

PART OF THE FOLLY BEACH FLORIST MYSTERY SERIES

Deeply Cuts the Rose of Murder



PHOEBE T. EGGLI

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Dedicated to Mrs. Holland, a teacher and member of the community who always showed me kindness, despite me not having officially been one of her students, or having been placed in her care. She was naturally loving and kind!



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Chapter 1

“Love is much like a wild rose, beautiful and calm, but willing to draw blood in its own defense.”

- Mark Overby

Kayla Ballantyne owned and operated her floral shop in the teensy seaside town of Folly Beach, SC for years. Every year she was astounded by the craziness of the floral equivalent of Christmas... PROM! No amount of planning and months-long preparations would ever yield the week before prom to be anything less than chaotic. Now that the big day was upon them, Kayla found herself nearly suffocated by the overpowering pungent odor of thousands of roses. Ninety-nine percent of the time the aroma of roses, or really any flower, gave off a sweet, pleasant fragrance. However, with her entire shop flooded in roses of every shape, size, and color, it was a bit too much for anyone's sense of smell – even a veteran florist like Kayla.

“Ouch!” yelled Kayla's new part-time assistant, Javier. She hired him when her long-time assistant and close friend, Jessica Ward, moved across the state to work on a research grant at Clemson University's Botanical Gardens. Jessie earned the grant a couple years back after her designer calla lily gained notoriety. Thankfully, the graduate student was on a break from the university so she could help Kayla and Javier out during the crisis known as “Prom”. Even Jessie's younger brother, Alex, helped out earlier in the week at the shop. He worked with Kayla to design a special bouquet for his own date. Now that full-scale preparations were being made for the big event, Alex found he was needed elsewhere – specifically for decorating the institutional-looking high school gymnasium to resemble a fancy 1920's ballroom.

That hadn't been the first exclamation of pain from the group gathered around every available countertop in the floral shop during the process of arranging all the bouquets and boutonnieres, not to

mention the table centerpieces, for the Folly Beach High School Prom. The young man definitely had the most bandaged appendages from countless scratches and pokes of thorns and careless scissor clips. At this point, Kayla pictured him as a mummy as she watched him apply yet another bandage to his dark, but delicate skin.

Trying to stifle a laugh so as not to alert Javier to her humor at his expense, Kayla leaned over the counter to turn up the volume on her iPod as a Jimmy Buffett tune began to play. The crew had been working 15-plus hours a day for the last week to prepare for tomorrow when the shop would be flooded with teenagers picking up their flowers for what they considered to be the most important night of their young lives. It always made Kayla smile to see the excited anticipation in just about 100 percent of the youngsters as they daydreamed their particular visions of prom. Little did they know that this event was only a small pebble along the way to the greater events that awaited them later in life – college, love, career, marriage, family, etc. However, it was hard not to get swept up in the excitement and thrill emanated by the teenagers for this one night. Kayla fought becoming nostalgic as she reminisced about her own prom with her now ex-husband. Besides, this year's prom was going to be a huge improvement from that night decades ago. For one, she was no longer a slightly gawky, extremely self-conscious teenager and this wasn't her prom. No, tonight was Alex Ward's big night! Although, Kayla would be in attendance as a chaperone. Cringing at the thought of being a watch dog over hundreds of teenagers for an entire evening, she didn't pay enough attention to what she was doing until a sharp pain erupted in her right index finger. "Ouch!!!" she shrieked in surprise as she looked down to see her own blood oozing out from around a large thorn that was now wedged in her finger.

"That will teach you to stop daydreaming like all those teenage girls about to burst through your front doors in the morning," Jessie giggled. The young woman was so happy to be back in Folly Beach for prom season. Despite it being the busiest time of the year for the floral industry, she enjoyed the excitement. Besides, it had been too

long since her last visit back from Clemson. She missed her “lil bro” and she missed Kayla. The older woman had essentially taken them in after the deaths of their parents. Kayla was more of a surrogate mom/big sister than just a friend. When Jessie received her big break with the grant from Clemson, Kayla immediately offered to help by having Alex move in with her. Most people would feel this was too much of an imposition on a family friend, but Jessie knew Kayla truly wanted to help and truly enjoyed having Alex in her home. She also trusted that Alex was in the best care in the world. Kayla viewed him as son and doted on him endlessly. It was amazing the young man wasn’t a spoiled brat like some of the other teenagers she’d encountered. Instead, Alex was a strong, smart, and sweet boy, despite growing up without his parents for the majority of his years.

