

# Fragile

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Red Rose™ Publishing

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*By*

*Shara Azod*

*&*

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## *Dedication:*

*Shara And RaeLynn would like to dedicate this book to all the faithful Red Rose readers out there who helped make Red Rose a stunning success. Without you none of this would have been possible.*



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### Prologue

Kale Casterlow had seen enough crime scenes to know from the smell of blood, bile, and devastation just how swiftly the case would fold. Judging from the looks of this one, the case would probably never be solved. He rubbed the tensed knots of stress huddled at the base of his neck and sighed. Cobalt and scarlet lights washed over this corner where Church and Cone Avenues met. Bright, cheery crime scene tape issued caution and sectioned off about a half a mile each way. Already CSI scoured the scene, plastic bags and fingerprint powder in plenty.

Still, Kale knew they wouldn't find much anything relevant. The high traffic area would yield scores of fingerprints, trash, cigarette butts and the like. It was unlikely that any of it would amount to a solid lead.

Right now, the case boiled down to one of three options. Who knew life was one big multiple choice test? The question had been posed. Who tried to kill Cayla Porter? This could be A) a mugging gone wrong, B) a possible rape, or C) an attempted murder solely to end her life, make that murder one, if the victim didn't survive her gunshot wounds.

His weary gray eyes swept over the spot where Cayla had been shot twice at close range by her assailant. Splats of crimson mixed with sticky soda residue and

other liquids Kale didn't want to identify. Some of those things came from Cayla. Debris and what not might produce something valuable, but Kale didn't carry much hope of that happening. The entire space rang of death, and even though the victim fought for her life over at Moses Cone Hospital, he couldn't stomach the smell for much longer. Not that the odors in a hospital constituted anything remotely more pleasant. They were simply death and antiseptic.

*Is that all we are in the end? A sack of organs, blood, and a few bones? Nothing comes from violence, except pain and suffering, the two bastard offspring of violence.*

Although he hated the smell, he remained rooted, unable to lift his feet to move away. He felt connected to the victim in a way that disturbed him more than the violent act itself.

"Detective Casterlow," yelled one of the CSI team. "We got something."

Kale's eyebrows rose and a smirk ratcheted up his left cheek. *Okay. So I'm allowed to be wrong. They did manage to find something.* He adjusted his mind set to focus. *Still early in this case, so don't choose a certain motive or scenario over another one. This could be about anything or nothing.*

He stepped carefully around the site of the gunshot and headed to the Marvin, waving his latex-gloved hand furiously. Smiling like he'd won the lotto, Marvin bounced up and down while pointing at the find.

“Marvin, I know you’re new, but this can’t be your first time out in the field,” Kale said once he reached the Afro-sporting man.

Marvin grinned at him. “I didn’t want to say, but hell yes. This is my first time out.”

“I couldn’t tell.”

“I’m a consummate professional,” Marvin replied, missing, or choosing to ignore, Kale’s sarcasm.

“Sure. So, what you got?” Kale asked, shaking his head at the newbie’s inability to spot his teasing. His high school English teacher told him once that his humor was so dry, it could produce cactus.

“Ta-da! I have discovered two really nice shoe impressions,” Marvin said. He beamed, chest thrown out, hands on his hips, and a big grin. “The cast will set in about another two minutes. This is perfect. I also scanned them in and photographed them.”

Kale’s budding hope crashed into his feet, bypassing his stomach all together.

“Listen, Marvin,” Kale said lightly, putting his hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “I’m not a CSI. But this is the corner of Cone and Church. There’s a bus stop right here. Thousands of people come through here all the time, leaving double that number in shoe impressions, fingerprints, trash...”



Marvin's sunny smile wilted a bit at the corners before dropping off entirely.

"Oh, yes," Marvin said, not meeting Kale's eyes. He took deep breaths.

"If you can tell me how these connect to my victim, that may help us narrow it down, and give us an idea about who decided to hurt her tonight. So keep at it. This is a solid start."

Kale gave Marvin a slap on the back and headed back to the section of concrete where a beautiful black woman had been shot twice at close range. For some reason, he couldn't shake the details out of his head. Every new case he started with a similar stubbornness about details, it was what made him excellent at his job, but this one was different.

Not only could Kale not get the details from running in a loop through his head, he couldn't stop thinking about the victim, Cayla Porter. If she died, the world would lose some of its brightness. About this he was most certain. Beyond her ashen face, the trembling lips, and agony carved into her face, Cayla's beauty shined. He could see her through the injured victim in the clutches of severe pain and torment of being assaulted and then shot, to a stunningly attractive woman.

*Is that why he chose you? He hated beauty that much he had to destroy it? Cayla, don't let him destroy you. Fight. Damn it, fight.*

What was worse? He couldn't stop seeing her sprawled and broken on the ground like a discarded, horribly treated doll. Those large, round bedroom eyes

pleading with him, then closing in pain, the blood still seeping from her wounds and saturating her clothes and the sidewalk. With each breath she took, the flicker of life diminished. Her hands reaching out for the paramedics, her gasping and wheezy breathing as if the holes punched through her were whistling. God, he had to put this to bed or he'd never sleep again. He'd done this job for over ten years, but this one, *Cayla*, had hooked him in a place no one, certainly no *case*, had ever done.

Right in his heart. And it had only been four hours and a handful of minutes.

Could be he was lonely. The job ate relationships and spit them out in to tiny pieces. So, Kale had stopped dating about five years ago. He couldn't find any woman with enough empathy and heart to understand why he had to work a murder/suicide on Christmas Day.

It didn't make a lick of damn sense. He didn't know her. Didn't know anything about her except what had been printed on her driver's license, which she had smartly placed in her jeans' pocket and not the purse the mugger stole. She hadn't fought him. No signs of a struggle, no broken nails, or anything that indicated she fought him. No. He asked for the purse. She gave it. He shot her twice anyway.

Why?

Why did he have feelings for this woman? *Feelings! Whoa. I don't have feelings, but I feel connected to her in some strange way.*

Why had the mugger shot her twice?

He stuffed his hands into his khaki pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels. His mind supplied the image of Cayla sprawled against the pavement again, her reaching out for him, eyes pleading...

*Enough! I've got to focus on solving this damn thing before someone commits me to an asylum. Shit, before I ask for a corner room.*

So fragile, so lithe and so small, Cayla had been an easy target for someone. Something about her made Kale automatically want to protect her, but she'd already been harmed. He wanted to save her life, but he lacked the proper training. All he could do was make way for the stretcher, and hold his breath that they managed to keep her pieced together until the experts at the hospital could work their magic.

"Fuck," he said to the chilly fall air, disgusted by the semi-hard erection in his pants. "When are we going to get the warrants to go into the grocery store and grab the surveillance tapes?"

"Soon," came a response from the lawyer attached his unit. Kale couldn't remember his name, Tom, Tim, Tiny, something like that. "We're waking up Judge O'Brian."

“Yeah, he’ll sign a warrant for an assaulted black woman since he’s a racist,” Kale said to the lawyer. “Why not try Williams or Smith?”

The short, boxy little lawyer tutted at Kale, his thin lips turned downward in a scowl.

“Judge O’Brian is the nicest judge in town...”

Kale tuned him out. Sure, sure. There's a skeleton in everyone's closet, but O’Brian had to take out a second mortgage to house all of his.

Into the thick blanket of night, a shrill ringtone of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony cracked the tense, hushed crime scene. The fat shrimp of a lawyer had his shiny Razr attached to his ear and if it was possible, Kale believed the man paled—which in and of itself was a feat.

*This isn’t going well.*

“Who was that?” Kale asked, calling down to the shorter male. “Nah, don’t tell me. Let me guess. O’Brian told you to go hump a whale. Right?”

“Must you be so crude?” the lawyer squeaked, face a puce color. “You’re uncouth and a discredit to the detectives you work with you. No wonder Captain Anderson didn’t assign you a partner. Who would want to work with you?”

“Am I right?” Kale mocked, grinning at the lawyer’s discomfort. “I already know I am. Just say so.”

“Yes,” the lawyer conceded, his voice brittle. “Yes, the judge has declined the warrant.”

“Thought so. I work alone because I don’t need a partner. I’m that good.”

Kale swallowed the laugh budding on his tongue. Too annoyed to truly release any humor, even cruel humor, he’d been up since four a.m. it was now close to midnight, at the edge of another day. Killing someone was like a stone thrown in the lake and those ripples reached out and produce a ton of victims and suspects. He’d spent the last four hours waiting for the warrant and now that he wasn’t getting one, he pushed forward. The first forty-eight to seventy-two hours of a crime were the most fruitful for violent crime cases. And he’d already lost four to stupidity. Adrenaline tingled on his nerves, making him edgy and impatient.

Time to catch up.

“Where are you going, Detective Casterlow?” the shrimp with a briefcase asked rather hotly. “We are not done here.”

“I am,” he remarked and ducked under the caution tape. His inky black hair tapered to his shoulders. He really needed to get it cut and a shave too, but time hadn’t allowed for much personal maintenance recently. “I’m going to talk to the victim, if you must know. By the way, Tim, I’ll be late for dinner.”

The lawyer puffed up, hands balled into fists. “The name is Terry for the ninetieth time! And I don’t care about dinner. I’m not your wife.”

Kale smiled.

“No? I couldn’t tell for a minute there, as you were questioning my whereabouts like we’d had a hot, sizzling booty call. Take my advice, Tom, go get laid and drink a beer. You might find your lost manhood that way.”

With that, Kale opened the doors to his unmarked cruiser and slammed them at once, shearing off the lawyer’s blathering on about ethics and code of conduct and warrants.

“Yeah, like he knows what any of that shit means,” Kale said to his reflection in the rearview mirror. His gray eyes were tired, and cherry red lines from fatigue and lack of sleep crisscrossed the whites. This case wouldn’t be easy, even if the surveillance at the store had been granted.

Backing up slowly, he pointed the car in the direction of the hospital. He drove there at a decent speed because part of him didn’t want to go. Talking to family members of victims had been his least favorite part of the job. For every person who was killed, attacked, or maimed, there were a slew of victims on the fringe, those who suffered the aftershock of the initial act. With great reluctance, Kale spoke to them, usually in a short, quick manner. They somehow expected him to explain the crumbling difference between wrong and right.

“Hell, I don’t know. I’m just a cop,” he said to the empty streets stretching out as he drove. “One who talks to himself.”

## Chapter One

*One week later...*

“Oh, hi Detective.” Cayla shifted slowly in the hospital bed, her throat drier than Mojave Desert.

The handsome detective had been slumped in that same chair in the same position so many times when she opened her eyes, she was beginning to think he had moved into the small private room she had been given. That had to be a mistake. She definitely did not carry the kind of insurance that would pay for a private room. In fact, she didn’t have the kind of insurance that would pay for the specialist who had repaired her lung.

“Are you in pain? Do you need something?” The detective was by her side in an instant.

It had been this way ever since she had first woken up after surgery three days ago. He had asked her a few questions regarding “the assault” as the other officers who had come in and out of her room had called it. She was afraid she was very little help. All she could remember was coming out of the bodega and some hooded figure snatching her purse, and then...

Cayla couldn't hold back a shiver as she recalled the feeling of being stabbed with pure lightening. Pain unlike any she had ever felt before pierced her flesh and raced through her body like quicksilver. She couldn't breathe, couldn't scream. The pavement seemed to rush toward her and she couldn't even put out her arms to cushion her fall.

"Hey, Look at me."

