

Giving Up The Ghost by Stacy-Deanne



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Praise For Giving Up the Ghost

If it's a great book you want, Stacy-Deanne is making sure that it's a great book that you will get with **Giving Up the Ghost!** For Detective Brianna Morris, the serial rapist known only as The Albany Predator has just been ousted as her worst case ever. A new attacker is targeting African-American women, and Brianna's best friend Cheyenne Wilson was unfortunate enough to be one of his victims. In **Giving Up the Ghost**, Stacy-Deanne pushes the limits to which Brianna must navigate a lecherous world of lust, logic and elusive lurkers.

~Joey Pinkney, author of *The Soul of a Man*

Giving Up The Ghost is a riveting and engrossing psychological thriller which grabs you from the beginning and refuses to let go until the very end. This fast-paced mystery is an intriguing love triangle of Mayhem, Lust and the Obsessions that inspire the two. Through captivating twists and turns, Stacy Deanne keeps you on the edge of your seat with a suspenseful, "Who Done It" which is a must read for the sheer enjoyment of figuring out the reasons "Why."

~Lorraine Elzia, Author of *Mistress Memoirs* and *Ask Nicely* and *I Might*

CHAPTER ONE

She could die tonight because she'd never seen anything this beautiful.

The April breeze swept against Cheyenne Wilson's face when she walked onto Simon Watts' terrace. She hadn't appreciated the aura of Albany, New York's nightfall in years. She remembered a game she played as a child. She used to stare out her bedroom window at night and try to count the thousands of headlights moving up and down the lanes.

Her frizzy ringlets danced in the breeze. Her gold nail polish caught the light in the corner of the terrace every time she moved her hands. She dug an inch of her peach dress from underneath her bosom. Seemed like every time she moved the humidity glued another part of the flimsy cloth to her caramel-brown skin.

These days Albany citizens had two choices where weather came into play. Either bitch or moan and curse Mother Nature or deal with the wrath of humidity left from the constant thunderstorms. Calm skies were a luxury.

Simon lived in Albany's richest neighborhood cut off from the rest of the city. He still dealt with the nuisance of loud music, barking dogs and car horns from blocks away.

Cheyenne chuckled. So even the rich weren't immune.

The best restaurants in the city surrounded Simon's neighborhood. Cheyenne smelled every aroma from the fried fish at the Asian restaurant to the tacos and enchiladas from that award-winning Mexican restaurant the Mayor raved about.

Crrrraacccckkkk!

Glasses broke.

"Ahhhh!"

Simon screamed from the kitchen.

"Simon you okay?" Cheyenne ran into the living room. Her heels sunk into the thick carpet the faster she moved. The objects in the room thrust into her vision with the speed of a tornado.

Black furniture, white walls, glossy fixtures, portraits, the conventional, classic-style lamps...

"Ahh!"

"Simon!"

"Ahhh! No! No! Uh!"

"Simon!" Cheyenne scampered to the hall. "Simon what's going on?"

"Cheyenne! Uh! Stay away! Get away!"

"Simon!" She laid her hand on her mouth. "Oh god. Simon are you all right?"

She heard him tussling in the kitchen. Could someone else be here?

“Cheyenne go! Run! Leave now!”

“Simon? Simon answer me please!”

Silence.

“Fuck.” She spun in circles around the living room. “Oh god, oh god, oh god.” She chewed the side of her hand. “Where’s the fuckin’ phone?” She searched the room, sweating and wheezing.

Big ass room and no fuckin’ phone?

She got her cell from her purse.

Something moved in the hallway.

She turned around. Her breath locked in her throat.

Footsteps.

“Simon is that you?”

The footsteps stopped.

“Hey I got a gun!” She lied. “You come near me if you want to!”

Bree had helped Cheyenne through some of the roughest times in her life. But right now, none of that outdid the bluffing tactic she’d taught Cheyenne.

When cornered, say you have a weapon especially when you don’t.

Shit. It paid to have a detective as a friend.

Cheyenne dropped the cell phone. It plopped underneath the couch.

“Shit!” She got on her knees and dug for it.

Thunder.

The electricity flickered.

“No, not now. Don’t go out now.” She moved her hand under the couch.

Rain sprinkled into the room from the terrace. Cheyenne flattened her body to the carpet to get a better grip on the phone. One of her fake nails broke off. She snatched the phone. She sat up on her knees and started to dial.

The electricity went out.

“God damn it! Shit! Not now!” Cheyenne crawled and fumbled through the darkness. “Shit!” She heard breathing in the room. She laid her shaking hand on her chest.

"I...I have a gun." She closed her eyes. "Fuck."

Someone grabbed the front of her dress. Still on her knees, she slid towards them.

"Ahh!"

She dropped the phone. Her knees burned against the carpet.

She broke free. She got up and tried to run to the terrace.

If she couldn't see them, maybe they couldn't see her.

Or maybe they could.

Her arms were snatched back.

"Ahhhh! Ohhh!"

They snatched her by the hair and tossed her.

"Ohhh!"

She landed on the couch, tumbled and flipped onto the floor.

Lighting sparked the room.

Her knees tingled from being scratched on the carpet. Her arms

felt like they'd been popped out their sockets. Her head pounded. She squinted, desperate to see the person in front of her but it was too dark.

They moved closer.

A speck of lightening allowed Cheyenne to see the shimmer of something gold in front of her.

The footsteps got closer. She couldn't see who held the object, but definitely recognized it. She'd fallen in love with Simon's little golden angel statue the first time she saw it.

Now she was afraid of it.

The lightening stopped. The room went pitch black again.

"Please don't hurt me." She coughed from a lack of breath. Vomit swirled in her stomach. Thick drool lathered between her lips.

The little angel dangled over her.

She clawed and kicked through blackness.

"No...please." She threw her arms up. "Someone help me! Help me! He..."

The statue cracked the base of Cheyenne's skull.

◆◆◆◆◆

“Detective Brianna Morris?”

“Yes?”

The tall black woman’s eyes locked on the man with the white coat and clipboard standing in the hospital waiting room. She moved from the soda machine. Her fingers left prints in the Styrofoam coffee cup. Her ponytail shifted until a few curls escaped the rubber band. Humidity banded the loose strands to the back of her neck.

“I’m Dr. Walden.” He shook her hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Yeah I wish it was under other circumstances.”

Her curvy lips and sleek nose turned an otherwise plain face into one worthy of being painted by Monet.

She sipped the last drop of her coffee. “How is Cheyenne? May I see her?”

“She just came out of surgery and she’s in intensive care right now.”

“Intensive...” Brianna stood against the vending machine. “So I can’t see her?”

“Follow me and I’ll gladly fill you in on the details.”

They went down three long halls and turned right towards the elevator.

“Doctor what can you tell me? Is she gonna be all right?”

“It’s too soon to comment on that.”

They got on the elevator.

“Well isn’t there something you can tell me?”

“She pulled through surgery but Cheyenne suffered extensive blows to the head. Her skull was severely fractured. We didn’t see any significant brain trauma but we’re still running tests so we don’t know if her recovery will be the success we hope. With head injuries, things can crop up after the fact.”

“Is she in a lot of pain?” Brianna propped the back of her foot on the elevator wall. “I just don’t want her to suffer anymore than she already has.”

“We’re keeping her heavily sedated so she’s able to rest.” Walden studied his clipboard.

“We looked through her things for next of kin or someone to contact but your name and number was the only thing in her billfold.”

Brianna chewed the side of her cup. “She doesn’t have any family.”

“Really?” Walden held the elevator door for her to get off first.

“That’s one of the reasons I promised I’d always be there for her. She doesn’t have many people in her life.”

“It’s sad to hear that, Detective Morris.”

They walked down the freezing ICU hall. The walls, floor, everything shined an eye-blinding white. She'd been up here many times thanks to her occupation. Always felt one step closer to death whenever she came down these halls.

She peeked through the corridors and doorways as they passed. He could be here right now. He always stayed a step ahead.

"Detective?"

"Huh?" She almost bumped into Walden.

"Are you all right? Did I lose you?"

"Oh." She felt her forehead. "Sorry I had something else on my mind. Just worried you know? What were you saying?"

He moved aside for a male nurse to pass.

"I was just inquiring about your relationship with Cheyenne. I mean..." He switched the clipboard from under one arm to the other.