Kayla flashed a sideways grin to both her assistants as she tossed down the roses she was working on in order to fetch tweezers to pull out the offending thorn. “Is it just me, or does this get harder every year?” she asked. “I can’t recall ever drawing this much blood.”

Javier laughed as he reminded her that she was at fault for all the chaos of prom season. With a questioning glance from Jessie, he explained. “Well, if Kayla would STOP creating the most imaginative and gorgeous bouquets in all the South Carolina coast, this wouldn’t be a problem! All these little debutantes would just run down the road to the local chain grocery store for their flowers. Also,” he added with a dramatic roll of his eyes, “Kayla will NOT turn down any orders. Regardless of the lateness of the order – like the two young girls who ran in here last night as we were closing begging for Kayla to make their bouquets.” He elaborated further, “And it wasn’t like those little things didn’t realize that prom was two days away. Now what moron, I ask, expects a master florist to accommodate their outlandish requests on such a tight schedule? One of those nitwits wanted twenty-four long-stem blood-red roses...like every other girl in this town didn’t ask for the same exact roses.” Javier was on the verge of a full tirade on the teenage girls and their unrealistic expectations when the front door bell indicated they had a visitor.

Kayla jumped at the chance to extract herself from another of the young man's rantings. One day when she had more patience she would have to ask what his issue was with excitable teenagers and prom. For such a young man, he sure was a pessimist soul for a florist. She hoped his attitude improved regarding obnoxious, unrealistic females before the slew of summer weddings.

As she pushed the door between the back work room and the main showroom, Kayla had to force herself not to turn back around. Talk about annoying, persistent, "I want things my way or else" attitude? Well, its personification just walked in the door -- Natalia Peterson. She had been in every day for the past two weeks with the same request. The young woman had even sent in dear ole Daddy to change Kayla's mind, but the florist wasn't budging from her decision.

"Hello, Natalia dear. How may I help you today?" Kayla asked with reluctance. The last thing she had time for right now was another round of arguing with the young girl. There were still approximately twenty-five more nosegays and three table centerpieces to finish before she could call it a night.

"Why good day, Mrs. Ballantyne," the teen cooed sweetly with a little too much emphasis on the "Mrs" part. Fighting the urge to roll her eyes or simply shove the girl back out the door, Kayla smiled back but there was definite tension behind her eyes. "Well, I was hoping," Natalia began, "we could reach an agreement about the roses I requested." Now Kayla knew the only agreement the girl would consider was for her to get her way 100 percent.

A few weeks ago Jessie had sent a sample of a new rose she helped design at Clemson's Botanical Gardens. Undeniably, the creamy white rose with an incredibly deep red trim was phenomenal! Even Alex had been impressed. So impressed that he begged Jessie to send some more for a special bouquet for his prom date. He couldn't wait to surprise her with the flowers! He even drafted a special design for

the bouquet. His sister had come through with a small batch of the roses for him. However, the roses arrived the same day Natalia came in to place her own prom order. She happened to see the new flowers and decided that she HAD to have them. Due to the small supply of the roses, and her inability to get more, Kayla refused the girl's request. There was more to it than that though. Kayla really wanted Alex to have something truly special and unique for his beautiful prom date, Brianna Swindall. Once Natalia discovered the roses were meant for Alex's date, she became even more insistent, to the point that Kayla felt harassed. She really hated the idea of having to battle it out with the girl AGAIN.

Oddly, Kayla heard the music die down in the back room. Javier and Jessie must be listening in and getting a good kick of the situation. Taking a deep, cleansing breath, she faced the stubborn teen. She had to hand it to the striking blonde beauty. She knew what she wanted and went right after it. However, the Natalia she had known for many years was sweet and friendly. She coached the girl for many years for the YMCA's swim and dive team. Kayla had no idea why she had turned into an argumentative brat regarding some silly flowers. The previous evening Jessie voiced her opinion on the matter...Natalia had a "thing" for Alex. Perhaps she subconsciously wanted to spoil his date's night just a little. The idea had merit, but Kayla really hoped all this fuss wasn't just petty teenage jealousy.