Cayla's head turned toward the gentle growl as if she were a marionette, her eyes wide and frantic. Panic attack. They had been her constant companion since she had first opened her eyes in the recovery room. The stark whiteness everywhere terrified her. She believed she had died. The first attack happened then. Choking on the tube that was embedded in her throat, her hands frantically sought purchase on anything, yanking tubes out of her arms, trying in petrified dread to dislodge the foreign object out of her body.

It had been a deep, calm gravelly voice that had pulled her from the edge then just as it was now.

"Breathe for me, sweetheart," he instructed with infinite patience. "That's it. You are doing real good, honey. Just keep breathing."

His large, rough hands made firm circles against her chilled skin where the hospital gown didn't quite close. For some reason, this man calmed her in a way nothing else did. The attacks were so much worse when he wasn't around, which



wasn't often. He always seemed to be somewhere near, lurking about. She didn't know what she was going to do when she got out of the hospital and had to go it alone. The thought of going back to her apartment sent icy shards of terror through her.

"You want to tell me what brought this on?" he asked gently, gingerly sitting on the side of the hard, narrow bed.

"I was just thinking about...about the attack. And about what I would do when I went home."

Cayla hated how lost she sounded, how fragile. She felt like she was made out of porcelain and some unknown hand was pushing her ever closer to the edge. She jumped at every little noise. She could not stand to be touched—except when he touched her. Maybe because he had been there, she remembered his voice as she struggled to hold on to consciousness, and as the polite, but pressured paramedics lifted her off the cold, hard ground. He had held her hand as she lay there, promising she would pull through this, that everything would be all right. Nothing would ever be all right again.

Salty tears leaked silently from her eyes as she closed her lids against the pain, both physical and emotional. What was she going to do?

"Hey now, what's with the waterworks?" he inquired, the faint trace of concern punctuating each word.

Cayla had to smile, despite her tears, at the gentle giant by her side. He had shifted her subtly so that her cheek lay against his solid chest, the hand on her back never stopping in its motions. She knew this security she felt whenever he was here was a false one, but she could not stop herself from basking in the warmth he provided. He was her lifeboat in the middle of a raging storm. Did he even realize what he was doing? How he made her feel? How was she going to make it after this? Who would she turn to?

“Why are you doing this?” She could not stop the words from spilling from her lips. She truly hadn’t meant to say anything at all. His hand stilled, yet he did not remove it.

“I don’t know.” It was a soft declaration more to himself than to her.

Cayla looked up into the stormy gray eyes that seemed to hold her captive. He looked pensive, yet there was something more. Something she could not begin to define. He peered down at her and smiled. A sad self-mocking gesture really. He looked so tired; grim frown lines framed his luscious lips. Were men supposed to have such tempting mouths, all full and kissable? It was a mouth that inspired wicked thoughts despite her tremendous physical discomfort. His unkempt dark locks fell forward into his eyes. His jaw line gave testimony that it had been a while since his face had seen a razor.

He worked too hard and saw too much. Who took care of Kale Casterlow? Her hands reached up and pushed his hair off his forehead before she thought about what she was doing. His eyes closed as if she was stroking him in some sensual, intimate way. When his eyes opened and locked onto hers once more, she gasped at what she found blaring out from them. Passion. Pure, unadulterated, raw desire. Why would such a ruggedly beautiful man desire *her*?

“I will find who did this to you, Cayla. I swear, no one will ever hurt you again.”

She quivered at the dark possession in his avowal.

“I know you will,” she whispered, her voice temporarily stolen by surprise.

What an odd relationship they were developing. She did not know this man, yet she trusted him in a way she had never trusted anyone. She believed him. She believed *in* him.

“I am going home tomorrow,” she informed him softly.

“What the hell?! Says who?!”

Even though he was obviously agitated, he was very careful as he extracted himself from her. Cayla instantly missed the warmth of his big body. She bit her lip as she watched him prowl the room. Normal people paced, but not Detective Casterlow. He moved like a giant panther, smooth and deadly. She would hate to be a criminal with him on her tail. The man screamed lethal intensity. Yet, with

her, he was all sweetness and light. Well, maybe not, but he was definitely gentle and caring. He was a complete dichotomy.

“My insurance is running out, especially now...” She went back to biting her lip. She didn’t want to tell him she had lost her job due to one too many absences. Not that she could have done a thing to help it. Still, waitresses came a dime a dozen. And without her job, she would soon lose her tiny, crappy apartment. With no savings, she had no idea what she was going to do. She had no family and few friends, all of them not any better off then she was. She might be able to get a week or two out of them, but after that, she was on her own.

“You lost your job, didn’t you?”

Of course he had read her. He was a cop, his job was reading people. Unable to do more than nod, she refused to return his direct gaze. She had a high school diploma and no chance at affording a technical school, much less a college or university, even with financial aid. She had to eat and live somewhere. Thank the fates she kept her money in her pocket instead of her purse, otherwise she would have nothing at all.

Closing her eyes against the hopelessness she felt, she tried to gather what was left of her tattered self esteem. She would overcome this surely. She had been through worse right? A ward of the court from the tender age of six, she had fought to keep it together all her life. This was no different.

“Shit.”

Another smile despite the gravity of her situation graced her lips at his soft expletive. The prowling resumed with a fury as he absently pushed his hand through the thick locks of his hair. How she wished it was her hand, how she wished he was her man.

*Stop being silly, Cay,” she admonished herself sternly. He is concerned about his case, nothing else.*

She watched as he seemed to be working out some complex problem in his head. She could almost see his brain laboring in overdrive. Damn, she hated feeling so helpless, so dependent. Yet, she willingly put her trust and her hope in him. She was drawn to his strength on some instinct she could not define. It was senseless really, nothing good would come of it. Sooner or later she was going to have to go back out there into the cold world. She was forever destined to be on the outside looking in at other people’s warmth and happiness.

*You’ll be fine, Cay. You always are.*

“Do you have any family, somewhere you can stay and be taken care of?”

That was so sweet, yet so laughable. No one had ever taken care of her. Not in the foster homes or group homes as a child, and definitely not as an adult. It was a sweet gesture though.

“Uh, no, but I will be all right.” She gave him a little self depreciating smile, trying to reassure him. “I will keep in touch, you know, for the case.” *You will keep in touch just to look at the yummy detective*, mockery dripped from the thought. “It was probably just some hype looking for money for a fix.”

Despite saying it, she didn’t really believe it. There was something about her attack that seemed too personal. She had an eerie feeling this was not about a purse snatching. It was nothing she could prove or explain, so she kept the secret knowledge to herself. Detective Casterlow had enough on his plate. He didn’t need her paranoid delusions.

“You’re coming home with me.”

“What? I can’t do that!”

Her heart stuttered in her chest. Oh, how she wanted to. She really, really did. But she couldn’t let him do that. He felt sorry for her. She could not accept his pity. It was just too pathetic.

“I will not have you going home alone!” Once again that piercing steel gaze trapped her body in its glare.

Damn, that was sexy. Her chest throbbed in agony and her head felt like someone had taken a sledge hammer to it, yet, her core dampened at the ardent stare. Her nipples tightened beneath her gown, and for just a second, she could have sworn eyes scanned the area, his tongue swiping his lips as he did so. No, she

had to be seeing things. Blinking, she found his eyes on hers. It had probably just been her imagination. She didn't have much by way of a chest. Silly to think it would have ever captured his notice.

"You don't have to feel responsible for me," she assured him. Her voice was weak in her own ears. How she wished he really wanted her in his home, in his bed.

Whoa! Where had that come from? Shaking her head, she tried to focus. He felt sorry for her. That was all. It was pity.

"You are coming home with me," he stalked toward her even as he spoke.

Cayla swallowed roughly as she watched him approach. She tried not to feel anything as his hand gently stroked her cheek before cupping the entire side of her face. His hand was so big, so strong. How could she not be affected?

"This is not about pity. I need to make sure you are safe and taken care of. I can't explain it. But I do know I will take care of you until you are one hundred percent. Or until..."

His words trailed off into nothing, but implication was clear. Dare she believe? Did she take a chance that maybe, he felt it too, this magnetic attraction? Cayla found she didn't care. Of it meant she would have more time with him, be near him just a little while longer, she would take that chance.

Before she could stop it, her head was nodding affirmative. This is what she wanted. This man would keep her safe. Wherever this may lead, she was willing to go.

“Okay, I will come home with you.”

“Good.”

A simple acknowledgment of his alpha directive, but damn if it wasn't sexy. What she hadn't expected was the gentle kiss, skirting her lips in the briefest of touches. Cayla had never felt more cherished. She was hooked. She only hoped and prayed Kale Casterlow would not destroy what was left of her dilapidated pride.



## Chapter Two

Kale switched the heat onto high in his beat up four-door sedan. The vehicle rattled and wheezed, but the frail beauty beside him the passenger seat seemed not to notice. Drowning in a weathered red sweatshirt and too long sweatpants, Cayla hadn't complained when the homeless shelter volunteer gave her the clothes.

There wasn't any way she could wear her old, blood stained clothing, they were evidence. Still Kale had seen a lot of victims of fires, floods, and violence sneer and turn their noses up at hand-me down clothing. Not Cayla, she genuinely thanked the volunteer, asked him to leave, and when he returned to the room, she wore the articles of clothing as if they were brand spanking new.

And it drew him ever closer to her. Admiration aside though, now out of the hospital, a survivor, Cayla revved his engine unlike any woman he'd met before. He couldn't figure out why. Add to that the ridiculous demand for her to stay at his place. The act alone would call his entire investigation into question and Kale knew that Tim the lawyer wouldn't have any trouble breaking his case down and calling into question each piece of evidence Kale managed to get from Cayla. Risking it all because of his lust scared him. He'd never before let anything interfere with the job.

“You comfortable over there?” he asked roughly, his throat closing over the lump there. He swallowed, but it remained lodged in place, mocking him. “I got you some things from your place, clothes, a brush, your toothbrush, and took them over to mine. Is that all right?”

“Yes,” she agreed in her honey sweet voice.

Even as she agreed, Kale spied her hands clutching the blanket thrown across her torso as if she meant to rip it to shreds. He reached across and took one of those tensed hands into his and rubbed the back of her palm with his thumb. Instinctively, she began to relax, her other hand released the blanket and she closed her eyes.

“I’ll go up with you,” he said, pulling out of the parking space in the hospital parking deck. “I’ll go inside first and check it out. Then I’ll call you in. It will be all right. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“I know,” she whispered and soon her head lolled to the side. Eyes closed, hand clutched his, and she relaxed into the seat, falling into slumber. The pain medication had kicked in at last.

Fuck.

Kale put his eyes on the road. *Why did I promise that? There’s no way I can guarantee no one will hurt her. Even now, Anderson’s in my ass about clearing the new cases on my desk, screaming at me to move on beyond her case, beyond her.*

He glanced at his sleeping beauty again. Even in the rough stages of recovery, this woman blew his attention and his focus into shreds. How? She reeked of innocence and goodness. In his profession he didn't see much of that from neither the criminals nor the victims. Not often and never in the quantities he'd discovered in her. It was like he had been locked in a prison cell and was finally being allowed to spend time in a garden. Everything seemed brighter, sweeter, and more luscious.

*Sweet Cayla, I will try my damnest to keep you from harm.*

The feeling surged. He'd had it that night at the crime scene. He hadn't lied to Cayla. The emotions coursing through him went far beyond pity and on to something that made him squirm in his seat. He wanted her, all of her, emotionally and physically. Moreover, he longed to solve the case, so Cayla could get her life back.