"You two must be very close since you were named as her emergency contact."

"Uh yes." She walked with her hands locked behind her back. "I met Cheyenne when I was investigating a serial rape case."

"Ah yes." He plucked his chin with the end of his clipboard. "I remember, the Albany Predator case right?"

"Yes."

"He was raping African-American women and killed some didn't he?"

Brianna held her breath. Desperate not to remember the fear she felt when she almost became one of the Predator's prize victims. Of course over the last few months, she'd become accustomed to living in fear. A new predator claimed Brianna as his victim.

And this man could teach the Albany Predator a thing or two about elusiveness.

She couldn't avoid him and she couldn't stop him. She didn't even know where to look or who to look for. Going after other criminals were easier because after months of studying them, she always picked up on vital clues. Not this time. This man not only played the game like a skilled pro but Brianna began to believe he might have even invented it.

"You should be congratulated, Detective Morris. No one thought the Predator would be caught but you did it."

She smiled. "I appreciate that but I don't think of it as any different than any other rape case I've worked on."

“But surely you have to. Shoot I remember how scared everyone was.” Walden pushed up his glasses. “My wife’s not black but even she didn’t wanna leave the house. Remember the Mayor had everyone in the city on curfew.”

“Yeah well that’s...”

“He broke into your home and attacked you didn’t he? I remember that from the papers.”

She closed her eyes.

“He almost killed your partner and...”

She stopped in mid stride. “Can we just get back to Cheyenne please?”

Walden stepped back and dropped his shoulders. “I’m sorry. How insensitive of me? You probably wish you could forget that case everyday don’t you?”

“Just understand that Cheyenne means a lot to me. I promised her I’d always protect her and I vow to keep that promise. I’m not gonna let the person who did this get away with it.”

“I can tell you care.”

She touched his arm. “Just be up front with me okay? What happens if she has trauma to the brain after all? Are you talking about something that can’t be fixed?”

“Don’t know until we see the remaining tests. Her head was cracked open.”

“Jesus.” She counted the little lines dividing the squares of the floor tile as they walked.

“Yeah I gotta tell you I’m shocked she even survived, Detective Morris.”

They walked past a row of beds with privacy only provided by thin curtains.

“I assumed she had her own guardian angel ya’ know?” Walden led Brianna to Cheyenne’s bed and pushed back the curtain. “Now meeting you, I know for sure she does.”

“Believe me if I were her guardian angel, this wouldn’t have happened.” Brianna froze at the sight of the battered woman. “Oh god.”

Bandages and tape covered eighty percent of Cheyenne’s face and head. She lay so still Brianna couldn’t tell if she were breathing. Tubes hung from her nose, mouth and arm.

“See the discoloration underneath her right eye?” Walden pointed to the swollen, purple area.

“Uh-huh.”

“She was hit so hard that the blows caused the discoloration. She had fluid building in that part of the face but we’re giving her something to drain it off. If she hadn’t gotten to surgery when she did she would have definitely died. Just a minute later could have made the difference.”

“That son of a bitch.” Brianna’s eye caught a tear. “He’s not gonna get away with this.” She twisted the curtain in her hand. “I don’t care what I have to do, he’s not getting away with this.”

“Detective Morris, do you know who did this?”

That would be the question of the hour. Her new predator would do anything to get to her. He’d said that many times. Would attacking her friend be a way to get her attention?

“Detective Morris?” Walden touched her shoulder.

She had to be objective. She needed to think like a cop and not a woman fighting every day for peace of mind. Yet she’d become both. Anyone could have done this to Cheyenne but only one person seemed to have a motive.

Was he really this twisted?

“Detective Morris?” Walden pulled her from the curtain.

“Huh?”

“Detective, you sure you don’t need a check-up yourself? You don’t look well at all.”

“I’m fine.” She tugged at her blouse. “This could cause permanent damage couldn’t it?”

Walden nodded. “The good news is that she’s stable and her vitals are good. She lost a lot of blood but we’re getting a handle on that. Like I said, we’ll know more when the tests are all done.”

“So you guys didn’t call the police, only me?”

“Yes. We would’ve called the police but since you were a detective, we decided to call you first and go from there.”

“You should have called the police, Dr. Walden.”

He shrugged. “You’re right I suppose. I was with another patient when it happened. The nurses should have called the police.”

“So how did Cheyenne get here in the first place? Obviously she didn’t drive.” Brianna touched Cheyenne’s freezing hand.

“She was brought in. That’s what the ladies in admittance say.”

“By who?”

His glasses tilted off his square nose. “I haven’t a clue, Detective.”

“You didn’t ask?”

“Well no...”

“Dr. Walden wouldn’t you say this isn’t your average situation where a patient is concerned? The first thing I’d have done was ask for all details.”

“Detective Morris it’s been very hectic around here and the place has been a zoo. We have patients in and out of trauma I guess...” He looked at Cheyenne. “You’re right. I have no excuse. I guess we were

so focused on helping Cheyenne we didn't worry about anything else."

"No, look I apologize. It's the cop in me. We're always thinking of the details. I suppose it's a little different for doctors."

"Just different type of details I guess. I'm sorry, Detective Morris."

She straightened the curtain. "Here's my card and everything. Give me a call if you learn anything else."

"I definitely will."

Brianna walked backwards through the curtain. "I'll be back tomorrow."

"Uh, Detective? Before you go there's the matter of insurance. We didn't find that Cheyenne has any type of policy."

"Cheyenne could barely afford her rent let alone health insurance."

"Well there has to be arrangements."

"Don't worry about it okay? I'll take care of everything. Put my name on anything that has to do with her bills."

"Detective Morris uh, you sure you wanna do that? Put yourself out like that?"

Her eyes shifted to the curtain separating Cheyenne's bed.

"Well you said it yourself right? I'm her guardian angel."

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Detective Steven Kemp's doorbell rang for the fourth time.

"Hold on!" He ran downstairs with his bed sheet around his waist.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"I'm comin'!" He fumbled with the sheet. "Moron."

His body flushed with intense heat when he saw the beautiful woman in the peephole.

He opened the door. "Hey, Bree."

His short blond hair absorbed the sweat from his forehead and neck. He tried to read her thoughts but he'd need a psychic to do that these days.

He closed the door behind her, taking a whiff of her peach perfume along the way.

"Hmm, what a surprise."

"I need to talk to you, Steve."

"Really?" He lowered his blue eyes to her shivering fingers. "I kinda got that feeling."

His nipples hardened when her eyes stroked his naked chest.

She pointed to the sheet. "Are you naked?"

He wrapped the sheet tighter. "Duh, I was asleep."

"When did you start sleeping naked?"

He scratched his chest. "Why you worried about it?" His blue eyes lit up. "You don't sleep with me anymore."

"I'm not worried about it. I could care less how you sleep." She went into the kitchen. She'd poured a glass of milk before Steven got into the room.

"What's up, Bree?" He sat at the table. "You're not the kind to drop by late at night for no reason." He rocked his legs. "Unless I'm still dreaming?"

"Yeah you wish." She finished the milk and put the glass in the sink.

"Hey, don't put the glass in the sink. Leave it on the counter."

She moved the glass.

"And did you forget you're lactose intolerant?"

"I needed something to calm my nerves." She leaned over the counter. "My heart's beating so fast."

"Bree, honey you can talk to me about anything. You know that."

She hid her tears underneath her palms.

"Bree, what's happened? You okay?"

"Cheyenne she..." She folded her arms. "She was attacked tonight."

"What?"

"Steven she looked horrible." She sucked in tears. "I can't get it out of my head. I keep seeing her lying in that bed all wrapped up, struggling for her life."

He passed her a paper towel.

"She was beaten on the head and left for dead." She walked around the table. "No one knows shit. The doctor didn't know anything and the nurses didn't know anything."

Steven's sheet slid from his waist.

"Someone's gotta know something. They just don't know they know it."

"It's all my fault." She leaned over the kitchen table.

"The hell it is. Don't go blaming yourself for this too, Bree."

"I promised I'd protect her, Steven! And I didn't."

“What the hell could you have done? She was attacked. It’s not like anyone knew it would happen.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She moved from his touch. “I told Cheyenne I wouldn’t let anything else happen to her. I didn’t keep that promise.”

“The woman was attacked. You’re not psychic, you didn’t know it would happen.”