The determined expression shining from the teen's eyes warned Kayla the argument was not yet over by a long shot. "Natalia, sweetheart," she began, "we've been over and over this. Please understand, we only have a few of those particular roses and those are promised to Alex for his prom date. I'm sorry. Any other flowers in the store, I'll create the most fabulous bouquet for you. Just not *those* roses." Obviously, this was not what the young girl wanted to hear, but Kayla had run out of ideas how to get through to Natalia that she wouldn't use the special roses for her.

With a grimace, Natalia's disappointment was apparent. However, the momentary flash of anger apparent in her eyes let Kayla know the sweet young girl she had known most of her life was not about to let the issue drop. Even with the prom scheduled for the next evening, she wanted those roses and wouldn't be satisfied with anything else. Despite all the problems over her prized calla lilies a couple years ago, Kayla still couldn't understand how flowers, no matter how beautiful, could be the cause of so much trouble.



Chapter 2

“Alex,” Kayla called upstairs to her houseguest and surrogate son, “you’re going to be late to pick up your date if you don’t stop primping in front of the mirror! You never take this long to get ready!” It was Alex Ward’s first prom and she had never seen him this particular about his appearance. She was worried if he waited much longer the beautiful floral arrangement she made especially for his date, Brianna Swindall, would wilt in the hot, humid air of Folly Beach, South Carolina. After putting together practically all of the flowers and boutonnieres for all the young ladies and gentlemen attending the Junior/Senior Prom, Kayla had been extra attentive to the creation of the masterpiece Alex would bestow on his lovely date and best friend. Even though he swore there was not a “love connection” between the two, Kayla sensed the friendship meant more than what he avowed.

Alex had grown into quite the handsome young man she always knew he would be. Despite all the trouble a couple years ago when his older sister, Jessica, had been accused of murdering Brandi Carroll at the wedding showcase, he hadn’t let the events tinge his joyful and optimistic side. Kayla was just as proud of him as if he were her own son. He was an excellent student with great grades. He was a nationally ranked swimmer and captain of the high school swim team. With the swim coach at Duke University set to come out to the regional swim meet in a couple weeks just to see Alex, everything was looking up for the young man. With her own daughter, Candace, overseas as an investigative journalist in the Ukraine of all places, having Alex living with her brought vast joy into her life. Witnessing this milestone in his life – prom – made her misty eyed. By this time next year, Alex would be preparing to go off to college and she’d be alone again. Kayla caught herself becoming emotional and sternly reminded herself that this was part of life, and a happy part at that. “Cut it out, Kay,” she scolded, “no water works tonight!”

Jessie joined Kayla in the living room to wait on the teenager to make an appearance. With a camera hanging from around her neck, Jessie laughed as Alex *finally* poked his head out of the bathroom doorway! “Why is it that for every important event where there are going to be pictures to immortalize something, I have to get a zit!” Alex exclaimed in despair.

“Cut it out, Zit-boy! You look fine!” Jessie teased. “You’re the only one that notices the hideous thing anyway!”

Kayla punched Jessie in the arm and stopped her with a stern look. She knew how the young man fretted over the appearance of acne, ever since he was teased by the entire football team over a nasty blemish right on the top of his nose during Homecoming week. She never understood why Alex wanted to play football this school year, especially since several of his teammates were obnoxious jocks and gave him a difficult time all season. He wanted to try it out though. Being his first time ever playing tackle football, he didn’t do too shabby as the second-string punter. Still, now the poor kid had anxiety every time a red dot started to emerge on his face! Pitying him, Kayla had tried every home remedy she knew ever since he first freaked two days ago after a long look in the bathroom mirror. Jessie knew better how to handle hormonal teenage acne, but insisted on purely homeopathic treatments. Sadly, his sister’s natural “cures” took much longer to do their job. The result – there was still trace evidence remaining on Alex’s distraught face. No one would notice, without a microscope, but the young man knew it was there and that was enough to distress him on what should be one of the happiest days of his life.

As Alex joined the ladies in the living room, it was clear he was far from happy. Walking up to, and towering over Kayla since he was now at six feet four inches in height, his aqua blue eyes pleaded for help. “Seriously,” she tried reassuring him, “you look fabulous! Truly, any normal human being won’t even be able to tell that your face is

anything less than perfect! Now, stop sulking and show me that handsome grin so we can get your picture before you run out the door to pick up Brianna!” She meant it, he really had turned from a somewhat gawky preteen to an impressively handsome young man. Any young woman at the high school would be swooning tonight to see him in his three-piece black tuxedo and crimson satin bowtie. She had even given him the ruby cufflinks her ex-husband forgot to take with him when he bolted several years ago. Kayla smiled. “James Bond has NOTHING on you tonight. Just no martinis, ok?” she teased.