"And maybe if I do that, you'll let me be a part of it."

*Ring. Ring. Ring.*

He gently freed his hand from Cayla's tight grasp, she moaned in disagreement with his actions, but remained asleep. He dug in his pocket for the cell phone. He managed to hit SEND before the traffic light turned green.

"Casterlow."

“Kale, it’s me, Marvin,” Marvin said giddily into his ear. “Can you come by today? I got something.”

Kale glanced at Cayla.

“Give me about an hour.”

“An hour? This is hot stuff, man,” Marvin said, “been working on it all morning. It’s about that case, the one with the attempted murder of that chick walking home over on Cone.”

Something fast and furious flashed forward in Kale, and shot out of his mouth before he’d blinked.

“Don’t call her a chick,” he growled, the menacing intentions making them hard.

“Whoa, Kale, listen, it’s just a case. No need to get all...”

“She isn’t just a case, Marvin,” he barked into the phone.

He took the phone away from his ear and held it up in front of his face, as if facing Marvin. Now, he could yell in to the receiver properly.

“She’s a fucking person. One with a name, like every fucking body else. Her name is Cayla. Got it, rookie?”

When he put the cell phone back to his ear, Marvin was silent. Kale checked the phone to see if the call had been lost.

Nope.

Marvin held the cell phone because Kale could hear him breathing, perhaps trying to stem his own anger at being yelled at. Kale didn't give a rat's ass about Marvin's feelings. No one would disrespect Cayla, not after all she's been through. She had a name, and damn it, people were going to use it.

"Right. Cayla. I thought we weren't supposed to get personal with cases, Detective Casterlow. That's why I try to remain objective," Marvin explained in a quiet voice.

"Who says this is personal?" Kale asked, though he knew it had long since become personal for him. At this moment, he had plans to take her to his home. It doesn't get more personal than that. But Marvin didn't need to know. "I'm saying you should show some respect for the victim of a violent crime by not calling her a chick. Don't they send you geeks to sensitivity training?"

"Right. Got it. I, I'll be here when you get here," Marvin said, voice quiet. "I hope the ch-Cayla is all right. What I got to show you, I hope, will, uh, help give you a suspect."

"See you in one hour," Kale said, hitting the END button while Marvin was in mid sentence.

He knew how to get to Cayla's place because he'd been there with the uniformed cops asking the neighbors about anything suspicious. In that neighborhood, they were lucky if two people gave them any information at all.

Here, amongst the downtrodden and the betrayed, the poor and the provoked lay ultimate despair. He passed by boarded up commercial buildings, places marred by graffiti and windows busted out by idle hooligans. Street walkers and evangelists synchronized on the street corners where it seemed the holy and the hell raisers worked side by side.

*How did she survive in this hell and still keep so much light?*

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” Cayla bolted up in her seats, hands reaching blindly out in front of her, smacking and defending off some unknown phantom attacker.

“Cayla! Cayla!” Kale pulled over suddenly to the curb, causing the car behind him to swerve to avoid hitting him. Fine. He’d ticket the bastard. “It’s all right. You’re safe! Safe!”

She continued to scream until he grabbed both her arms and shook her gently. He leaned in close to her face and whispered, lowering his tone and softening his delivery. “Cayla, it’s me. Casterlow. You’re with me. You’re fine.”

He cooed and stroked her, all too aware of the rising of his cock. Cars zipped by, some blowing at him. All he cared about at that moment was her. She relaxed again, the panic attack receding, rolling off of her like smoke. She shot him a shy grin and sighed.

“This takes some getting used to,” she said, breathlessly.

“Nightmare?” Kale asked, releasing her arms and turning back to the task at hand. Getting her belongings and settled into his apartment. Then hightailing downtown to HQ to see about the forensic stuff.

“Uh huh, about the attack. I, I think I remembered something about the attack,” she said.

Kale glanced back at her. “Something that isn’t in your statement?”

She nodded.

“Good, this is very good,” he said, pulling out into traffic behind a large, slow moving SUV. A new clue would help keep the case running hot instead of fading back into the cold files, which is where Captain Anderson wanted it to go. “I’m listening.”

He couldn’t help himself. He cast another glance over to her and spied her wringing her hands. Her luminous eyes, round with worry, stared straight ahead. On impulse, he took his right hand from the steering wheel and held it out to her, offering it.

She accepted, placing her left hand into his, she rubbed her right hand on her thigh, against the blanket as if ridding it of sweat -- and fear.

“The attacker,” deep breath and then she continued, “I think he knew me.”

Kale’s left hand gripped the steering wheel hard. “Why?”

“He, he called my name,” Cayla said in a hushed whisper, barely above the rattling heater. “He said, hey Cayla, and I turned around. And then the flash of the gun, and, and...”

“You can stop there,” Kale said, soothingly. He rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb. “I know all the other details, but that’s a new one.”

“I remembered it in the nightmare.”

“That’s great, really, that’s good,” he said, smiling at her, willing her to return it. When she smiled, really smiled, it lit up those dark patches in his heart. “I can follow this up this afternoon. Is that okay?”

She nodded her agreement and hesitantly asked, “You aren’t mad?”

He laughed. “What for? This is a fresh lead. I can go back to the file and start eliminating strangers who didn’t know your name. This helps me narrow down the list of possible suspects.”

“But I didn’t remember right away, and I’ve already given a statement, and...”

“No problem,” Kale said though he knew it would be an issue for the shrimp lawyer. “Victims’ memories are sometimes blocked by shock and the sheer violence of the act. It isn’t uncommon for victims to remember things clearly once the initial shock has worn off.”

“But it’s been a week already,” Cayla said.



She sat huddled beneath the blanket, her feet pulled up to the seat. One hand wrapped around her knees and the other lay in Kale's grip. Though her voice sounded calmer, he wondered if she truly was calm inside. Or was she projecting it to save him the trouble?

*Why are you getting involved with a woman this emotionally shattered? What had she done to cause someone she knew to try to kill her? She has no family, and the friendship pool is thinner than Captain Anderson's hair. What the fuck Kale?*

Truth be known, he didn't know what he was doing. Drawn to her, like a moth to a flame, he seemed unable to dislodge himself from the danger swarming around her. Quite the contrary all he wanted to do was save her, by putting himself in between it and her.

"I know I've asked you this a dozen times, but if you think the person knew you, tell me who would be at the top of your list of suspects?"

He made a left into the Shady Brooks apartment complex and suppressed a shudder. Once parked outside his apartment, he killed the engine before it died. Looking at Cayla, he watched her for signs of hesitation. The question was deeply personal and it called into questions bonds of friendship that on the surface may be perfect, but beneath fissures threatened to crack open and explode.

*Who had cracked and tried to kill you?*

“Anyone come to mind?” he prodded gently. “Ex-boyfriend? Old girlfriend? Disgruntled relative? Garden variety nutcase stalker?”

Cayla laughed, and it made his heart swell.

“Garden variety stalker? Really Detective Casterlow, I’m not all that for a stalker.”

Cayla laughed, and it made his heart swell until he thought it would burst from his chest and out onto the space between them.

“Yes. Yes, you are,” he said before his mental gate checked his words.

She turned to look at him then, and the relief in her face mixed with something he hadn’t expected to see from any woman -- interest. Those gorgeous eyes held his and before he knew it, he was being drawn toward her, falling into those deep chocolate pools of want before, at last, kissing those pillow soft lips. As his own lips pressed against hers, he heard her sigh and he struggled to be gentle, to only taste, and not plunder, to explore, not ravage, for Cayla remained fragile and the last thing he wanted to do was break her.

Not king’s horses, nor the king’s men, but he, Kale, would put Cayla back together again — with the glue from his heart.

## Chapter Three

Cayla had to smile at Kale's spartan yet messy apartment. It was a decent sized place, with two bedrooms, one he apparently used as an office as far as she could tell. There were papers stacked so high around the desk; the computer keyboard was buried completely.

Bless his heart, she could tell Kale had attempted to straighten up before collecting her from the hospital, but as far as she could tell, he had only stacked clothing, shoes, and papers in piles in the corners of most of the rooms. He had stocked the refrigerator, but there were dirty dishes stacked in the sink and the coffee pot looked as if he seldom did more rinse it out before making another pot.

When Kale had escorted her into his home, he had guided her straight to the bedroom and told her to get some rest. She had lain in his bed for a few minutes, trying to relax, but she couldn't seem to get her mind off the sexy cop who had brought her here. Lying in his bed, she could not help but fantasize about lying here with him. Would he hold her tightly throughout the night, or would he hug the edge of his side of the bed?

Would he be a patient and giving lover, or would he be rough and demanding? Probably a fair amount of both if his every day actions were any

indication. She had already experienced his gentle side, though it was mere kindness on his part. She didn't think he realized how often he caressed her cheek or smoothed the hair from her brow. He certainly didn't have a clue how her heart raced every time he touched her. He probably didn't have a clue what a warm haven the cocoon his arms felt when they were wrapped around her.

*Get a grip, Cay. He's not for you.*

Sadness weighed heavily on her shoulders. One day soon she would have to leave. He had brought her to his home out of the kindness of his heart. She could not stay here forever, no matter how much she might have wished otherwise.

Funny, Cayla never considered the whole happily ever after thing would ever be a part of her own tale when all was said and done. Therefore, she had never thought about what she would do when faced with the prospect. Most of the guys she had run across were products of their environment. It didn't matter what color they were, kindness, fidelity, and marriage were not in their vocabulary. Hell, vocabulary wasn't in their vocabulary. Women were to be used at *their* convenience, the female's need an afterthought. It wasn't that Cayla didn't want better, she really did. It just didn't seem to be forthcoming. She had broken up with her last boyfriend after one too many late night booty calls while easily forgetting she was alive for days at a time.

But a man like Kale, he was the type who would put his woman first. He would protect her with all he had in him and make her feel special without even trying. Hadn't he already done as much with her? He had made her feel like more than a victim to a case he was trying to crack. However fanciful it might be, Cayla felt as if when he touched her, when he looked at her, he was interested in her, the woman.

Of course, she was just being silly. Kale was a nice man who saw she had nowhere to go and no one to turn to. He felt sorry for her, that was all.

Knowing she wouldn't be getting any rest, Cayla got up to explore Kale's apartment. His bedroom was a study in semi-tidy chaos. The stark white sheets were generic in nature, with a dark blue comforter that looked brand new.

Opening his closet she saw the comforter was indeed new, and apparently so were the sheets. A battered looking older version of the same bedding was stuffed into the corner of the space. He had several ready-wear suits hanging there in dark blue, black and dark brown. There were several neutral colored dressed shirts, long and short sleeved, probably all bought from the same store, and his shoes were thrown willy-nilly on the floor, as if he simply opened the door and threw them off his feet. She could see him doing just that.

The bathroom was all white without a trace of personality. It was quite possibly the cleanest room in the apartment. The medicine cabinet held a

toothbrush, toothpaste, mouthwash, a hair brush and a bottle of aspirin. Other than a couple of washcloths, towels, a bar of soap and hand soap, the bathroom was bare. No carpets graced the floors. No art or decoration on the walls. In fact, other than some accommodation certificates and a couple of pictures of Kale in uniform, the entire apartment was a blank canvas.