“Funny it doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“Maybe not but you’ve done a lot for Cheyenne and I’m not gonna let you beat yourself up over this.”

“I just can’t believe this you know? How much bad luck can one person have? She’s a great person, Steven. She’s never hurt anyone but she can’t seem to catch a break. You know how long it took her to finally get over being raped.”

“Yeah I know.”

“And now this? Forget physically. She might not ever recover mentally. She could be scarred for the rest of her life.”

“Cheyenne is tougher than you think she is.”

“Oh come on, Steve. Who could take all this shit and come through it like nothing happened?”

“I didn’t say she’d ever forget, but she’ll get through this. You’ll be there to help her like you always have been.”

“Right.” She ran her finger across the stove. “Like I was there for her tonight huh?”

He caressed her shoulders. “She’s always known she can count on you. But you can’t keep trying to save the world. When are you gonna realize you’re human too?”

“I should have been there.” She moved to the sink. “I’ll never forgive myself for this.”

He stood in front of her. “I can’t tell you how to feel. All I can say is that you shouldn’t beat yourself up about this.” He took her hands.

“You’ve been a great friend to her, Bree. She’s not gonna blame you for any of this.”

“But I blame myself.”

Ring! Ring!

“Ahh!” Brianna hovered in Steven’s arms.

“Bree? What the…”

Ring! Ring!

She crept from his embrace. Her fingers dug into the counter behind her.

“Bree it’s just the phone.”

Her eyes stayed on the kitchen doorway.

Ring! Ring!

“Bree look at me all right?” He shook her. “What’s going on?”

“Aren’t you gonna answer it?”

“No.”

The ringing stopped.

Brianna inched to the doorway.

“Bree, you practically jumped outta ya’ damn skin now what’s going on?”

Sweat filled her face.

“Bree look at me.”

She did. Her eyes were on him but she didn’t seem quite there.

“Bree?” He grabbed her arms. “I’m worried about you. You jump when the phone rings at work and now you almost had a heart attack.”

“It’s nothing.” She shoved his hands away.

“Bullshit. Tell me what’s going on with you.”

“Just seemed strange that you’d get a call this late.” She tangled her fingers together.

“Isn’t it strange to you?”

“Not really. What’s strange is how you’ve been acting lately.”

“I’m just under pressure.” She dabbed her face with the paper towel. “So much is going on. That molestation case we just wrapped up and now Cheyenne.”

“No this is about you, Bree.”

“Just leave it alone, Steven. Please.”

“I can’t.” He put his arms around her. “I care about you too much to look the other way.”

“Steven.”

“And you know that. I don’t have to tell you. You know how I feel.” He brought his mouth to hers. “I can’t stop caring about ya’, Bree.

I don’t want to.”

“Steven stop it.” She turned her head. “I have a lot on my mind right now. This is the last thing I wanna think about right now.”

“I won’t stop trying to get us back to where we used to be, Bree. Where we both want and need to be.”

“I gotta go.”

He blocked her. “But you don’t really want to do you?”

She pried his hands from her waist. “Bye, Steve.”

“You can’t run from this, Bree. I won’t let you.”

She left.

CHAPTER TWO

Ring! Ring! Ring!

Brianna set the carton of milk on her kitchen counter an hour later. She took a deep breath and counted to ten. That familiar, alarming chill fell through the house.

“Meow!” Davis sat on the edge of the stairs licking his paws.

Just thinking about the caller’s maniacal voice scared her before she answered the phone. She tiptoed into the living room. Everything stood silent except the taunting chimes of the clock in the upstairs hallway.

She stared at the phone beside the couch. She could ignore him but that didn’t work with stalkers. He knew she was home. He knew everything. She knew nothing. She couldn’t dissuade him. She couldn’t control him. But she danced to his tune like a puppet. No amount of surveillance, tracing and threatening had brought any answers.

He kept the same anonymity he had from the beginning. She rubbed the front of her pink top. She straightened the ends of her blue shorts. Her mind ran through every horrid thought she could have imagined.

She picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Mmm. That’s something I’ve been missing. You don’t know how much I needed to hear your pretty voice today.” Brianna shut her eyes. “What? You got nothing to say to me, sweetie? Nothing to say to the love of your life?”

“I’ve taken all the shit I’m gonna to take from you. You’re not gonna continue to do this to me.”

“You say that all the time but you haven’t stopped me yet.”

Davis slipped into the living room. The brownish-tan feline stopped by Brianna’s feet.

“I keep telling you this just gonna keep happen’, love. What do I have to do to show you I’m the boss and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“And that’s what it’s all about isn’t it?” She turned in a half-circle.

“You having control over me. It’s that simple.”

“Hmm, not really.”

She gazed in midair as if he stood right in front of her.

“You’re not in control like you think you are. You’re a coward. If you weren’t you’d face me and stop hiding.”

“Ohh, baby.”

He breathed so deeply into the phone she almost felt it.

“Oh honey is that an invitation?”

She twisted the phone cord between her fingers. She burst into a horrid sweat that drenched her from head to toe.

“See, I’ve wanted that from the beginning, Brianna. You’ll never know how much. But let’s not play games okay?”

“Oh no?” Her voice caught in her throat. “Thought you liked to play games.”

“What I meant is, you already see me all the time. You see me in your dreams and every time you try to forget me, I’m always there. I know that. We’re bonded, honey. Not even I can stop that. There’s just no way.”

“I will find you. And I won’t hesitate to take the law into my own hands when I do.”

“Oooh you promise, Brianna?” He sucked his tongue. “See this is what excites me. Every time you threaten me and get upset, you show your fear. That’s when I know I got you.”

“And what if I told you I’m not gonna let you get to me anymore? Would that make you go away?”

“Ahh, you don’t really want that, Brianna. Deep down you like playing my little reindeer games. It makes our relationship all worthwhile.”

“We don’t have a relationship. I am gonna find out who you are.”

“You gonna find out what happened to your friend too?”

“What?” She almost kicked Davis when she moved. “What did you say?”

“You heard me.”

She backed into the table.

He laughed. “Now I know you can’t be surprised! I know everything about you. I know your friends. I know where you work, where you live, who you talk to, when you leave the house. I even know about the guys you’ve fucked and the ones who wanna fuck you.”

“Stop it.” Her knees quivered.

“Mmm but there’s something I don’t know. I don’t know what you look like when you come.”

“Stop it!”

“But I plan to know real soon. You can count on that, baby.”

“You shut your fuckin’ mouth.” She pressed her palm over the receiver. “If you had anything to do with Cheyenne’s attack I will kill you.” Sweat dribbled down her lips. “You understand me? I will fuckin’ kill you.”

“I love you, Brianna.”

“You don’t know how to love anyone! You stay away from the people I care about.”

“Hey, you’ve got it all wrong. I didn’t attack your friend.”

“Like I’d believe you. You’d do anything to get my attention!”

“I already own your attention. I didn’t have nothing to do with Cheyenne’s attack.”

“Bullshit.”

“You can believe it or don’t. But the fact is looks like someone was trying to make her pay attention. Take a lesson from that, Brianna. Because like the person who attacked Cheyenne, I don’t like being ignored either. Ever.”

Click.



“Okay Morris, we’re alone now.” Captain Jersey closed her office door the next day. Brianna watched her older, pale superior than continued her thoughts. Jersey’s green eyes glittered like Christmas lights against the red in her glasses. She stuffed a loose strand of her reddish-gray hair back into her bun.

“What did you want to say about Cheyenne’s attack that you couldn’t mention in front of Kemp?”

“I know that as cops we aren’t supposed to jump to conclusions.

I also know that in this line of work, things don’t come easy. Clues I mean.”

“True. Morris why are you talking in riddles? Can’t you just spit it out? We both have a lot of work today.”

“I got another phone call last night. From him.”

“Oh, no.” Jersey scratched underneath her glasses. “Well what did he say this time?”

“Look it’s bad enough he’s forced himself into my life. He’s not going to hurt the people I care about. I won’t let him.” She paced.

“Captain I’ve been up all night trying to see why someone would hurt Cheyenne. We don’t know the why or even the where concerning this. But maybe the major points aren’t all that’s important.”

“What are you getting at?”