The trio had formed a familial bond over the years. Kayla couldn't be any prouder of the two siblings she had taken under her wing after the passing of their parents. Now with Jessie off at Clemson most of the time and Alex living under her roof, she truly felt what an honor and privilege it was to be a surrogate mom to the young man before her. Tears brimmed in her eyes, threatening to spill over, as she straightened his bowtie and brushed off non-existent lint from his shoulders.

Luckily, Jessie was around to keep the moment light before Kayla started to blubber on about how he'd grown up so fast. “Ok, Ok! Picture time! No tears, Kay! Geez, you would think you've never sent a kid to prom before. You can turn on the waterworks next year when he's a senior. If we don't snap a photo soon, his date will report him M.I.A. and go without him!” The young woman hustled the reluctant teen over to the fireplace mantle while directing him how to stand, when to smile, how to smile, etc. To witness the event, one would believe she was a fashion photographer rather than a botanist. Her ploy worked perfectly. Kayla didn't have time to tear up and was even smiling broadly as Jessie snapped a couple of pictures of her with Alex. After a few flashes of the camera, she pushed him out the door and on his way to what should be a fantastic evening. Besides, Jessie knew Kayla still needed to finish getting ready herself before her hot date picked her up for the prom. Every year she swore she wouldn't volunteer to chaperone the dance. Every year she was

manipulated into doing it. At least this year, Jessie thought, Kayla had the sense to liven it up a bit by taking her own date – the highly attractive Detective Billy Randall.

A half hour later, right on time as always, the doorbell rang indicating Kayla's escort had arrived. Sitting at her vanity table, she stared at her own reflection with mixed emotions. Kayla took a deep breath before brushing the stray tendrils of golden blonde hair away from her usually sparkling blue eyes. She knew she looked remarkable for her age. She felt rather than saw the beginning signs of crow's feet. Most women would envy her looks, as well as her sexy boyfriend. But Kayla wasn't most women. Tonight she felt every bit of her forty-four years.

As for the incredibly handsome man now waiting for her in the living room...those feelings were harder to sort out. Billy had made it abundantly clear that he expected an answer soon as to where their relationship was headed. It had been almost two years since they started dating. Kayla would readily admit she loved every second they were together, but she would only admit that to herself. Perhaps, she thought, her feelings did amount to love. However, after the heartache of being left by her ex-husband several years ago, she still could not give herself over completely to the emotion. Billy had made his feelings known long ago, but had patiently bided his time waiting on Kayla to free herself of past emotional baggage. However, no man has infinite patience and his was near the limit. It was easy to understand his desire for confirmation that the woman who held his heart could open hers to him as well. Sadly, uncertainty and fear kept a tight rein on Kayla. Tonight could be an incredibly beautiful beginning for them as a true couple, or it could simply be the end. With her thoughts and emotions still running havoc in her mind, she took one last look in the antique looking glass and then a cleansing deep breath as Jessie knocked on her bedroom door.

Plastering a smile on her face that didn't quite reach her eyes, Kayla joined Billy in the living room. His dark chocolate brown eyes grew

larger when she strolled into the room. Anyone could see the man was head over heels for the petite blonde in the deep maroon, off-the-shoulder evening gown. Seeing him looking very dapper in his dark gray suit and clean-shaven for the first time she'd known him, Kayla felt the butterflies in her stomach swell and her breath catch. His smile grew wider as she walked towards him. Jessie continued her new job as photographer by snapping dozens of pictures of the dressed up gorgeous couple. For one pose, Kayla looked up into Billy's honest, deep brown eyes and felt her heart skip a beat. The idea of getting lost in those eyes appealed greatly. She longed to do just that. She wanted so desperately to enjoy this night, but knew his inquiring gaze could easily upset the delicate façade she was holding onto in her efforts to avoid a decision. With a final flash of the camera, Jessie shooed them out the front door. At this rate, the chaperones would be the last ones to arrive at the prom. Billy flashed his sexiest, side grin with a wink, "Your chariot awaits, my lady!" As he took her hand to help her into his oversized truck, Kayla tried to focus more on not tripping in her three inch heels and less on the electric warmth of his touch.