Cayla couldn't stop herself from mentally decorating the place. Before she knew it, she was rearranging things here and there, cleaning as she went along. Her injuries ensured she couldn't do too much, but she washed the clothes that were scattered about the laundry room, washed and put away the dishes, cleaned out his coffee pot, running it first with vinegar and water, then several times with pure water to make sure it was clean inside and out. In the bedroom, she discovered clothes stuffed into the drawers of the dresser with no discernable pattern. Sitting on the bed, she folded each articles of clothing, separating them and replacing them in an organized manner.

Since he had gone through the trouble of stocking the fridge, Cayla started dinner. He didn't have much by way of spices, so she settled for making a simple meatloaf, mashed potatoes and sweet peas. She was taking the meatloaf out of the oven when Kale returned home.

"Hi," she smiled shyly, hoping he wouldn't be mad at her for invading his personal items. "I, uh, couldn't sleep, so I decided to make myself useful."

Kale frowned at her rushing forward to usher her to the couch.

“You didn’t have to do all this!” he seemed embarrassed more than mad.

Almost sheepish. “I didn’t bring you here to be my maid! You should be taking it easy!”

“No, I’m all right,” she rushed to assure him. “I, uh, enjoyed doing it.”

And she had. For just a little while, she allowed herself to pretend she was his wife, taking care of the home while he was away at work. It was a load of 1950s bullshit, but there it was. She felt her face burning under his scrutiny and discovered she couldn’t find the courage to meet his eyes. He was probably regretting his decision to offer her refuge. Damn it, why didn’t she think before she acted?

“Hey, look at me.”

His voice was so soft and calming she couldn’t help but do it.

“I appreciate all you have done,” he assured her, squeezing her hand as he knelt in front of her. “I just don’t want you to overexert yourself. You were banged up pretty bad. I need to make sure you get all nice and healthy.”

Why? So he could get rid of her? But looking into those stormy grays, she didn’t believe that was it. He looked earnestly concerned for her. She didn’t know how to take that. No one had ever been concerned for her. Did one just accept it as their due, or should she say thank you?

“I...I just wanted to, is all.” Her voice was little more than a whispered squeak. The truth made her incredibly self-conscious. “I wanted to make you happy. I mean, comfortable. Like you make me.”

It took a lot to admit it. In a small way, she was opening herself just a small amount to see where she stood. Sure he had kissed her, but that was just to relax her wasn't it? Just a token of the moment. But then, his face was coming towards her again.

*Oh, yes, please yes!*

Just as tenderly as before, their lips met and clung. Unlike before, when Kale had backed off almost immediately with a parting kiss on the cheek, his tongue licked the seam of her lips as if asking permission to enter. Without reservation, she opened to admit him, sighing as he dove in. His hands snaked around her, pulling her closer to him. Cayla let him lead as he gently dragged her into his lap. His hands were everywhere at once, yet he managed to steer clear of wounded areas. She wanted to get closer, just a little closer. Rocking her hips forward, Cayla miscalculated badly, twisting something and send a shaft of pure agony through her body.

“OW!”

Kale stopped immediately, pulling back without displacing her from his lap.

“What happened? Are you okay?”



She had to smile at the terrified panic on his face despite the pain still throbbing through her.

“It’s okay,” she assured him, managing to keep her grimace to a minimum. “I just moved a wrong.”

Without breaking a sweat, Cayla found herself being lifted in his arms and carried into the bedroom and laid carefully on the bed. She was grateful that instead of beating feet as soon as he had her all situated, he sat next to her, stroking her hair.

“I have to remember you aren’t ready for this yet.”

His statement was said more to himself rather than at her, so she didn’t feel it necessary to reply. Her heart soared at his words no matter how much she tried to tamp down her joy. He had thought about her beyond this case! Did that mean he was interested in her, or was it only physical? She really didn’t think he was the type who only wanted to get to know her between the sheets. He had been too solicitous, too attentive. Even now, he was trying to make her hurts all better, though only time could accomplish that one.

“Get some rest, sweetheart. We will talk when you are feeling better.”

She wanted to talk now; she wanted to ask him if he liked her, or if it was all in her imagination. Instead, the toll of her cleaning crashed on her with the

suddenness of a tidal wave, her eyelids too heavy to keep open. Soon. They would talk soon.

## Chapter Four

Kale returned to the room posing as an office with his dick hard and his mind whirling. He sorely wanted to glide back into bedroom, lift the sheets and strip down to nothing except his desire. Yes, she had kissed him back and that husky moan escaping from her luscious mouth served only to make stone become steel in his pants. Instead, he sat at his ancient mac, reviewing his case notes and struggling to push the feel of her from his memory. Otherwise, he'd never rid himself of his affliction—an erection that grew more painful by the minute.

He inserted his memory stick into the USB drive and called up the report on the shoe impressions Marvin found at the crime scene. Sure enough, the rookie CSI had discovered two pair of sneakers with droplets of the victim's blood in them along with a wad of gum covered in Cayla's blood. Another CSI had found a shell casing for a .22 in the grass edging the scene, the same gun with which Cayla had been shot.

Fingerprints were mostly smeared, except for one. A bloody partial fingerprint had been left. A goldmine of evidence, but not if they had no one to match it to. Marvin entered the DNA into the state wide system, but it came back without a match. All that meant was the bastard hadn't been convicted of a crime

in North Carolina. Marvin had forwarded the sequence to the national database and sent the fingerprint stuff through AFIS, but that took time to come back, a few days at the earliest and a few months at the longest.

Whoever attacked her wasn't a professional. A fucking amateur. Which eliminated anyone with a record, because if you'd been through the system, you wouldn't make mistakes like this damn person did. Leaving a casing? He popped his knuckles. The other shell casing probably ended up in the sewer or somewhere amongst the debris. CSI only had so many hands and so much time.

The other little cool piece of evidence came from Cayla. She said the attacker called her name. Street savvy, Cayla wouldn't wear a shirt with her name on it or anything indication who she is to a stranger. No, he didn't believe some stranger had overheard her name either. Someone who knew her and what a small circle too. Few friends and even less family could count her among their number.

All of which would be amateurs if they tried to commit a crime.

"Let's start with the most recent individuals in her life," he said to the whirling hourglass on the monitor. It cleared and up came his notes of suspects. He scanned down the list, eliminating those who didn't have any real connection to Cayla other than being around when she was assaulted.

He logged into the police computer database and eliminated those who didn't have criminal record or whose alibis had come through. Much to his excitement the names dwindled down to four.

An ex-boyfriend, his girlfriend, another waitress at the restaurant where Cayla worked and a busboy who had a crush on her. Yes, Kale could identify with the busboy, though he doubted his feelings for her constituted a crush. No, his heart had vacated his body and taken refuge in hers.

He'd start with the boyfriend, and see how that fairs. The idiot managed to lose someone as amazing as Cayla, he couldn't be too smart. Kale laughed in the glare of the monitor and leaned back, putting his hands behind his head. He'd make a two for one. The ex and his girlfriend on the same day would put him through half the list and he could still get back here to check on Cayla. He'll get them out of the way, though he didn't know about their alibis. Of the other two suspects, neither had been home in the three times the uniforms had been by, but the cops said they would follow up again tomorrow.

He took out his cell phone and called the CSI department, knowing full and well that at this time of night, Marvin had already left.

"Marvin, Casterlow. Listen, get ready to do some field work. I need blood drawn on four suspects, and we'll do DNA swabs of saliva, too. The needles though will show them just how fucking serious this is. See you at ten."

He pressed the END button and immediately dialed the number of the lawyer. As the idea brightened in his mind, he could hardly contain himself. The adrenaline rushed him, even making his semi-erect cock push upward again.

“Tom, Tim, whatever the fuck your name is, this is Casterlow. I need a warrant for the following people, Julian Deveron, Stacy Keeter, Mack Mitchell and a Jane Smith, and no that last one isn’t me fucking with you. I need DNA from all four of these suspects in the Porter case. I need them by 8am tomorrow so get your sorry ass off your dump, put down the champagne and do some fucking work.

He hung up and leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes. Yes, he could eliminate them all with the swish of a swab in the mouth. The gum could be a dead end, or it could be the very key to unlocking and solving the case. The shoeprints, the DNA, and the shell casing should be enough to send the idiot who shot Cayla away for an extended stay in the state pen. If only he could line it all up to point at the attacker.

Tomorrow, he’d deal with the case and with a bit of luck he’d be able to put it to bed.

Bed.

At that one word, his cock stiffened in eagerness. A beautiful woman lay sprawled in his bed. Shit that hadn’t happened in nearly ten years. He logged off the police database, closed out his email—which he hadn’t even read, and shut

down his computer. Work, normally the most prominent thing in his life had been shoved to the back and all he could think about was the heat radiating from Cayla as she sat on his lap, her squirming stirring his arousal and making him acknowledge he was a man and she a very sexy woman. He rubbed his index finger across his lip, still feeling hers there. He stood up, noting how his balls ached. Walking would be difficult, but he couldn't climb into bed with her sporting a solid member and a wanting smile.

She might think he'd only invited her here to take advantage of her. Nothing could be further from the truth, but Cayla required delicate hands. He couldn't let her think he longed to devour her the way he truly did inside. She'd run screaming. No, that's not what he wanted.

Healing. She required a lot of it, emotionally and physically.

His feet found their way back to the doorway of his bedroom. He'd done a half-ass job of cleaning and tidying the place, but time hadn't been on his side. Still, having such a delicate flower in his bed seemed to brighten the entire dim interior the way new paint changed a room. In slumber, Cayla radiated a quiet peace. Mouth parted, little snores escaped into the air, a symphony of sleep. With her tousled dark hair across his sole pillow and her luminous skin, smooth as warm chocolate spread out against the cobalt blue of his covers, Cayla made a striking image indeed.

“God, you are so fantastic,” he said to her, whispering as to not disturb her.  
“Do you feel the same about me?”

He snorted and turned away from the doorway, trying to corral the wild horses of his hormones. Climbing into bed now would end up with his cock inside her—somehow. Though vulnerable, Cayla had been fairly clear. She’d kissed him back. Still he couldn’t risk Cayla having regrets later on when she sobered and healed from her injuries. The kiss could’ve been an in the moment kind of thing.

He shrugged and headed back to the kitchen where she had cleaned and made dinner. Wouldn’t be so bad to have her live with him, to have a wife, or someone to hold on cold nights in the winter or when a particular case sliced through his hardened exterior. No, it wouldn’t be bad at all. It would be wonderful.

*Damn Casterlow, where’s this optimistic shit coming from? This ain’t you.*

He smirked as he made a plate of meatloaf, peas, and mashed potatoes. He shoved it into the microwave and sat down in front of the television to watch the news. He hadn’t done this sort of thing in months, usually he’d eat fast food, take out or a box of noodles and call it a day.

*She’s changing me. I can feel it inside. Even if she walks out of here and leaves me forever, I ain’t never going to be the same again. How can I after a woman like her comes into your life, brushes you with her magic and leaves?*



And this lead back to the ex-boyfriend, Julian. How had he coped with her dumping him? By all accounts from co-workers, Julian wasn't a man you dumped. Had his fury over being let go by such a creature as Cayla led him to try to kill her? That whole if I can't have her no one will cliché?

Too easy.

But possible.

Casterlow ate while his mind rolled through the four primary suspects over and over again. The television shows bled on into the other, but he hardly took notice. His mind worked on the puzzle this case presented with tireless interest, running scenarios over and over again—as he had every night for the last week.