“It’s a chain reaction, a domino effect. He’s...he’s been toying with me. He’s been a step ahead. He wanted me to think he stopped but he hadn’t. He lives on playing with me and jerking my emotions. What better way to get my attention than to do something like this right?”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Jersey propped up on her desk. “Are you saying that the man who is stalking you might be the person who attacked Cheyenne Wilson?”

Brianna turned from Jersey’s somber expression. She tried to block out noise from the rampant detectives down the hall.

“Morris I want to catch this guy more than anything and we’re doing all we can, and being discreet. But what makes you think your stalker did this? It makes no sense to me.”

She chewed the tip of her finger. "None of this makes sense. I don't have any proof or anything but I know he has something to do with this. I know it."

"What would be the motive?"

"Damn Captain you know what it would be! To get back at me! To make me pay attention to him! All he wants is to have me jump through hoops and play this game with him. Wants to see how far I'll let him push me. He's playing with me like I'm on a fuckin' Monopoly board! It's one thing to bother me but when he tries to hurt people I care about, I can't let that happen." She stood behind Jersey's chair. "We have got to find him now. It's not just about me anymore."

"Easier said than done. We've been on this man for months, Brianna. Nothing has worked. We can't trace his calls. You don't even know what he looks like! You can't even tell what his voice really sounds like because he talks so low on the phone." Jersey sat at her desk. "You got all this crap to deal with. Cheyenne's attack is the last thing you need to worry about."

"I don't give a damn. I'm gonna find out who did this to her. It connects to me, Captain."

Jersey dug through her drawer. "I heard this morning they're giving it to Homicide downtown."

"Who?"

Jersey filled her cup with coffee. "Our beloved Jayce Matthews."

"Homicide? Why? There was no murder."

"It was an attempted murder, Morris."

"It was an assault. That's Steven and my neck of the woods. Look I like Jayce but he's not gonna put the time into this case that I would."

"It's Jayce's case. You can't do anything about that."

"Well Steven and I are gonna work on it too."

"Morris."

"We don't have another case right now, Captain. You got something for us?"

Jersey shook her head.

"Well then. And even if I did have another case I'm not leaving this up to Jayce. Cheyenne's my friend. I didn't stop her from being attacked but I damn sure will do all I can to find out who did it."

"You gotta start thinking about your own life. You gotta take this nut seriously."

"I am taking it seriously!" Brianna bent over the desk. "I deal with this every damn day, no one else, me."

"Everything we've tried hasn't worked. I think we'd be a lot better off if we pull others in."

"No."

"Morris."

"I don't want anyone else to find out! I sure as hell don't want Steven to know. I don't want folks hovering over me and treating me like some victim."

"You are the victim." Jersey stood. "Maybe it's time you accept that. Jumping into Cheyenne's situation isn't gonna change yours. Sooner or later you're gonna have to face that this is really happening."

"You promised me this would be between us."

"We can at least tell Kemp. I don't feel right keeping this from him."

"I don't mean to be rude Captain but let me handle this the way I want to."

"There's something you're not addressing, Morris."

She grabbed the doorknob. "What?"

"If this man really did attack Cheyenne, he could do the same thing to Steven."

"That won't happen."

"Please. How do you know that?"

"Because I won't let it happen, Captain. He won't hurt anyone else I care about."

"You can't promise that, Morris."

"The hell I can't."



Brianna and Steven squeezed their way through the crowd blocking the entrance doors of the hospital. Police cars sped towards the building with their sirens blaring. Fire trucks, including the Fire Marshall's vehicle parked by the side entrances and exits. A van from Channel Five News drove through the gathering onlookers.

People who weren't included in the latest firefighter accident rushed inside before paramedics brought two firefighters in on gurneys. The firefighters were rushed down the hall so fast that a cloud of smoke followed. People covered their noses as the harsh stench of smoke and soot clouded the front of the hospital.

Brianna pushed her nose in her blouse.

"It's from that fire downtown." Steven covered his nose with a tissue. "I heard about it on my way to work."

They approached the ladies at the admittance desk.

"Aww, man." Brianna stretched. "I swear if I had the chance, I could sleep a month."

Steven flicked her ponytail. "You didn't sleep well last night did you?"

"No." She put her hand on her hip. "But that's not unlike any night lately."

“So we gonna keep dancing or are you gonna tell me what’s going on with you?”

“Don’t start, Steven. Leave it alone.”

“What that you’ve been jumping outta your skin lately? Bree let me help you.”

“I don’t need your help.” She lowered her voice when someone passed.

“You in some kinda trouble?”

“We’re here for Cheyenne, Steve. Not me.”

“Yeah you say that but I’m not convinced.”

A chubby woman in a blue smock walked behind the counter with a Coke.

“May I help you?” She sat down with her side rolls hanging out the chair.

Steven showed his badge. “Detective Steven Kemp and Detective Brianna Morris with the Albany Police Department.” He put his badge up. “Need to ask some questions about a patient, Cheyenne Wilson who was admitted last night. She’d been attacked, beaten on the head.”

The lady shoved a McDonald’s sack off her keyboard. “Uh, Cheyenne Wilson?”

“Yes,” Brianna said. “Someone brought her in last night and we’re hoping someone around here got a name of the person or can tell us anything that will help.”

The lady picked her teeth with her pinky nail. “Okay let me check for you.”

She scrolled through a list of names. “Okay here she is I see. She’s in ICU?”

“Yes.” Brianna leaned to see the computer screen.

“Well it doesn’t have a name for anyone who brought her in.” The lady checked another list. “Nope, no name was given.”

“So you can’t tell us anything? I was here last night and Dr. Walden said you guys saw who brought her in.”

“I wasn’t working last night. Marsha was.”

“Well?” Steven smacked the counter. “Could you please get Marsha then?”

“Sure.” She dialed the phone. “Let me uh see what floor she’s on right now.”

A petite woman with limp blond hair and her arm in a cast walked up.

“Marsha’s not in yet, Ruth.”

The blond smiled at Brianna but seemed to find it hard to take her eyes off the handsome officer beside her.

“Oh she’s not?” Ruth hung up the phone.

The blond rested her injured arm on the counter. "Is there something I can help with?"

"Were you here last night?" Steven asked.

"Why yes." Her eyes scanned Steven from head to toe. "I'm Janet. You are?"

"I'm Detective Steven Kemp and this is my partner Brianna Morris."

Brianna waved.

"Detectives?" Janet stood up straight.

"We're trying to find out who brought in a patient, Cheyenne Wilson last night." Brianna tapped her palm with her fist. "On the computer it doesn't have a name but I spoke to Dr. Walden last night and I know someone brought her in."

"Yes I remember her. She was beaten right?"

"Right." Brianna sighed. "Now we're finally getting somewhere."

"Hopefully." Steven scratched the back of his neck.

"Yeah a man brought her in but he ran off before we could get him to sign in or tell us his name."

Brianna took out her notepad. "What did this man look like?"

"Uh." Janet's head fell to the side. "He got my attention quick. Not just because he was with this injured lady, but because of how he was acting."

"And how was he acting?" Steven asked.

"A little jumpy. I thought it was just because he was worried about the lady but when he left the way he did, I found it suspicious."

"Yet no one bothered to call the police." Brianna got her pen out her back pocket.

"Tell us what you can about this man okay?"

Janet nodded at Steven. "He was a white guy. He was tall."

"How tall?" Brianna scribbled on the pad.

"About as tall as both of you are. Very tall."

"Bree's six-feet and I'm six-three. Which one did he seem closer to?"

"About your height." Janet slunk against the counter. "I'd say six-three at least."

"Okay." Steven rubbed his chin. "What else?"

"He was about early thirties I'd say."

"Early thirties?" Brianna jotted.

“Yeah.”

“What about clothes?” Steven asked. “Can you remember what he was wearing?”

“Hmm.” She bit her fingernail. “Well you guys know it was raining very heavy last night. He had on a raincoat. I couldn’t tell what else he had on because his coat was closed. He had on a hat too.”

“What kind of hat?” Brianna waved the pad. “Baseball cap, knit cap, rain hat, what?”

“No it was a small hat. Like a tam or something. Dark color, I don’t remember if it was black or navy or brown. There were so many people in here, walking in and out I couldn’t tell the exact color.”

“Any other distinctions?” Brianna flicked her ponytail off her shoulder. “Did he have an earring, tattoo, facial hair? Anything that made him stick out?”