By the time they arrived at the high school, Kayla felt more at ease. Billy had that way about him that always managed to soothe her into a sense of peace. They had known each other for almost two years and she couldn't recall a time she had ever been so nervous around him. At least not until lately when he had become more vocal about his need to know if she was as committed to him as he was to her. Most women...any sane woman...would easily have gazed up into those dark eyes and fell into his strong arms if asked that question by this amazing man. "What is my problem?" Kayla wondered. Really, she knew the answer. In one word—fear. In another word—Charlie, her ex. "Blast that man!" she thought on a daily basis. That fear instilled in her by his neglect and abandonment restrained Kayla's heart from jumping right out of her chest and into Billy's hands.

Not wanting to ruin what could very well be her last date with the handsome detective, Kayla decided to let go of the anxiety long

enough to at least enjoy the evening. How often did she get a chance to dress up like this? Despite her tendency to prefer casual clothes and sneakers, it was nice to get dolled up every once and awhile. She determined to make the most of the situation. Much like Scarlett O'Hara, she would "think about *that* tomorrow". Tonight she wanted to escape reality; relish the music and joviality; and maybe even dance a little while watching over a gymnasium full of hormonal teenagers. Of course, Kayla wasn't quite sure she could dance in these high heels. She could barely walk without assistance from Billy's arm. At least that was the excuse she gave herself for clinging tightly to him as they walked up the front steps and into the school.



Chapter 3

Kayla didn't have a long time to dwell on her intentions as the evening progressed. Music blared throughout the school from the band's sound system. At this rate, most attendees would be 75% deaf by the end of the night. The flashing disco lights did little to illuminate the gym floor so chaperones had to stroll around the majority of the time to keep their eyes on things. Although not on official police business, Billy did an outstanding job spotting unauthorized beverages scattered around the room. Kayla's best friend, Trish Collins, was also a chaperone, as well as the prom caterer. The middle-aged chef spent the majority of the night safeguarding the punch from devious teenagers with flasks. Thankfully, no one had succeeded yet. Trish vowed to keep it that way. Although, she suggested Billy may want to request officers to check out the prom band's van in the back lot. She swore time and again they reeked of pot smoke.

Throughout the evening, Kayla tried to sneak peeks at Alex and his beautiful date, Brianna. She promised the young man not to embarrass him tonight so she kept her distance. Trish, however, had made no such promise to her niece who happened to be Alex's best friend and date. The sound of Trish's squeal of delight upon seeing the handsome couple getting their picture taken was heard even above the thunderous boom of the drummer's solo while the rest of the band took a break. Kayla looked over in time to see Alex cringe just as the camera flashed. She hoped the photographer would take another shot because that particular picture was not going to be what the couple wanted for posterity's sake.

The majority of the evening went by in a blur for Kayla. She was amazed at how much teen angst presented itself during the party. Although she had chaperoned a few proms, this year's crowd was a bit more mischievous. So busy keeping the peace between some

rowdy boys in the back of the gym, she barely noticed the quieter disagreement brewing just a few feet away. It wasn't until she heard a familiar male voice raised in frustration that she turned to see Alex's date stomp away in a huff. Concern for Alex caused Kayla to start off in his direction to find out the cause of the ruckus. Never before had she seen the young man look so confused and upset. Certainly, she had never known Alex and Brianna to bicker even though they had been friends for years. Actually, come to think of it, she had never seen Brianna in a temper all the years she had known her. However, she was stopped short by a strong hand on her arm.

"Let them work it out themselves, Kayla. You can't do everything for him," a husky voice stated firmly. Billy Randall knew his girlfriend had a tendency to want to take care of everything for those she loved. Sometimes to the point of butting in where she didn't belong. This was definitely one of those times. The last thing Alex needed was his guardian jumping in to solve his relationship problems. In the middle of the prom, no less. Billy told her she needed to give Alex room to grow up hundreds of times, but she never seemed to listen. However, he felt this was one time he should intervene on the boy's behalf. Kayla knew he was right, but it still didn't stop the flash of temper behind her sparkling blue eyes. Thankfully, Billy chose to overlook her immediate angry reaction. Besides, there were other issues to discuss between the couple. Now was not that time. With a deep breath and resigning look, Kayla took his hand as he led her away in the other direction.