Hours passed and before he knew it, the clock gave the time as ten after midnight. He stood up and stretched. Body weary and his mind worn out from the constant questioning and scenario creation, he removed his shoes, sliding them off by the heel. He rolled his neck, massaging the tangled mass of stress there. An early start would be the best method of attack on the four suspects, so he had to be up earlier than usual. The early bird and all that nonsense. He stopped short at his bedroom's entrance and stared.

In shadows, Cayla lay in a stream of moonlight from the clear, cloudless night. As if eager to touch her, too, the beams exposed her legs and curves with obscene details. Kale groaned, and hurriedly went about snatching his pajamas

from the second dresser drawer. They still had the tags on them. He fled to the bathroom, taking deep gulps of air to try to stem the heat rushing through him. God, she stirred up his libido! How was he going to get through the night?

He stripped, ignoring his swollen phallus as best he could. If he touched himself, he'd come right then and there. No, he avoided the bouncing weapon as he pulled on his pj bottoms. He normally slept naked, but with a guest in the house he took out the pjs his sister bought him five Christmases ago.

Before they stopped speaking.

He left the bathroom, dropping his dirty clothes into a pile he thought was dirty also. He couldn't quite tell in the dark. The bed's location he knew by heart, and the added illumination from the window helped him not fall into bed on top of her. Not that he didn't want to be, but he didn't want to harm her.

Sighing, he sat on the bed and debated his options. Leave or stay?

"Casterlow?" moaned Cayla as she rolled over onto her side, grimaced, before moving to her back. "Detective?"

He'd told her to call him Kale, but she still didn't.

"Yes," he answered, heart thundering in his chest. Her nightgown had slid up to reveal her thighs, creamy cocoa, and a nice pair of lace red panties. He wanted to yank it down, to stop the view from assaulting his hormones, but if he touched her, he knew, he'd be lost.

“Hold me,” she said, visibly trembling. “Please, I, I...”

He got up and moved to the other side of the bed, where she could turn to her left side and talk to him without pain. Though each movement caused the gown to inch up further, a slow tease and all of it unintentional.

“I’m here, Cayla, but...” he began, faltered and fell silent.

Her hand bolted out of the darkness and snared his tee-shirt. She grabbed it into her fist and leaned up on her elbows. Sweat dotted her brow and her eyes were wide—too wide.

Without waiting, he climbed onto the bed, snatching her into his embrace and holding her, rocking her, and whispering how all was well. Guilt swirled through him. He stroked her back and held her pressed to him, but he wanted to be buried inside her. Holding her felt wonderful and if she missed the rock hard phallus pressed against her thigh, she was truly out of it.

*What kind of fucking pervert am I? She’s obviously distraught and her I am rubbing my cock against her.*

He tried to move her, so she wouldn’t feel his eagerness to have her. But she remained latched onto him, clutching his tee-shirt as if he was a rock in a violent storm. He stroked her hair, her neck, and rubbed her back in soothing circles, but he could feel the tight pointed tips of her breasts through the gown’s thin material.

They poked his chest and he groaned, and with effort managed to sit her on bed, not his lap, and hug her.

“Hold me tightly,” she pleaded, voice a soft hush above the occasional wind’s howl outside. “That’s nice.”

“Yes, but I think you should rest,” he whispered back, anxious to remove his hands before he lost all control over himself. The last shreds of decency he had unraveled with each passing second his hands stroked her body, each moment her breasts, full with nipples on point pressed against him, and her soft words caressing his ear didn’t help.

She let go of him, and he released her to, slowly, as she lay back on the bed. She rolled over to her left and said, “Come to bed, detective.”

Did she push her ass out a bit when she said that?

He shook his head. His horniness had taken over.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea, Cayla. I’m going to take the recliner tonight.”

He moved to get up but she turned to him, stopping him with her hand.

“You’re a detective,” she said, smiling shyly in the shadows. “Come to bed, please.”

“Cayla, this isn’t a good idea, I mean, you’re hurt and...”

Instantly, boldly, she sprung forward to an upright position and pressed her

lips against his, pried his open and allowed her tongue to speak the urgent need he had so ignorantly ignored. She wrapped her arms around him, grunting a bit at the pain, but she locked them tight, not letting him go.

Kale fell into that kiss and relaxed, letting go of his logic, his better judgment and his reservations.

*Oh shit.*

## Chapter Five

Cayla knew what she was doing. Later, if she had to, she could blame the pain medication or claim to have been dreaming, but for right now, she was going to take this moment, revel in it and enjoy it. It wasn't that she wanted to give her body to him as some kind payment for his incredible kindness. No, she wanted Kale in a way she had never wanted a man before in her life.

Wanted, hell, she craved him the way carnivores craved meat. And she knew what piece of him she hungered for most. He may despise her for it afterwards, but she had to see what it was like, just once to be with a man who truly *saw* her. Not her figure, not her easy going attitude, not her ability to roll with the punches, but all of her, the woman.

If Kale hadn't initiated the kisses on the sofa, she probably would have never been so bold. But he had, and she wanted more. Just a simple caress from his big, work roughened hands and she was wet and needy. The way he treated her as if she was something precious to be treasured had become more of an aphrodisiac than anything else she had ever encountered. He didn't use his looks as a weapon or withhold tenderness unless he got what he wanted. He was a genuinely sweet, caring and sexy man.

A man unlike one she'd ever met before—and she longed to feel that man beneath her hands, caress the skin which smelled so masculine, and hug the hardened body beneath the poor, overworked suits.

When Kale melted into her kiss, she wanted to weep for joy. She relaxed her body against the bed, allowing him to take over and steer her passion wherever he wanted. Each stroke of his tongue set her body ablaze higher and higher until she was panting with desperate want and clutching his tee-shirt as if he could possibly get any closer to her. One of his hands braced himself against the headboard, while the other gently held her face, caressing her cheek and jaw line. Shivers rushed across her flesh, scampering in their enthusiasm and forcing her nipples to tighten, her clit to throb, and her stomach to clutch.

*God, I want this MAN!*

“Please, Kale.” She scarcely recognized her own voice; it was so husky with desire.

Would he stop? Would he let her injuries put a damper of their interlude, like before? She might be tempted to hold him down and take him if he did. Would he report it, if she did?

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

Cayla smiled what she hoped was a sultry signal of her hunger. His voice was every bit as passion laden as her own. At least she knew he wasn't unaffected. "You won't. I know you won't. Touch me, Kale, please..."

He looked down with a frown creasing his brow. On impulse, she reached up to run her finger across those tempting waves. He was debating with himself; she could tell by the way his eyes reflected both yearning and concern alternately. She allowed her legs to fall open a little wider, which permitted him to sink into her more snugly. Bracing her elbows on the mattress so she wouldn't have to move her upper torso, she ground her hips upward against the hard evidence of his arousal.

A thick groan escaped her lips and she trembled against his rock hard cock.

Kale moaned, allowing his own hips to follow suit, his eyes drifting shut. Cayla knew it still wasn't enough. She wanted him inside her, now! Yet, he was so honorable that he would deny himself just to make sure he didn't hurt her. Oh, to have a man like that in her life permanently! But she would take right now. Opening her night shirt, she cupped her aching breasts, lifting them up as an offering. Rolling her stony nipples between her finger and thumb, she was awash with pleasure that left her panting, and hankering for more.

"Kale?"



She wanted to laugh when he opened his lids only to have his eyes cross at the picture she made, sprawled out like a banquet for the taking. She wanted to, but Kale had lowered his head, engulfing one heavy breast into the warm cavern of his mouth, his tongue expertly swirling around the puckered nipple while his hands and fingers mimicked the action on the other. She sighed in delight, removing her own hands to give him full access.

“So beautiful,” came the harsh whisper from the vicinity of her chest. “So perfect.”

Cayla felt light headed, she wanted him so badly. Her pussy ached to be filled with the package contained by his pjs. It wept her own juices in silent demand for Kale to satisfy her. Chills broke out all over her body, goose bumps rising as witness of the wonderful sensations he stimulated. The magic of his mouth had her sobbing, her hand clutching his hair unsure whether to pull him away to demand he give her what she really needed or to yank him closer.

“I need more! Please, Kale!”

With a lingering kiss to her quivering flesh, Kale rose and stared down at her. Eyes ablaze with passion and hot lust, they seemed to glow in the dimly light room.

“You are worth more to me than just this.” His voice held more than a hint of steel. Cayla found herself nodding her understanding as those thunderstorm he

called eyes held her captive. “This will not be a onetime thing, Cayla. I wanted to take it slow, but I...” his eyes swept her half exposed frame, his nostrils flaring. His cock pushed against the flimsy fabric, a pole of a tent. “I have to have you, sweetheart. I promise to be as gentle as I can, but I...”

“Shhh, it’s all right,” she assured him, her hands touching the side of his face. Surely he saw her trembling with desire for him. Had he mistaken her quivering ache for pain? He had to understand. The hunger raging inside could only be quieted by him. “I want this just as much. I *need* this. Give me what I need.”

“Turn on your side,” Kale instructed, the strain in his command sending just as many thrills through her as feeling his hands removing her panties.

She held her breath as he moved behind her as she settled on her uninjured side and lifted her leg. She could feel his hard, warm cock at her opening, but still he paused.

“Tell me if you hurt, even a little bit,” Kale instructed.

“I will.” She most certainly would not!

Yet, he only slipped inside her no more than half an inch before stopping again. She attempted to push down, but the grip on her hip was too strong.

“Easy, sweetheart,” he growled in her ear, tiny puffs of his breath teasing the sensitive skin of her ear and neck. “We have all night.”

Another inch of the smooth, bulbous head of his phallus penetrated her deliciously slow. Then another pause. Another thick inch of his wide, so wide cock. Then another inch of teasing torment. God, she was going mad with impatience. She reached behind her and slapped at the hand holding her side.

“Kale...” she pleaded, her mouth massaging his name as it passed her lips.  
“Please...”

So wound up in the sensation of having him half way parked inside her, she was begging, desperate to have him fully seated inside. It seemed to take hours rather than the moments it had been, but finally, finally, he was there, filling every corner of her being. His wide member seemed to fill every inch of her tunnel. The feel of his searing chest against her back, his hand cupping her breast, his other holding the weight of her leg to give him both leverage and access-it was heaven. Cayla felt a sense of completeness she never had before, as if she belonged right there, with him, to him.

Then he started to move.

He moved carefully at first, nearly driving her insane with the slow, sensual strokes, steering her to wild passion with only the need for more forcing words to stumble from her mouth.

“Please, Kale! Give it to me!”

“Baby, I don’t want to hurt you.”

Hearing the strained control in his voice, Cayla was determined to drive him just as mad as he was driving her. Ignoring the twinges of pain, she moved with him. Forcing her hips back to accept his forward thrusts deeper inside her core, Cayla nearly swooned with pleasure. It felt so incredibly good! Such sweet torment!

“Cayla, baby don’t do...”

Whatever he was about to say was lost in a fierce snarl, as he began to piston his hips harder, ever deeper. Grasping the sheets in her fists, she couldn’t help but ride along with him, meeting his passionate movement with ones every bit as ferocious as his own. Gone was the tender, gentle lover and in his place was a man driven by pure passion. This was the Kale she needed! She was lost in a world of sensations. He was gently biting the sides of her neck, his hand long since let go of her leg which was now somehow hooked around his body. His skillful fingers were busy plucking at her engorged clit, taking her to the very edge, but stilling right before she went over. She was begging, pleading, but he kept playing her body like a maestro.

“Fuck, Cayla, I need you to come with me baby!”