“I couldn’t tell if he had an earring or tattoo but he did have a goatee. I guess he had brown hair because the goatee was brown but I couldn’t see his hair because of the hat. He had very pretty eyes but they looked kind of sneaky.”

“What color eyes? Blue like mine?” Steven pointed to his eyes.

“No.” Janet blushed. “They weren’t as pretty as yours.”

Steven smirked.

“I’d never forget that shade of blue.”

Brianna tapped the pad. “What color did the man’s eyes look?”

“They were light. I’d say gray or maybe hazel. At least that’s what they looked like from a distance.”

“Is that all you can remember?” Steven slid in behind Janet.

“Yes.” She stiffened. “If I think of anything else I’d be more than happy to tell you guys.”

Brianna closed the pad. “I bet you will.”

“Oh uh, he looked like he had money.”

“Why you say that?”

Janet faced Steven. “I swear that hat was Armani. Fashion magazines are my life. Oh yeah and he had on sneakers. I think Sean John.”

“Sean John sneakers huh?” Steven sucked his lip.

“And his watch was probably a Rolex at least. It was very elegant. I can’t be sure of the brand but it looked very expensive.”

“Call us if you think of anything else all right?” Steven passed Janet their cards.

She shoved them inside her smock. “I’ll call you even if I don’t.”

CHAPTER THREE

Steven and Brianna piled behind the crowd in front of the Flamingo strip club that night.

Usually Brianna avoided the Flamingo like the plague but seeing how Cheyenne's place of work might hold the answers they needed, she couldn't be picky.

Men ran from all directions and headed straight to the gyrating strippers on stage. People raced up and down the parking lot waving cans out the window and yelling. Brianna and Steven were swept inside by the typhoon of loud patrons.

Brianna couldn't take safety for granted no matter how crowded the place was. Any one of these men could be her stalker. She studied faces and body language. Made a mental note of every man in that room.

Yet still had no idea whom to look for.

"Owww!"

A gang of young guys danced in front of the stage. Others grabbed at the strippers only to be thrown back by the bouncers. Men dropped beer on the floor and fondled the passing waitresses.

Brianna moved back and forth to save her feet from being trampled by the human traffic.

Springsteen's "Adam Raised a Cain" echoed from the speakers across the room.

"Steve!" Brianna covered her ears. "Damn it's more crowded than usual in here!"

"Huh?"

"I said it's more crowded than usual!"

"Whoo! Hoo!" Men danced between the detectives.

"I think I know why, Bree!" Steven pointed to the sign over the bar.

"They're having a discount on beer tonight!"

"Oh great! The last thing anyone in here needs is cheap beer! God I hate this place!"

"What?"

"I said I hate this place!"

A leather bra flew over Brianna's head.

"Whoa, Bree." Steven pulled her out the line of fire. "Almost got'cha there huh?"

"I tell you my patience is running out!"

A bucktooth man with two king-sized beers bumped into Brianna.

"I hope someone here can tell us something, Steve. I can't take much more of this!"

"I told you to let me come by myself!" He danced and snapped his fingers.

“Yeah right! Something tells me you wouldn’t have been able to keep your mind on business!”

He laughed.

“Oww!”

“Yeah!”

“Whoo, baby!”

“Steve!”

“Huh?” He laid his hand on Brianna’s back.

“This place makes me feel like a piece of meat.”

“Ha, ha! Come on, it ain’t that bad.”

“Yeah I’m sure it’s heaven for you!”

“Hopefully Juney’s working tonight!” Steven stretched to see over the crowd.

“Oh god let her be here! I’m serious, Steve! I’m two seconds from leaving!”

“You know you wanna find out what happened to Cheyenne.” He pushed her out of the path of raging men. “If anyone knows anything about Cheyenne it would be Juney.” He nudged her. “Hey, Bree. Check it out.”

“What?”

“Hey ain’t that Ryan from work?” Steven pointed to the young man with the coal black hair and blazing blue eyes. He wasn’t holding the same enthusiasm as the other guys in the club.

“Yeah that’s him.” Brianna jumped up and down. “Ryan!” He turned around in the booth.

“Ryan over here!”

“Hey, guys!” He galloped to the detectives with a half-empty glass of beer.

“Ryan, dude!” Steven slapped his back.

“Hey, Steve. Bree.”

“Hey, Ryan.” She crossed her arms. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Oh yeah?” He looked towards the stage. “What man wouldn’t wanna be in a room full of beautiful semi-naked women?”

Steven play-punched him. “Well shit when the fellas asked you to come here with us last week you said this wasn’t your thing. Makes me think you didn’t wanna hang with us.”

He blushed. “No nothing like that. I got a little lonely you know? It’s not easy being new in the city and not having any friends.”

“Oh now you know that’s not true.” Brianna put her arm around his shoulder. “You’re one of us.”

“Yeah, man.” Steven jabbed Ryan’s chest. “You know we stick together.”

“You mean you cops stick together.” He sipped. “I just work at the station, getting mail and running errands. Not exactly on you guys’ level.”

“Ryan it’s not like that believe me, “ Brianna said. “We think you’re a great kid.”

He looked into his glass. “Kid?”

“I didn’t mean anything by that.”

“No I...I get it.”

She touched his shoulder. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Oh!” He laughed. “Come on, Bree. You could never offend me.”

“Well you can hang with us anytime you want.”

“You mean that, Bree?”

“Of course I do.”

He finished his beer. “Well I’d better go. Gotta be up bright and early. Oh by the way.” He snapped his fingers. “What are you two doing here?”

“On official business, can you believe it?” Steven chuckled.

“A case or something?”

“Yeah. A friend of mine was attacked and Steven and I are doing our part to find out what happened.”

“Oh man that’s horrible, Bree. I hope they’re okay.”

“I hope she’ll be but to be honest, not sure yet. She’s in ICU.”

“I really hope she’s okay. I’ll keep her in my prayers for you.”

Brianna smiled. “I appreciate that.”

“Yeah.” He broke his stare. “Well I gotta get outta here. It was great seeing you guys.”

“Oh hey, man!” Steven raised his arms. “Debra’s been bragging about you. Said you put in a new alarm system in her place.”

“Oh yeah.” Ryan shook his glass. “It’s a hobby of mine. I know a lot about alarm systems and locks. Always interested me.”

“Well Debra was impressed,” Steve said. “Said you did a great job and she’s never felt so secure.”

“I was uh...thinking of getting an alarm system.”

“Since when, Bree?”

“Does it matter, Steve?”

“No just surprising that’s all. You always said you didn’t like alarm systems.”

“Well uh...” She cleared her throat. “A woman can never be too safe can she?”

“She’s right, Steve. A lot of things can happen to a woman living alone, cop or not. Tell you what, Bree. If you ever wanna talk about getting a system then let me know. I’d love to help you. I’d get you a good price.”

“That’s very sweet, Ryan.”

“Well I’ll see you guys.” Ryan dissolved into the crowd.

“Cool guy if only he’d relax.”

Brianna fidgeted. “I still don’t see Juney.”

“If she’s not here we might have to try another time.”

Brianna massaged her temples. “I can’t take much more of this noise.”

“Hey, Steve!” Tim, the bartender slid drinks to the end of the bar.

“Tim! Hey, man!” Steven and Brianna burrowed through the crowd at the bar.

“Steve what’s happen’ huh?” The men bumped fists. “Didn’t expect to see you here. Oh and hello to you too, Detective Morris.”

She tugged on her ears. “Hey, Tim.”

“So what’cha two drinking? Sit down!”

Tim shooed men off the center stools.

“Anything you want is on the house.”

“We’d love to take you up on the offer but I’m afraid we’re here on official business, Tim.”

He wiped off a glass. “Really? I don’t like to hear that. The last time you guys came here on business something horrible happened to Cheyenne.”

The officers exchanged glances.

“Oh no.” Tim set the glass down. “What’s happened now?”

“Why don’t we talk over here huh?” Steven gestured to the other end of the bar.

Tim crossed his arms underneath his flabby chest. “What’s going on, guys?”

“Cheyenne was beaten last night,” Brianna said. “She almost died.”

“What?” He slapped the hand towel over his shoulder. “I don’t believe this.”

Steven leaned in. “All we know is she was brought to the hospital by some guy. We don’t know if Cheyenne knew him and we don’t have any idea who he is.”