Over an hour later, Alex rushed up to where Kayla and Billy were ladling out fizzed-out punch. The anxious look on his face alarmed them both. "Have either of you seen Brianna? I can't find her and it's almost time for the crowning of the prom king and queen. She's a junior attendant. She should be backstage already, but she's not." Obviously, the couple had not worked out their issue, whatever it was, if Brianna had still not reappeared. This concerned Kayla greatly, for Brianna was easy-going and not usually one to hold a grudge. What exactly did Alex do to upset his date?

Billy was the first to reply, "I'm sure she's around here somewhere. We'll help look for her." The trio split up in different directions. Alex questioned all his friends. No one had seen her since the earlier tiff with Alex when she ran out of the gymnasium. The detective scoured the hallways and backstage to no avail. However, he did find several stressed out girls behind the stage curtain waiting to find out if they were the new prom queen. He also discovered a hiding spot of an amorous couple with clothes a bit too disheveled. He sent them scurrying away with a stern warning that the young lady's father, an officer with the police department, would be hearing about this incident.

Kayla searched the hallways and any open classrooms towards the back of the school. After witnessing the argument Brianna had with Alex, she expected to find the girl possibly sulking in a dark corner. Although the booms and thumps of the music from the gym vibrated throughout the school, the lighting in this part of the building was dark. The area was supposed to be off-limits for the event, but it wasn't like there were guards posted outside the gym doors. Calling out the girl's name, Kayla's intuition made her uneasy as she approached the tall heavy door leading to the swimming pool and athletic department offices in the very back of the building.

Just as Kayla placed her hand on the door she nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of another heavy door banging shut somewhere close by. She almost laughed at herself for getting spooked so easily, but her heart continued to pound loudly in her chest as she once again touched the door to enter the pool area. Pushing on the door, Kayla's senses were immediately accosted by fumes of chlorine and other chemicals used to maintain the Olympic size pool.

The pool was dark, but strangely there were a couple lights on in the back offices. Kayla could see the locker room lights from a tiny window in the doors at the other end of the pool deck. "Brianna," Kayla called although she found her voice weak and somewhat shaky.

She guessed that the loud noise had startled her more than she wanted to admit. Although no lights were on in the area, moonlight filtered in through the large skylights in the ceiling above the pool giving just enough illumination to make out vague shapes so as to avoid tripping over something. Kayla's high heels made a resounding clanking noise as she walked on the hard concrete floor surrounding the pool. Nearly slipping on something, Kayla stooped down to investigate what she stepped on. She tenderly picked up something silky and moist. Holding the object up to the light from the ceiling windows, she saw a torn rose petal. Without better lighting she couldn't tell for certain, but Kayla would swear it looked like one of the petals from Brianna's bouquet – creamy white delicate petals with a dusting of deep crimson red around its edges. Contemplating the petal, she noticed her vision was adjusting to the darkness of the room. Calling out one more time for Brianna, Kayla caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye - a trail of petals leading to the water's edge. With the knot in her stomach tightening and finding it more difficult to breathe, she stepped closer to the pool while trying not to slip on the blanket of rose petals.

Just then the full moon peeked through some wispy cirrus clouds. Suddenly, the entire pool area was bathed in moonlight causing a dark form to appear in the pool itself. As the knowledge dawned on her about what she was seeing, Kayla fought the urge to flee. She forced herself to draw closer. There, face down in the shallow end of the pool, a body floated – surrounded by rose petals and long thornless stems.

Kayla instinctively knew whose body that was. She had seen the young woman every day for years. Just tonight she had watched the golden blonde hair tossed behind her head as she laughed. Just a couple hours ago, that dress had twirled about her slender legs as she swayed to one of the few ballads played by the band with her hands entwined behind her date's neck. Just an hour ago she watched as the fiery young woman stomped away from her handsome date. And just last night Kayla had created the most glorious bouquet of unique

creamy white roses tinged with a dash of crimson red around their tips with a smattering of baby's breath and a satin red velvet ribbon to match the brilliant hue of the girl's red gown. Now, the vibrant soul that was Brianna Swindall lay face down in the pool surrounded by what was left of her special roses. Without regard for her own elegant silk cocktail dress and three inch heels, Kayla jumped into the water to get to the girl while letting out a blood curdling scream.