How could she do any less? With a scattered scream, she flew, heedless of the arms crushing her to him. It was worth every bit of the pain.



Kale's body relaxed in waves of aftershock of his orgasm rippling violently through him. He emptied inside her and still her burning heat threatened to make him erect again. Though he wanted nothing else but to stay inside her warmth forever, he slowly dislodged himself from her being.

*What if I've hurt her? Damn it, I let my fucking lust override my better judgment. What if she's mad?*

He couldn't take that, her anger, or worse, her disappointment. Seeing loss in her eyes would stab him to the quick and leave him for dead. Wounding a spirit such as hers, would render him incomplete and ineffective, two things he'd never felt before.

With gentleness, he hugged her close to him, spooning against the softness of her ass, and fighting to focus on something other than how good she felt. Too much attention to her smooth skin and the heavenly scent of sexuality wafting from her flesh would only serve to make him dive into her again. His odor mixed with hers had created something stirring in the air.

And judging by how tenderly she moved, Cayla was in enough pain.

"Do you want another pain pill?" he asked, guilt stripping his voice to a whisper. "I'm sorry I hurt you, baby."

"No, I want to experience all of this," she replied, snuggling closer to him and grunting a bit in the process. "You didn't hurt me, Kale. I, I feel wonderful."

He pulled her tightly to him, though careful not to overdo it. Pressing his lips against the top of her hair, he sighed. This was how every night should end. With her wrapped tightly in his embrace and his cock resting against the round arc of her ass. Yes, with this woman, each night he would actually rest without the haunts of the job swirling in his brain. With her, peace settled into him, and his body calmed down. A flicker of a laugh flashed across his lips and he sighed again, relaxing against his pillow.

“What’s so funny?” Cayla asked, hearing the small chuckle escape his lips.

“Nothing’s funny,” he confided. “I, I’m happy. I’m happy with to be with you, Cayla.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” he whispered against her hair and closed his eyes.

At last, he slept.

## Chapter Six

“So?” Kale inquired around the steamy cup of police coffee. “You got what I need or what?”

The lawyer with the short build and bright scarlet pinched face said, “Depends. You remember my name?”

Kale snorted out a guffaw. So the shrimp had grown some balls! Excellent.

“I don’t see anything funny about your need for a warrant and my name, Casterlow,” the lawyer retorted indignantly adjusting his tie in the reflective glass outside of interview room one. “You’ve got a suspect in there, and three other ones on the way in. So, I suggest, Mr. Smart Ass, you get my name right.”

Kale sized up the short man in front of him and nodded, a grin on his face. He might actually start to like the lawyer after all.

“It’s about time, Terry, you grew some balls and got on top of your shit,” Kale said at last with a smirk. He laughed. “That’s what this division needs. So, do I have a warrant for DNA or not?”

Terry held up a single sheet of paper with the loops and dips signature of a judge.

“Yes, Detective Casterlow.”

“Yes!” Kale said, pushing his hair back and out of his eyes. “Where’s CSI to do the deed?”

Terry shrugged. “Don’t know. I paged them at six thirty this morning when I got the signature. Oh, and by the way, you owe Judge Henderson a dinner at Marcos.”

“Marcos? I’m a cop not a fucking bank.”

Terry shrugged again, but this time with a smirk of his own. It looked sickly against his flushed face. “Not my problem. You wanted the warrant for your fishing expedition you got it. He said you owed him for waking him up before dawn, though he did see probably cause.”

“Sure, I’ll send him a gift certificate,” Kale muttered, turning away from Terry. It didn’t matter. Judge Henderson could’ve asked for his arms, and he would’ve given it. Any price would be worth it if it meant catching the person who tried to kill Cayla. What’s two hundred bucks for her life? Her safety? Her peace of mind? It was nothing.

He focused on the person seated at the round table in interview one.

The ex-boyfriend, Julian, sat slouched in the hard folding chair, his fingers drumming against the table’s scarred and marred surface. A weasel, his skeletal frame and fidgety movements spoke to some addiction. Tattoos littered the



exposed sections of his arms and the threadbare t-shirt gave testimony of his poverty. Dreadlocks spilled down his back, and a silver ball gleamed from the piercing above his left eyebrow. Two teardrops forever etched in ink decorated the left eye. He hadn't said much, but he wanted a phone call. They hadn't given it to him, but again, all things in time.

*A fucking waste of human DNA right here. How come you haven't graced our criminal justice system before now? Slippery bastard, I bet you've made others do your dirty work. Your girlfriends perhaps? What happened, Julian? Cayla too smart for your damn deceptions?*

"Aye, Casterlow," Marvin called, out of breath as he approached, boxy metallic kit in his hands. "Sorry about that. Had to drop my son off at daycare."

"No problem."

"Really?" Marvin's voice squeaked. "You're not mad? Not going to go all loco on me?"

"No," Kale said, his gaze still locked on Julian. *What did you see in this, Cayla?*

"Wow, we should work together in the mornings more often," Marvin remarked, mood lifting into a cheeriness Kale despised in the a.m. "What, you finally get laid and now you're in a better mood?"

Kale finally shot him a glare that made Marvin swallow hard and loud.

"You got the swab?"

Marvin's face sobered significantly. "Yes. Ready."

Kale turned back to the window and his temper rose at the very sight of Julian.

“Let’s do it.”

He led the way, banging through interview room with furious intent. Julian jumped in his seat, his narrow frame and bearded face surprised by the commotion. Once he locked eyes with Kale, he had the gall to buck up, thrusting out his bird chest with some twisted idea of manhood.

“Are you Julian Deveron?” Kale asked, eyes burning a hole through the other man. He casually touched his holster and grinned.

Julian’s eyes flinted around the room before landing on Marvin, the only other face of color in the room. Kale could see the relief roll from the bastard, but the entire good cop and bad cop ploy was working. He wasn’t going to complain.

“Yeah, that’s me, but hey, what’s up with this shit?” Julian asked Marvin, jutting his chin toward Kale. He pushed his chair back from the table, back from Kale. “I got rights. I ain’t down for no Rodney King shit, man.”

Kale glanced over his shoulder at Marvin, but his thoughts fled to Cayla, tucked beneath the new sheets of his bed. Safe. Secure. And happy. At least she had been when he left her an hour ago.

*How, baby, did you ever put up with this asshole?*

“Then I suggest, sir, you comply with the terms of the search warrant,” Marvin said dryly. He carefully placed the big metallic box on the table, and began prepping for the DNA swab. They’d try saliva first, but if Julian refused or became combatant, they’d take it by force—with a needle.

“What warrant?” Julian shouted, scrambling out of the chair, sending it crashing to the floor. “What the fuck is this about?”

“An attempted murder,” Kale said, venom dripping on every word. He gripped the table to stay his hand from punching the hell out of the suspect.

“What? I haven’t murdered anyone, I fucking told you before,” he spat, pacing around the space, a caged tiger. “If this is about that bitch, Cayla...”

That’s all he got out of his mouth because Kale had shot across the table his fist raised, ready to pound.

“Detective Casterlow!” Marvin said calmly as if this happened all the time. Though when Kale turned to look at Marvin, his round eyes betrayed his shock. “Please show the suspect the search warrant.”

Kale composed himself, counting backward from one hundred. He yanked down his suit, stood up and held up the paper.

“This is a warrant, you piece of shit, and it gives Mr. Emms there the right to take your DNA. So stop fucking whining like a bitch you believe Cayla to be, and open your mouth.”

Julian scoffed. “Fuck you, man.”

Kale smiled.

Marvin cleared his throat. “I would suggest, Mr. Deveron, that you not provoke the detective again.”

Julian’s eyes swung back to Kale’s face. “The fuck is so funny?”

“Oh, I’m enjoying your show of piss poor masculinity,” Kale explained, folding the warrant and putting it into his pocket. “If you continue to resist the warrant, I will be able to take your DNA by force, if necessary.”

Julian stopped and met Kale’s eyes once more. Something in them must have spoke Kale’s intention of carrying out that threat with as much force as necessary, because Julian quietly sat down in the chair, scooted it up to the table and turned to Marvin.

“Let’s get it done, man. I ain’t got all fucking day.”

Marvin shot Kale a glance that spoke of how impressed he was.

Kale shrugged. *It’s nothing.*

Though he couldn’t lie, Kale wanted Julian to resist a little more so he could hurt him physically the way the man had hurt Cayla emotionally. Still, if he could nail the rotten piece of human carcass with an attempted murder charge, he’d feel a lot better. Sure, it was petty, but someone should teach Julian a lesson about valuing people beyond what they could do for him. He didn’t need Cayla to tell

him what kind of man Julian Deveron was, Kale could read him. After all he was good at reading street trash and Julian was of the highest quality.

“Open wide, please,” Marvin instructed and swabbed the inside of Julian’s mouth with all the bedside manner of a new dentist with a drill.

Marvin carefully closed the plastic over the cotton swab’s head and turned to Kale.

“Next.”



“That’s all four,” Marvin said at last, closing the lid of his metallic box with a soft *click*. “I should have preliminary results based on mitochondrial DNA, but nothing definitive for several weeks. You know how backed up the state crime lab gets.”

“So?” Kale asked.

They stood outside the police station, leaning against Kale’s cruiser. Already approaching lunch, Kale wanted to get home to Cayla, for a quick bite (and not her body, but some food, though he strongly considered doing both) before having to come back to the station and work on the other cases littering his desk. Captain Anderson’s fury at his lack of attention to the other cases had set a fire under him.

“So, you need to do something else while we’re waiting, something other than obsess about this case,” Marvin said. “I know I’m new and all, but I’ve never seen anyone as dogged about a case as you with this one.”

Kale shrugged. “You just met me. Wait around.”

Inside Kale knew he didn’t pay nearly the attention to the other cases as he did with this one. But then he’d never fallen in love with a victim of one of his cases before—ever. And love was an inadequate adjective to describe how he felt about her. It served only as a label, for what his heart said about her, felt about her, surged when around her, yes, he was in love, but so much more than the trite word meant.

“Yeah, well, let’s hope this pans out for you. I should have some answers for you tomorrow, but the final report will come down from the state’s experts.”

They pounded fists and Marvin pushed off the cruiser, heading toward his own sleek black CSI SUV.

Tomorrow.

That would be a long time. Kale glanced down at his watch. Nearly noon. Enough time to get back to his place, have lunch, see his ray of sunshine and scurry back to the desk before one thirty. With this little tidbit of joy bobbing in his chest, he climbed into the cruiser, and pointed in the direction of his apartment.

His only thought was of Cayla. Was she sleeping? Wondering around the place bored out of her mind? Reading one of the stack of novels in his to be read pile? Or would she be painting her toenails, washing her hair, or staring out of the living room window thinking about him the way he was thinking about her?

As he made a right out the parking lot, his mind tumbled over the people he managed to snare DNA from. Remarkably he got all of them into the station to get the DNA. Sometimes he had to go to the suspect's home, apartment, hellhole to get it, but not this time. Seeing it as a good sign, Kale's mood buoyed in a sea of happiness. He was certain that in those four people, one of them tried to kill Cayla.

He had his money on Julian, but the weasel gave it up too quickly for his taste. No, it had to be one of the other three remaining. Though Julian's alibi couldn't be verified, it didn't mean the little prick wasn't telling the truth. He said he'd been home, asleep when Cayla was shot. No one saw him, because his girlfriend was working.