“We were hoping maybe someone around here could tell us something.”

“I sure as hell don’t know anything. I can’t believe this. Is she gonna be all right?”

“I don’t know. She’s in ICU and she’s not looking too good.”

“Yeah Bree and I were hoping you could tell us anything that’s changed with Cheyenne lately. Like, someone she might have started hanging around or anything.”

“I haven’t seen Cheyenne in weeks. She doesn’t work here anymore.”

“What?” Brianna looked at both men. “She didn’t tell me she’d gotten a new job.”

“I don’t know if she got a new job. She just said she didn’t wanna work here anymore. You know she was fed up with this place.”

“Why wouldn’t she tell me?”

“Is that really a big deal, Bree?”

“Could be. It’s strange for Cheyenne to just quit her job. And where the hell is she getting money from?”

“Maybe Juney can help you out.” Tim pointed. “She’s over there somewhere.”

“Yeah thanks, Tim.”

“No problem, Steve. I wish I knew more.” Tim went back to the bar, shaking his head.

“Hey, Detective Morris! Detective Kemp!” A frail brunette perched a tray of drinks on her shoulder.

“Juney! Hey.” Brianna hugged her.

“Hey, Juney.” Steven kissed her cheek.

“Oh man this is a surprise.” Juney chewed bubble gum. “It’s a jungle in here tonight as I am sure you can see.”

“Can we.” Brianna fanned.

“Whoo it’s hot!” Juney fanned her blouse. “Sweating like a pig in here. It’s good to see you guys.” She lowered the tray. “That is of course unless you’re here on business.”

“We need to talk to you, Juney,” Steven said. “We need your help.”

Juney handed her tray to another waitress and followed the detectives to the restroom area.

“What’s going on? Something’s happened hasn’t it?”

Brianna exhaled. “Cheyenne was beaten last night.”

“What?” Juney covered her mouth. “Oh no. No.”

Steven held her. “She’s in ICU at Central West. She’s doing okay.”

“Oh no.” Juney buried her head in Steven’s chest. “What the hell happened?”

“Tim told us she doesn’t work her anymore.”

“Yeah she quit her job a few weeks ago.” She stared at Brianna.

“You didn’t know?”

“No she didn’t tell me. I doubt she could find another job so fast so how is Cheyenne paying her bills if she’s not working?”

“I don’t know, Detective Morris. All she said was that no one needs to worry about her and that she finally has her life under control.”

Steven pulled trash out his pants pocket. “What the hell does that mean?”

“She just said she’s finally happy without any worries. I’m guessing it had something to do with this guy. Her new friend.”

“New friend?” Brianna raised an eyebrow. “What new friend?”

“Some guy she met through Havana Horizons.”

“The dating service?” Steven asked.

“Uh-huh.”

Brianna sucked her lip. “Cheyenne used a dating service?”

“Something else she hadn’t told you huh, Bree?”

“Juney what’s this guy’s name?”

“I don’t know. She never told me. I haven’t seen her much lately.”

Steven watched a stripper come out the ladies’ room. “So you never met him?”

“No. I told her I had a strange feeling about this. Things she told me about this guy made me think he’s kinda controlling you know?”

Brianna got her notepad. “Juney think okay? Did she ever tell you what he looked like? Anything that might help us?”

“Wait what does this have to do with Cheyenne being attacked?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Steven said. “See a man dropped Cheyenne off at the hospital and didn’t leave his name or anything. All we know is he’s a tall white guy with a goatee and he wears Sean John sneakers.”

“Sean John sneakers?”

“Yes does that ring a bell?” Brianna got her pen ready to write.

“I never met him and she never told me his name but she did say he was a white man and he had an accent.”

Steven stooped in front of her. “What kind of accent?”

“British.”

Brianna wrote the information. “And this is the same guy she met through Havana Horizons?”

“I assume so yes.” Juney sighed into her palms. “Oh god I can’t believe this has happened. I gotta get to the hospital.”

“Wait.” Steven grabbed her. “Think, is there anything else at all Cheyenne said about this man? Anything?”

She slithered from his hold. “She said he was always trying to buy her stuff. Jewelry and things like that. Said he offered to take her to Venice.”

“Venice?” Brianna lowered the pad.

“Yeah. And from what Cheyenne says, he wasn’t exactly hurting for money.”

“Holy shit...Steve.”

“Juney, hmmm!” Steven kissed her. “Thanks.”

“Did I help?”

“Oh you bet.” Brianna put the pad up. “You helped a whole lot.”

◆◆◆◆◆

The man watched inside the Flamingo from the parking lot. He stretched against the building to see past the men that went in and out. Another group of guys strolled inside the bar. He spotted Brianna. His shaft tore at his zipper. No stripper in the world could compare to her fully clothed.

He gripped his crotch. “Mmm.”

He rushed to his car. His vision blinded by lust and sweat. He yanked the door open, got inside and unzipped his pants. He shoved his hand in his underwear.

“Uhh ahhh.” He came before he shut the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Week Later

Steven drove through the sophisticated homes of Madison Hills. The elite neighborhood housed some of Albany's most prominent residents from upper middle class to wealthy. A resident had to make at least ninety thousand just to rent in the area. Doctors, lawyers, politicians, executives, local celebrities and socialites made Madison Hills a gold mine.

Brianna wiggled in the passenger's seat admiring the perfectly trimmed yards, serene atmosphere, and the soaring town homes and mansions.

Thanks to Havana Horizons they'd gotten a list of men who could fit the so-called description of Cheyenne's new friend. So far their search led them to one hundred and fifty men. Now they were down to the last one. They'd gotten nowhere with the others. All of the men had solid alibis and no accents. They also hadn't heard of Cheyenne Wilson.

"There's your house, Bree."

They passed the Spanish-colonial mansion that had become Brianna's favorite. She'd fallen in love with the animal-shaped hedges and white iron fence.

"Well it must be nice huh?" She turned her head upside down to see the top of the house.

"Wonder how much they paid for that place."

"Shit, I missed the turn." He did a U-turn in a culdesac. "Uh-oh." Steven stuck his head out the window. "Security cameras all over the damn place. I bet you fart around here and they throw ya' in jail."

"Usually money doesn't mean much to me, you know that." Brianna searched the radio stations. "But a place like this makes a girl wonder what it's like to have a little extra change." She sat back. "Know what I meant?"

"What the hell ya' talkin' bout, Bree? You're rich ya' damn self."

"I'm not rich."

"You are too rich." He laughed.

"My stepfather's rich." She waved at a little girl walking down the street with flowers.

"It's not the same thing."

"Your stepfather's rich, your momma's rich, you're rich. You ain't gotta bullshit about it, Bree."

"My stepfather was rich before he married momma. I'm not rich."

"Yes you are."

"No I'm not."

"You are too. Rich by association."

"I said I'm not rich." She punched him.

“Oww!” He stroked his arm. “Jesus I’m driving. What’s your problem? Like being rich is a put down.”

“Look I work hard for my money. I don’t sponge off my stepfather. If I was rich would I be struggling to pay bills from month to month?”

Steven’s shades slid off his head. “That’s got nothing to do with you not being rich, that’s you having fucked up credit.”

“Shut up. I got great credit. My credit was good enough to co-sign for this heap of shit you call a car.”

“Kiss my ass, Bree. And you love this heap of shit car.”

“Yeah you wish. Steve your credit’s so bad you couldn’t even get Internet service in your own name.”

“Whatever.”

“Now that’s fucked up credit.”

He squinted at the orange street signs. “What’s the name of the street again?”

“Perri View.”

“This is it.” He made a left. “What’s the address?”

“Thirty fifteen.”

“Thirty fifteen?”

“Yeah see it? The one by the brick house.”

Steven cruised in the middle of the street. “The white one?”

“Yep.”

A sculptured yard and pebble walkway offset the deluxe two-story. Elegant patio furniture sat in a circle on the front porch.

They parked behind the black Mercedes parked crooked in the driveway.

“Whoo wee, Bree.” Steven turned the car off. “Look at that Mercedes. Man she’s sweet.”

“Maybe we should park on the street.”

“I’m not parking on the damn street for someone to steal my car.”

“Uh judging by the look of the cars in this neighborhood Steve I think yours is the last to worry about.”

“Well let’s hope Michael cooperates.” Steven closed his door and followed Brianna up the walkway.

