proposing tonight?" Michael asked as they shook hands.

"Well, you did ask my dad for her hand—word got around! Now let me kiss the bride-to-be." He embraced Marisa and held her close. "You got a good one Missy, hold on tight." he whispered.

"Hey that's enough 'brotherly' love, my friend!" Michael joked. Marisa stood between them with an arm around each.

"Michael, did you really ask John for my hand? That's so sweet and old fashioned. I'm sure he was touched and I know my Dad's looking down with approval." Marisa looked to the heavens and just

knew her parents had guided her to Michael and were looking down pleased with themselves.

They talked and laughed, ate and drank, and shared love and friendship. As the anticipation of Christmas Eve passed into the magic of Christmas Day with clock's stroke of midnight, they were curled up in front the fire, drinking brandy and listening to the quiet. Finally Michael and Chris looked up at each other and nodded. It was time for the special gifts. Michael reached over to the tree and pulled out two beautifully wrapped boxes.

"Ladies we have a special gift for you to open." Chris said with a glint in his eye.

"We chose these after your work on the task force—especially your *independent* work." Michael added.

Marisa and Marlane looked at each other. "I'm not sure I like the sound of that!" Marisa said warily. Marlane looked equally uncertain as they opened the boxes to reveal wooden paddles with their names carved inside hearts. They both chuckled nervously as they looked to the men they loved for some sign that these were a joke gifts.

Any hope they had was quickly dashed as Chris and Michael upended their ladies over their laps and put the paddles to work. And in no time at all the quiet of an early Christmas morning was broken by the soft cracks of two paddles across skirted bottoms and the squeals of two young ladies whose cheeks quickly turned as rosy as Santa's. But as their bottoms heated up, so did their hearts knowing they were loved by two men who cared enough to keep them safe.