The girlfriend, Stacy Keeter. No one at that greasy dive she worked for saw her working, but then she did dishes in the back. One of the waitress said the night was so busy, she doesn't remember seeing anyone, let alone Stacy. Another one told Kale she didn't see Stacy and had pointedly looked for her because they ran out of forks midway through the dinner rush. Kale's focus narrowed to one,

Stacy Keeter. He hadn't paid much attention to the notes, simply writing down the statements, and initialing the report.

He'd been dead set against the ex, but what if the ex hadn't done it?

Three others could've.

No alibi. Opportunity. But what reason did Stacy have to want to kill Cayla?

Kale headed toward home in the zone of mental figuring. Something nagged at him, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Something he should've caught sooner had been thinking with the head on his shoulders and not with his cock.

The itch continued to wiggle in the back of his brain, but once Cayla opened the door to his apartment, it quickly stilled as if satisfied at last.



## Chapter Seven

“Hello, Detective.” Cayla couldn’t keep the smile off her face or out of her voice.

She had hoped Kale would come home for lunch, in fact, she had prepared for it, making soup and sandwiches just in case.

“Hey yourself,” his return greeting sent tiny tingles all down her spine. She loved his gravelly voice, all deep and rough. The fact he quickly drug her into his arms didn’t hurt a bit either. “Please call me Kale.”

Cayla would have been a bundle of nerves seeing him after last night if he hadn’t kissed her so tenderly when he thought her asleep before he left this morning. Of course, the fact he’d called three times to make sure she was all right helped too. But if there were any doubts Kale didn’t regret last night, the kiss he was laying on her right now put all doubts to rest. It may not have been as passionate as the kisses they shared last night, but it was sweet and tender, full of promises of more nights like the former one.

She was not so silly as to believe a simple kiss as any sort of declaration, she had learned against things like that, but coming from Kale, Cayla allowed herself to have a sliver of faith.

“Something smells good,” Kale murmured lifting his lips from hers.

Loathe to step away, she wrapped her arms around him to keep him close just a little while longer. It was hopelessly needy, but she didn’t care. In his arms was where she felt safest, and she would stay in their warmth as long as she could.

“I made lunch,” she murmured against his chest. “Just in case you came...back, you know, for, uh, lunch.”

Damn she sounded like an idiot. What could she say? *I hoped you come home for lunch?* First of all, this was not her home, and secondly, she didn’t want to sound as needy as she felt.

“I was talking about you.”

She was a grown woman, not given to missish manners, yet Kale always made her feel like a teenager on her first date. She felt like shouting to the world, *He likes me! He really likes me!* Instead, she just buried her head in his chest with a muffled, “thank you”. Lord love him, he let her, rubbing her back until she got herself together enough to pull away. Clearing her throat, she gave him a shy smile, taking him by the hand and leading him toward the small kitchen.

“Let me get your lunch.”

Just saying such a mundane domestic thing sent a shaft of pleasure through her. Despite the fact her body was still sore, deliciously so, she took supreme joy in playing the happy homemaker for Kale. If only...

“You sit down,” Kale turned them both so deftly, she hadn’t noticed until they were standing by the sofa. “You look like you have been doing too much already.”

“I like doing things for you!” she insisted, then immediately wished she could take the words back. Damn, she didn’t mean to sound like she was pushing her way into his life.

Her face burning, Cayla suddenly found something fascinating in the shag carpet. Kale cupped her chin, gently raising it so that she was forced to look at him. “I like you doing things for me. But I don’t want you doing too much. I need you healthy.”

Cayla shivered at the rich, deep rumble of meaning in his words. How could he keep doing that? How did he keep making her feel as if she were special to him? She prayed he was serious, because her heart was so tied up in him, she was positive she would break if he rejected her. Even in the face of such vulnerability, she believed he wouldn’t ever hurt her. For the first time in her life, she believed in a person, she trusted in another human being.

For most people, falling in love was something to be expected. Even the most jaded soul believed one day, love would come to them. Cayla had never had any faith in something as fickle as a dream. But as she opened her eyes in the

recovery room, he was there, this fierce dark angel, and she knew. There was no logical explanation. It didn't need to make sense.

"Here, let me feed you." Cayla blinked hard at his words.

"I can do it," she insisted, unsure what to think. She had seen such things on the rare occasion she was able to actually see a movie. These things didn't really happen, did they? How was she to act?

"Cayla," his voice washed over her, putting her at ease once again. It did it with no effort at all. Just a simple word and tension melted off her shoulders like ice before a raging fire. "Baby, I like caring for you. It makes me...you make me feel like a man."

Breath escaped her in a harsh gasp. What did that mean? Was she doing something wrong? Was she too forward? Maybe she had invaded his space, taking over his apartment, going through his things.

"It's not a bad thing." He must have noted the confusion running rampant through her features. "It is a good thing. A very good thing."

"I am not sure how to do this," she confessed as plainly as she could. It was better to just let it all out now, to learn where they both stood. She felt he was offering her more than refuge during her recovery. But she had to be sure. "I- Where are we going with this?"

"Where do you want to go?"

She wanted it all. The picket fence, the two point five kids, the dog.

“Whatever you want to give,” she said instead. No need to freak him out.

“I want — Damn.” A hard lump formed in Cayla’s throat as she watched him place the bowl of steaming soup on the worn coffee table and pace back and forth, his hand running distractedly through his hair.

She had been wrong then. He hadn’t meant anything more than to be nice. She felt like ten times the fool for building up fantasies around him. Was she so desperate for kindness she projected feelings that didn’t exist. What a sorry, lonely sap she was!

“I am not very good at words, Cayla,” he began, stopping and frowning down at her as she sat waiting for the ax to fall. He was a nice man, a good man. Just because she got all caught up in her own stupid attraction was no reason to make him suffer.

“It’s all right,” she interjected. She didn’t want to hear it. She knew the spiel. She was a nice girl, and any man would be lucky to have her, but- . She so didn’t need another “but” right now. She felt stupid enough as it was. “You don’t have to say anything, I understand.”

She refused to look at him. If she looked into those gray eyes of his, she would fall apart right here, and he didn’t deserve that. Instead she looked down at

her work worn hands, concentrating on keeping bitter tears at bay. She had no one to blame but herself, she had known better.

“Sweetheart, I don’t think you do.”

Cayla jumped at the sound of his voice so close. She hadn’t seen him approach or kneel down in front of her. His hands reached out to caress her face, his warm palms feeling like balm to her raw soul. How could his touch make her feel so damn special when he only touched her as a show of kindness? Kindness, and perhaps pity. She was, after all, a pitiful sight.

“Cayla, you make me feel like no woman has ever made me feel before. In the short time I’ve known you, you have become so precious to me. I don’t know what a man is supposed to say at a time like this, I don’t know what to do. But I do know I want this-you and me. I want to come home and see you here every day. I want to provide for you, to keep you safe. Please let me do that for you Cayla. You would make me the happiest man in the world.”

Cayla’s heart drank in his words until she felt as if she was full to bursting. The tears that burned her eyes were no longer tears of sorrow, but of joy. A pure happiness of the soul that lightened the darkest corners of her being. She hadn’t been wrong, he did care about her. From his declaration, he cared about her as much as she cared for him. Maybe he wasn’t ready to proclaim his love, but she was.

“Oh, Kale, I love you so much!”

Throwing herself in his arms, for the first time in her life, Cayla surrendered all her hopes and dreams into another’s hands, and she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, everything would be all right.



Kale returned to the station with a spring in his step. He couldn’t wipe off the foolish grin that split his face the entire drive back. He was late, but he couldn’t give a flying flip. Every second he had spent with his woman had been worth it.

*His woman.* Who would have thought a crusty cop like himself would ever be so blessed. Cayla was everything a man could want and so much more. And she was his. His mind whirled at that fact. He knew to his bones it wasn’t gratitude, or some misplaced hero worship. He had seen that shit before, the blind devotion of someone a cop had saved or helped get justice for. There was something so much deeper between the two of them.

After feeding her every drop of a bowl of soup and grabbing a sandwich for himself, he had just sat and held her for a while. They talked about their hopes and dreams, marveling at how similar their fondest wishes were. Cayla had grown up in foster homes and didn’t remember her real parents. Kale often wished he could

forget his. They may have had completely different upbringings, but the effects had been the same. Neither found it easy to trust, neither had much faith in people.

Where they differed the most was that in spite of all the hardship Cayla had been through, she was still pure at heart. Kale marveled at how she could stay so sweet in light of the life she had lived. Any other person would be bitter and hard. She was anything but. How could he not love her? When she smiled at him it was like the sun breaking through the clouds after a thunderstorm. Everything was all fresh and new.

And when he kissed her.

Kale groaned as his cock stirred at the thought of those soft pillowy lips. He had been damned tempted to take her again right there on the couch. Cayla was so damned responsive, melting into his embrace without the slightest hesitation. She didn't use sex as a weapon like so many women he had known in his past. She gave freely, accepting all he had to offer. He was a heel to have taken her last night, but damn it, who could have refused? It had taken everything he had in him to untangle himself from her a few short minutes ago. Hell, he was tempted to turn the car around and go back.

*Stop being an ass, she needs rest.* Although he had told her to go lay down, she was probably tackling the massive task of setting his office in order. He had noticed his drawers had been magically organized, everything folded neatly and all



fresh smelling. Nothing littered the floors, his laundry basket empty. No corner of his formerly messy apartment was spared her touch.

He had left promising to take her to buy some things for the apartment when she was up to shopping. He wanted her to make the place a home, her home. He had a nice little savings tucked away. Looks like he might be using some of that for a down payment someplace nice and clean -- a place with a yard. Grinning like a loon, he allowed himself to imagine a nice little place in the burbs, a place to raise some kids. He couldn't think of a better woman to have children with than Cayla.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Casterlow," he told himself sternly pulling into the station's parking lot. "First you need to solve this case."

And he would, as soon as humanly possible. He wanted no threat out there to his woman.

The grin returned with a vengeance. *His woman.* Yeah, he liked that.

## Chapter Eight

The thought itched and pecked at the back of Kale's mind all day. Cayla had distracted him from it, allowing him to love and loose himself inside of her. Now, the magic of her presence faded as the cop's instinct sharpened his mind. The fog of calm receded the further he got away from her. Before lunch he'd been musing about the goings-on of the new woman in Julian's life, Stacy.

The alibis she supplied failed to be very convincing, but coupled with that, he couldn't finger Julian for certain. Tunnel vision notwithstanding, he kept looking at his cell phone and wishing for Marvin to call him with the preliminary DNA reports.

He slid into the car parking lot and climbed out. With his mind abuzz, he made his way into the station house. By the time he cleared the entranceway to homicide, Captain Anderson stood red-faced and boiling.

"Casterlow! Where the fuck have you been?"

"Working," Kale said casually back, not liking the crowd of cops staring at the oral reaming the captain laid on him.

“On what?” Captain Anderson spat, lips a white line of fury against his puce face. “Your desk is a fucking trash heap of cases sitting there rotting. So, what the fuck have you been working on, Casterlow?”

“The Porter case,” Kale said sternly, meeting the captain’s furious eyes. “Sir, I...”

“The Porter case,” scoffed Anderson. “Didn’t I tell you to leave that case for the frozen squad to thaw? Get to the heap on that desk, Casterlow, or...”

Kale’s gaze burrowed unflinchingly into his captain. The threat lay open and read for plucking, but Kale knew better. Anderson and he went back to the academy. He knew Kale’s record for solving cases. And he knew that dressing him down like this would only do one thing—make the stubborn streak in Kale widen and dig deeper.