“Think he might be Cheyenne’s friend?”

“Let’s hope because we’ve run out of options.”

Brianna rang the doorbell. Steven stood so close he could have inhaled her.

“Mmm.” He propped his hand on the door.

“What?”

“Nothing you just smell so good.”

“Steve.” She looked down.

“What? Is it my fault you smell good?”

“Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“You know like what.” She fondled her ponytail. “Get your mind on what’s important.”

He swept his arm behind her back. “Believe me it is.”

“Stop it.” She knocked his hand down. She checked the peephole.

“Shit what’s taking him so long?”

“Maybe he ain’t here.”

Brianna rang the doorbell again.

“Maybe he can’t hear the bell.” Steven banged on the door.

“Michael Buchanan are you in there? It’s the police! We need to ask you some questions!” He knocked again. “Michael!”

“Arf! Arf! Arf!” A black Chihuahua flew from around the house and landed at Brianna’s feet.

“Aww, Steven look. ” She scooped him up. “Hey, baby. Isn’t he cute?”

Steven hooked his shades on his shirt. “If that’s Michael’s dog he’s gay.”

“What?” Brianna bounced the dog.

“No straight man would have a dog that little.”

“You don’t know anything.”

“I know about the rules of being a man.” He knocked. “Michael! I know he’s in there.”

“Wait back up.” The dog licked Brianna’s face. “The rules of being a man?”

“Yep there are rules every straight man follows. That’s how you know he’s straight.”

“Steven I would say that’s the dumbest thing you’ve ever said but I know you’re gonna start talking again so I won’t.”

“Look straight men don’t buy little dogs and they don’t buy cats. A surefire sign they’re gay.” He kicked the door. “Michael Buchanan!”

“So Michael’s gay?”

“If that’s his dog he is.”

Steven fell back when the door opened.

A tall man walked onto the stoop. He was shirtless and his slacks sagged off his slim waist.

“I assure you I’m not gay.”

His short brunette hair held the trend of the ‘60s with a modern twist. Long sideburns with bangs that hid his eyebrows. Every strand submerged in mousse. He presented a cunning grin that probably hid and betrayed his secrets at the same time. His goatee couldn’t have been neater if it had been painted on. Faint wrinkles appeared under his nose every time he blinked. His firm body wore small signs of maturity but his youthful face stood still in time. Eyes so gray they turned silver in the sunlight. He wore a diamond stud in his right ear.

He slid a paint-stained towel in and out his long fingers. His stare sent a deadening chill down Brianna’s spine.

That and of course his British accent.

“Well hello there.” Michael swung the towel, drawing attention to the black charcoal on his fingers.

“What can I do for you?”

“Bree he’s British.” Steven whispered.

“No shit.”

“Aye?” Michael scratched his six-pack stomach, leaving a trail of blackness on his bellybutton.

“You are Michael Buchanan right?” Brianna kept her distance.

“Why yes I am.” A tiny dimple poked from his chin. “And you are?”

They introduced themselves and flashed their badges. Michael put his hand over Brianna’s as he overlooked the information. She got the feeling he used it as an excuse to touch her.

“Detective Morris huh?”

He made that sucking sound with his teeth that all men seemed to when they met a woman they found attractive. This didn’t feel right. Brianna had the instinct to turn around and run but couldn’t risk it. Michael, bizarre or not might be the one who could shed light on Cheyenne’s attack. If he didn’t know anything Brianna would be more than happy to leave and never come back. But if he did...

“You like my dog?”

“What?” Brianna exhaled.

Michael wiggled the dog’s paw. “He seems to like you a lot. I knew he had good taste.”

“Yeah well uh, here you go.” She held the dog out to Michael.

“Oh no, you can hold him. Believe me I don’t mind at all.”

Brianna secured the tiny pile of black fur in her arms. “He got a name?”

“Coal.” Michael’s eyes leapt from her face to the line leading to her cleavage.

She stood back.

“I named him that because he’s so black.”

“Oh.”

“You can hold him as long as you want, Brianna. He loves being in the arms of a lovely woman.”

“Is that right?” Steven asked.

Brianna had forgotten Steven was there until he spoke.

“Of course. Don’t most men?”

“Whatever.” Steven gestured inside the house. “We need to ask you some questions about a case we’re investigating. We’d appreciate your cooperation.”

Michael’s eyes stayed on Brianna. “Am I under suspicion or something?”

Brianna transferred Coal to her other hand. “Why would you think that? Should we be suspicious of you?”

“Well no but usually when cops show up on your door it’s not because they want to exchange recipes.” He widened the door. “Come on in. I hope I can help you.”

“Thanks.” Steven went in first.

Michael stood so close to Brianna when she walked in she had to touch his chest to keep her balance.

“Excuse me, Mr. Buchanan.”

“Hmm.” He sniffed her hair. “You smell good, Detective.”

“What?”

“You smell like peaches.”

Steven rubbed the inside of his palms.

“That’s not a very appropriate thing to say, Mr. Buchanan. This is a very serious visit.”

“Call me by my first name.” He sandwiched her between the wall and his chest.

“Mr. Buchanan, please move.”

He did but acted as though he didn’t want to.

“I’m confused, Brianna. Is it against the law for an officer to be complimented?”

“No. I’m just not used to men smelling me.”

Steven chuckled. “Got an interesting place here.” He scoped out the lavender furniture set in the den.

Michael’s home wasn’t dripping in fine paintings and antiques like Brianna pictured. His den looked like an upgraded college dorm room.

Steven came back into the hall. “You got a fetish for purple or something, man?”

“Got many fetishes.” Michael’s stare hit Brianna’s face again.

“Purple just happens to be my favorite color.”

“It’s Bree’s too.”

“Oh is it?”

“It’s one of my favorite colors.”

“So we have something in common?” Michael leaned into her.

“Wonder if we have anything else in common.”

“I hope I don’t have to tell you again, Mr. Buchanan.” She stepped back. “Please stay out of my personal space.”

“I’m sorry. I meant no harm. I wonder what else we like that’s the same.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Shit, man.” Steven picked up a miniature crystal statue of a naked woman. She bent over with her gigantic breasts hanging down her knees. “Now this is the kind of stuff that makes a guy appreciate art.”

“I’m sure it does, Steve.”

“Ah.” Michael got the statue. “You like it, Detective Kemp?”

“You see the front of my pants? I love it.”

“I got that from Mia’s.” Michael put it on the shelf.

“That’s that place that sells erotic art isn’t it?”

“Why yes it is, Brianna.” Michael’s eyes widened.

“Should’ve known Bree would know. She loves art.”

“Oh really?” Michael crowded her again.

“Steven.” Brianna stood against the wall.

“So we do have something else in common huh?”

“I don’t shop there I just know about it. What would I want erotic art for?”

“Oh to appreciate it of course. Art is art isn’t it?”

“That’s not my kind of art, Michael. Sorry.”

Steven grinned. “I think I’ll give this Mia’s a try after work.”

“Please, Steve. You couldn’t afford to park there. It’s for rich people.”

Steven raised his head. He wore an expression Brianna couldn’t decipher.

And she knew *all* his expressions.

“Well, well.” He sniffed. “You had a woman here earlier, Michael?”

“Why you say that, Detective Kemp?”

“Come on, we’re all adults. Bree I know you smell it too.”

“I don’t.” Course she’d smelled it and it got louder each second.

Michael took a deep whiff. “You trying to say my house smells like pussy, Detective Kemp?”

“Ha, ha, ha, ha!”

“Jesus.” Brianna sighed. “Steven, shut up!”

“God well I wasn’t trying to say it out loud, man. Ha, ha! But yes. That’s what it smells like.”

“Sorry if this uh, embarrasses you, Michael.”

"I'm not embarrassed, Brianna. We're all adults aren't we? We all know what women smell like."

Brianna stroked Coal. "Can we just get to the reason we came?"

"I had a female over earlier and we made love."

"Whoa." Steven sucked in laughter.

"Look that's too much information, Mr. Buchanan."

"Does this offend you, Brianna? Speaking so openly about a woman's natural smell?"

"Look..."

"It's natural isn't it? Women smell and that smell gets more intense during lovemaking."

"Holy shit!" Steven leaned over, holding his stomach. "Michael I mean it when I say this is the most fun I've ever had questioning someone."

Brianna walked towards the stairwell. Michael's gaze reached her destination before she did.

"You don't have any servants or anything?"

"No. I value my privacy."

She turned from his stare. "Are you an artist?"

"Yes I am."

"Is that how you got your money? Are was it inherited?"

"Guess you can say it was inherited by someone very close to me."

"What part of England are you from?"

"That's funny." Michael scratched the back of his neck. "See I'm really American but I lived abroad for a long time. That's the reason for the accent."

"Ah I see." Brianna took the opportunity to observe him. "Interesting."

"Okay since we all know one another let's get to the point," Steven said. "Do you know a woman named Cheyenne Wilson?"

"Cheyenne? That's a pretty name but no I don't. Why?"

"She was almost beaten to death a week ago. Wednesday, April twelfth."

"Oh my goodness."

Brianna showed him Cheyenne's picture.

"Well she is a beautiful woman but I don't know her. How did this lead to me?"

“She has been seeing a man she met on Havana Horizons, the dating service. We got your name off a list from there. We were told this man also had an accent and imagine our surprise when you did.”

“Detective Kemp I understand that but I swear I’ve never heard of Cheyenne Wilson.”

“Hmm.” Brianna snuggled Coal. “Did you ever meet any women from Havana Horizons?”

“Look I didn’t even wanna join the damn thing to be honest. A friend of mine suggested it.” He swatted his towel. “Said it would help me settle down and not be so wild you know?”

“Uh-huh.” Steven nodded.

“But I like being wild. Anyway, I never met anyone from Havana. I didn’t participate that long. I talked to some women online but it never went further.”

“Why not?”

He smiled at Brianna. “They weren’t my type.”

“And what’s your type?”

He threw his arms behind his back. “It’s, hard to explain, Brianna.”

“I’m listening.”

“Let’s just say the women on Havana were a little too ordinary for my taste.”

“And what does that mean exactly?”

He moved closer. “I’d probably have to show you for you to understand.”

“Back it up, Michael.” Steven got in front of him.

“Sorry. I meant no harm. She just smells so good you know?”

“Yeah we’ve established that,” Steven said. “Stick to business.”

“I could get lost in that smell.”

Brianna put Coal down. He scampered to the den.

“Okay the ladies just weren’t my type. Can we leave it at that?”

“You’re a weirdo or something?”

“I don’t consider myself one, Detective Kemp. What others might think, well I can’t control that.”

Brianna got her pencil. “Where were you the night of the twelfth if you don’t mind me asking.”

Michael scratched his arm. “At a restaurant. I’m sure. I eat out a lot.”

Steven put his hand on the railing of the stairs. “What restaurant?”

“Well, honestly I don’t remember.”

"You don't remember?" Brianna chuckled. "How can you not remember when it was just a week ago?"

"I lead a busy life. I pick up something to eat or go to a restaurant all the time. I don't always remember where I am every night." He twirled his finger. "Maybe my brain's warped from sniffing all this paint and stuff. I have my head buried in a canvas all the time. I live in my own world."

Brianna paced. "Well think, Michael. I mean do you have a place you regularly eat at? Maybe that's where you were."

"I don't remember."

"Michael that doesn't seem to make any sense," Steven said. "I don't eat out as much as you probably but I can remember where I ate. Can't you break it down to a favorite restaurant or something?"

"No." He groaned. "I cannot and I don't know why you're asking me. I told you where I was. I was eating."

"Not all night though right?" Brianna played with her fingers.

"What did you do after that?"

"I came home."

Steven perched his shades on his head. "And what did you do when you came home?"

"I...look I came home and probably watched a movie and went to sleep. I was tired that night."

"Oh you were?" Brianna looked at Steven. "You can remember that you were tired but you can't remember where you ate that night?"

He exhaled. "I'm always tired after I eat, Brianna."

"I see."

"Look I never heard of Cheyenne Wilson and I don't have anything to do with her attack."

"Well..." Brianna touched her chest. "Did we say that? Steven, did we say that?"

"No I can't remember us saying that."

A crooked smile tore through Michael's lips. "You like this don't you, Brianna?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Playing games. You're playing with me and you like it."

"Michael this is serious."

"Oh I know. I'm serious too. I don't know Cheyenne Wilson. I cross my heart and hope to die."

Being in Michael's presence alone made Brianna wanna throw up. But she wouldn't let anxiety stop her from getting the answers she needed. Michael had lied with such ease it scared her. In fact she doubted everything he'd said before he opened his mouth.

If he wanted to play games, they'd play.

"Uh Steven can I speak to Michael alone please?"

"What? What the hell you talkin' 'bout, Bree?"

Michael licked his lips.

"Can you just wait for me in the car?"

"Why? What's going on?"

She shoved Steven to the front door. "This guy's pulling my chain so I'm gonna pull his."

"What?"

"Shh. Just go wait for me outside. I think I can get more out of him if you're not here."

"Bree he might be lying or he might not but he's obviously not gonna tell us anything."

She opened the door. "I know what I'm doing. He's playing with me. I'm gonna play with his ass too."

"But..."

"Please wait for me in the car."

"What are you gonna do, fuck him?"

"Go wait in the car." She pushed him outside.

"Shit Bree we don't have time for this."

"I'll be out in a minute." She closed the door.

"Is Bree your nickname?"

"Yeah."

"Hmm." He pursed his lips. "Well I'm flattered you wanna talk to me but I don't know how else I can help you."

"I think you might be able to."

Ring! Ring!

Even the phone didn't interrupt Michael's stare.

"You gonna get that?"

"Huh?"

"Your phone's ringing, Michael."

Ring! Ring!

“Oh is it? Just a second.” He went to the den.

Brianna checked out the kitchen and living room. Michael’s phone conversation had become quite heated when she got back to the hall. Since it didn’t seem like he’d be done soon she took the chance to look around upstairs.

Nothing stood out. You could hardly tell Michael had money by his home. Brianna had more antiques than he did.

She walked down the hall, peeking inside the darkened doorways. She came to the room in the middle of the hall with the door parted open. The red walls beckoned her. She put her hands on the door and listened for Michael. He still spoke on the phone downstairs. She might have been better off listening in on his conversation but something told her to go into this room.

She’d walked into the pit of perversion. Red velvet had been stapled to every inch of the walls, hiding their natural color. The carpet had been torn away, exposing a scuffed up floor. Whips and chains dangled from hooks. Satin material, probably blindfolds were folded on the dresser. Hats, gloves and kneepads with assorted spikes were piled in front of a box fan. Brianna got the feeling that fan wasn’t there just for cooling off the room.

“Jesus Christ.” She turned in circles but couldn’t absorb the madness to save her life.

The room was bare except for the dresser and the wide table in the middle of the room.

Spiked chokers and wooden paddles of assorted sizes were strewn over the table. Rows of thick belts were hung on the walls by nails. And that smell. A sour, indisputable stank of sweat and musk. She became engulfed in body heat as if she stood in a room of a hundred people.

She covered her nose with her blouse but she now wore the scent. Explicit cartoons and pictures of naked women and men in various, painful positions were all over the walls. Women had gags in their mouths while the men whipped them with cattle prods and posts.

Over to the side was a wrinkled picture of a woman with enormous breasts, tied to a table and being beaten by several men and women. The caption, “More!” sat between her spread legs.

“See anything you like?”

“Ahh!” Brianna whisked around.

Michael didn’t move or smile. Just stared with that same keen expression.

He closed the door.

END OF SAMPLE

Did you like that? Want more? Can’t wait to find out what happens between Bree and Michael? Who attacked Cheyenne? Who’s the stalker and how does Simon Watts fit into all this? Wanna know? NEED to know?

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Brianna’s psychiatrist, Dr. Nadia Hollister is stabbed to death in her upstairs bathroom. Brianna, who is at Nadia’s while the murder happens, is the only witness. Unfortunately she was knocked unconscious by the killer and only has the memory of the killer’s scent to go on.

Brianna and Steven sign on to help Homicide Detective Jayce Matthews solve the case. With Nadia’s journals as her guide, Bree learns that Nadia was keeping a devastating secret that has something to do with her adopted daughter. The renowned doctor was not whom she seemed to be and her secret may not have only got her killed but could ruin the foundation of her entire family.

The police hunt for suspects but Nadia's secret could wreck the lives of many, all who have motive to kill her.

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