“Sir,” Kale interrupted, his voice rumbling through the department so dangerously low, the buzz of murmurs fell instantly silent. “I’m close to breaking that one. Have four suspects and I’m waiting on the DNA and fingerprints and I’ll have my primary suspect for arresting.”

Captain Anderson smirked and snorted. It rippled out into a guffaw and the rest of the crowd of spectators dispersed, returning to whatever duties they had before the promise of one of the captain’s famous rants. Kale nodded once at the

captain, and he gave him a single nod back before waddling into his office and slamming the door.

Kale stalked over to his desk, shooting black looks at anyone who dared think about approaching him with stupid nonsense. So what his desk and case files increased with each passing day. Anderson could always attach some rookie detective to him as a temporary partner and have the newbie sludge his way through the shit, but he hadn't, because he knew Kale would get them done—in time.

And it would still be sooner than any of the other cops in the homicide squad.

Anderson had simply wanted to call his bluff, dress him down in front of the others because he took so much heat for allowing Kale to work alone and a bit off the chain. None of the other detectives received such privileges, but then again, none of them had Kale's skills.

"Aye, Casterlow!" called one of the fat slobbering detectives. Already huge sweat stains saturated his button-down shirt. "Package for you in interview room three."

Kale kept his poker face as he nodded, as if he knew all along he had a suspect waiting.

*I told all the suspects to go home and not to leave town. So, who's in the box?*

He made his way to the rear of the department's floor where nestled together were four connecting rooms. They served as interview rooms one through four. The interlocking doors locked. This part of the station used to be utilized for other things, but when crime spreads, so does the police staff.

Boxed into interview room three sat a rather plain woman with mousy brown hair and a washed out complexion. Piercing glittered the left ear and old acne scars covered most of her cheeks and forehead. She kept her head tilted at an angle where her greasy hair covered most of her face, but it didn't actually help her out in that area.

Kale smiled, but it held little hint of warmth or pleasure. He couldn't believe his luck.

"Stacy."

He'd only spoken to her a few times, and even then, he hadn't paid her much attention. So, he wouldn't have to go snatch her up later or send a unit for her narrow ass. Nope, she came straight to him. Somebody up there liked him. First he gets the girl of dreams, Cayla, and now someone's dropping suspects into his lap like raindrops on Easter.

"Casterlow!" came a shout so annoyed it automatically put Kale on alert. "Been trying to contact you for over an hour!"

Marvin.

Kale took out his cell phone and checked. Yes. Sure enough, he'd turned it off before he went in to be with Cayla. He wanted their time to be, well, *their* time. Heading back to the station, he'd forgotten to switch the device back on.

"I am entitled to a lunch," Kale said, playfully punching Marvin. "What gives?"

"The DNA gave her up. Points directly to her," he nodded at the skinny pallid girl in the hard folding chair. "Fingerprint, well, the partial thumb, couldn't be ruled out that it belongs to her. Not enough points to match 100%, but it does keep her in the pool, while excluding the other three suspects."

"Yes!" Kale said, fist pumping the air. They got her.

Marvin's face cracked into a smile.

"Did I do good or what?" he asked. "She's as good a gone, right?"

Marvin peered through the one-directional glass at Stacy.

When he didn't get a response, he cut his eyes over to Kale.

"Right?"

Kale's attention had been on the girl too. *Why did you try to kill her? Julian had moved on. Shit, Cayla had moved on, so what? Why? I know she's more woman than you'll ever be in your wildest delusions, but...what madness ran through that drug soaked sponge you call a brain?*

“Well, if I got a confession, she’d be wrapped up tighter than a Christmas ham,” Kale said at last, meeting Marvin’s questioning eyes.

“A confession?” Marvin asked, shaking his head. “There’s enough forensics to send her down the river.”

“That’s not enough.”

“Not enough? Man, death penalty cases have been tried and convicted with less!”

Kale gripped on the door handle tightened. How could he make Marvin understand something as personal as this case had become without throwing the entire thing into chaos? Skating on thin ice met the qualifications for this situation, but he had to know her motive. He had to understand, because Cayla would need to understand, she’d require closure. Above all, his woman would want to reason why someone she didn’t even really know would try to cause her demise.

And Cayla deserved to know everything.

“It’s not enough for me, Marvin,” Kale growled and pushed into the interview room. *Or Cayla.*

“I’m Detective Casterlow,” Kale said, his voice frosty as the winter day. He struggled to shove his displeasure and budding hatred downward. He had enough

to take her to trial. No district attorney would pass on the case he had. Marvin wasn't wrong—murder cases had been solved and convicted with less.

“Why am I back here? I just fucking left two hours ago and as soon as I get home, another fucking cop shows up to bring me back,” Stacy whined, chewed fingertips scratching at the scars on her face. “What the fuck? I got a job, man.”

Kale's face turned hard, the jolly cop vanishing into the folds of his menacing glare.

She shut up. Her eyes took in his face, and she sat up straight in her chair.

“I—I didn't do nothing.”

“Yes, you did,” Kale said. “Tell me why you did it.”

“I'm telling you I ain't did nothing,” she whined louder, more panicked. She flipped her hair over her shoulder and hugged herself tight. “Fuck man.”

“I checked your alibis,” Kale said, launching the assault to dismantle her entire premise of being innocent. “None of the waitresses could confirm your appearance at the restaurant that night.”

“Huh?”

“No one saw you there, Stacy,” Kale explained, patiently, but his words worked like little daggers, tearing through the fabric of her faux innocence. “And with such a busy night, you think someone would have seen you.”



“But, but I, I was...”

Kale shook his head.

“I was!”

“No, you wasn’t,” Kale said sobering. “You were at the corner of Church and Cone firing your .22 at Cayla Porter.”

Stacy bolted out of the chair, sending it crashing to the ground. “Screw you! I totally didn’t try to kill that bitch!”

Kale’s eyebrow rose.

“Bitch? Did you know Cayla Porter?” he asked, calmly.

“No, I don’t know her,” she said, pacing back and forth.

“You called her a bitch,” Kale noted. “That implies some malice.”

Stacy’s had her hands in her hair, tugging on it in angst. If only he could ratchet up her more she might spill.

“Then explain how your fingerprints got all over the shell casing from the bullets fired into my, uh, her?”

That got her. Stacy froze and began to shudder.

“Explain where you were last Thursday night at eight o’clock,” Kale asked, making his voice louder. “Explain how your fingerprints got all over the casings found at the scene. Explain how you are calling her a bitch, when you claim to not know her.”

He stalked up to her and fought down the urge to grab her.

“EXPLAIN!”

Stacy jumped and stumbled backward. Tears spilled out of her eyes and her lips trembled.

Without hesitation, she bellowed. “I hate her! I’m not explaining anything!” she screamed, slamming her hands onto the table.

“But you don’t know her,” Kale said smugly.

Riled up good and proper, Stacy continued to plow on. Now that the dam had been broken, her mouth wouldn’t stop.

“I hate her. Julian always talks about how good she was. Cayla this and Cayla that!” Stacy yelled. “I fucking hate the sight of her!”

“Julian still has photos of her, eh?” Kale asked gently, now only occasionally prodding the now rattled woman to keep talking. He caught the blinking red light of the recording device. Super. The confession would be caught on tape.

“Yeah! He, he takes it out and shows it to me,” Stacy continued to scream. “Whenever I don’t do it right. Cayla always does it right. Like’s she so fucking hot! Fucking bitch! BITCH!”

This last she said in a perfect mimic of Julian’s nasal drawl.

“So, because Julian holds her up as the model of the perfect girlfriend, you decided to kill her? Seems a bit extreme to me,” Kale said, leaning against the door.

His eyes watched Stacy's emotional meltdown with the cool detachment. So what the boyfriend was still hung up on Cayla? What man wouldn't be after a woman like that enters your life and exits?

But to murder?

There had to be more.

The puddle of the woman balling her eyes out the table, shuddering uncontrollably, very near hysteria, couldn't have thought simply eliminating the other woman's existence would somehow eradicate the memory of her. Surely not. Surely the stupid girl didn't believe that.

"I though, I thought," Stacy yelled, fat tears streaming down her marred cheeks. "If she was dead. If she wasn't around anymore, Julian wouldn't, I could, he would..."

The door to the interview room banged open and in strolled Terry with a fistful of paperwork. He shot Casterlow a grim smile before staring down at the mess of a woman. He shoved the top sheet of paper to him and said, "You do the honors. You worked for it."

Kale took the sheet and read the first bold line. An arrest warrant.

Super.

“Stacy Keeter. You are under arrest for the attempted murder of Cayla Porter,” Kale said, feeling the weight on his shoulders lift. “You have the right to remain silent...”

## Epilogue

“I can’t believe that,” Cayla said, snuggling closer to Kale.

He’d taken the three days off after arresting Stacy Keeter. He wanted to break it to Cayla and celebrate the capture of her assailant. Lying on the sofa, he kissed her ear, holding her gently to him as if he never meant to let her go.

And he didn’t.

“I hardly know her,” she said, closing her eyes and kissing his chest.

She felt so good nuzzling against his bare chest. The scent of lavender set his heart racing. God, he wanted to spend his entire life with her, hell, *in her*. He kissed her neck, dropping kisses along the nape of her neck, moaning softly against her.

“She’s gone, baby,” he whispered. “Gone, like the wind.”

“Thank you.”

He held her and kissed her ear lobe. Here she was thanking him, when he’d done nothing but perform the job he’d been paid to do. He’d done the same for any victim, had done it before, but, yeah, he’d been lying if he said he didn’t do it a tad bit differently.

Still, the gratitude exuding from her was unfounded. This woman had given him meaning, purpose and ignited a fire inside him to which only Cayla could

quench. He looked down at her, his heart swelling with growing love. Cayla's eyes shined with unshed tears, and she pushed upward and kissed those heavenly lips, drowning him in her heat. Sweetness and heat spread through him and when he pulled back, he met her eyes again.

“Thank you, baby,” he said, titling her head upward for another fiery kiss.

“For saving me. You’ve made me whole again.”

*The End*

A little bit about the author:

[www.sharaazod.com](http://www.sharaazod.com)

I am a graduate of Trinity University with a B.S. in Business Administration, served in the Navy for four of the most interesting years of my life, and once got arrested in Mexico (wouldn't you love to know why?). I have traveled extensively.

My favorite destination is of course Paris, followed by Bahrain, Hong Kong and Sicily.

I fell in love with romance after reading *The Flame and the Flower* at age 13.

My first attempt at romance was three binders of an ongoing saga of Duran Duran, specifically John, Simon and Roger and myself. I decided to become a writer after I got busted with said notebook, and grounded for the explicit sexual content.

My parents wouldn't believe I had actually never had sex, just read about it. I figured it must have been partly believable.

I married a cowboy from Illinois and have two of the most intelligent, gorgeous children in the world.

I met my husband in Japan, we had our first date in Hawaii, and got married in San Diego. I have lived in Southern California, Chicago, and Sicily and currently reside in the South. I love to hear from fans, so feel free to email.

*Peace and Love,*

*Shara*

Red Rose Publishing:

My Cherie Amour

Ménage a Valentine(Anthology with RaeLynn Blue)

Triple Bow(Anthology with RaeLynn Blue)

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RaeLynn Blue is the author of numerous titles of erotic romance and science fiction. A humble scribbler of tales, RaeLynn is actively writing another story of lust, love, and romance. Join her at <http://raelynnblue.blogspot.com>

### **Red Rose Publishing:**

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