Chapter 4

The sun was peeking over the horizon as Kayla finally inserted the key into her own front door. Every girl dreams of a prom to remember, but this prom would be remembered for all the wrong reasons. The evening started with such promise and beauty. It started with a handsome young man with brown wavy hair with a shock of golden tones to highlight his sparkling blue-green eyes dressed in a fine tuxedo and bowtie to match his date's classic floor-length dress. It started with a beautiful young woman with long, flowing blonde hair and piercing grey eyes complemented by the dark rouge of her evening gown. It started with smiles and laughter. It ended in sadness and tears.

It hadn't taken long to determine Brianna was dead when Kayla dived into the pool in an attempt to save her. Thankfully her screams had been heard above the blaring music of the band by Billy, who had been searching the halls for the missing teenage girl. Within minutes, the school transformed from a jubilant prom into a crime scene. The entire police force blanketed the school grounds. Paramedics had been unable to revive the teen. Instead, after a preliminary forensics evidence sweep, Brianna Swindall's body was whisked away in a silent ambulance to the county morgue as her fellow students stood by in confusion. Parents were notified by a robo-call blast sent out by the principal to please come to the school to pick up your children. Jessie arrived quickly to be with Alex. In shock, Kayla had been unable to place the call to his sister. Thankfully, Billy kept his cool and handled everything for her. He allowed Jessie to take the young boy home since he was beside himself in grief and shock. However, he informed Alex's sister that he would have to question the boy as soon as he regained his composure.

As the primary witness and the one that discovered the girl's body, Kayla had to remain at the school for much longer to give her

statement a number of times. She remained even longer than necessary upon seeing her close friend, and aunt to the deceased girl, huddled in a corner of the school's long hallway. Trish Collins was being tended to by paramedics, but there was nothing they could do to fix the aunt's broken heart. Kayla stayed with her friend as Brianna's parents arrived at the school and discovered what had become of their daughter. Trish's sister immediately collapsed upon hearing the news. Another ambulance arrived to transport the distraught mother to the hospital. Tears blurred her vision as she thought of what her own reaction would be if something happened to her own beloved child. "No mother should EVER have to endure this," Kayla thought in anger and sadness.

It wasn't until the dark night sky began to grow a lighter gray as sunrise neared, that Trish dropped Kayla off at her home. Being the lead detective of the Folly Beach Police Department, Billy had to remain at the scene. It had been a long night and would be an even longer next few days as the police investigated Brianna's cause of death. However, Kayla knew that wouldn't be the worst part. That would be helping Alex, and others that loved Brianna, to deal with her loss. Too tired to focus on any of it at the moment, Kayla checked in on a sleeping Alex before throwing herself into her shower to wash away the stench of pool chemicals from her hair and skin. The boy was curled up in his bed with his big sister next to him. Jessie's arm was draped over Alex as a means of comfort. Kayla remembered the number of times she found the two of them asleep in those same positions after their parents' deaths. For the sweet boy to endure another untimely passing of someone close to him...well, that broke her heart.

No matter how long she stood in the steaming shower; no matter how many times she scrubbed her skin with lavender-scented bodywash; and no matter how many times Kayla lathered and rinsed her golden tresses, she still smelled the chlorine. For once in her life, that particular odor made her want to retch. As a swim coach for many

years, not only was she adjusted to the chemical-laden aroma but she found it comforting. In one night, that was forever changed.

Honestly, Kayla could no longer tell what water was from the showerhead or what were her own salty tears pouring down her face. It wasn't until the water turned icy cold that she realized how much time had passed. Drying off with a hand towel (being so busy at work all week the laundry had been severely neglected), she donned an oversized Motley Crue concert t-shirt and collapsed onto her bed.

What could've been minutes or hours later, the ding-dong of the doorbell woke everyone in the house. Shrugging on a pair of shorts, Kayla stumbled towards the door as a red-eyed Alex braced himself against the doorframe of his bedroom. Not surprising, a weary detective with a touch of grey at his temples appeared in the front doorway. Relieved, Kayla embraced him while burying her face in his strong chest. Under normal circumstances, Billy would've squeezed her tightly and she would've felt his heart beat a little faster. Not this time though. Instead his hold on her was brief, less than consoling. His gaze went past Kayla to the young man barely holding himself together.

“Son,” Billy began with something akin to regret in his voice, “I need to ask you a few questions about what happened tonight.” Kayla was astounded at his tone – all official sounding. This wasn't a police interrogation! This was her Alex. A sweet kid whose date was just found dead at the prom. She couldn't figure out why Billy would use his “cop” voice at this moment. Stepping back from her boyfriend, all Kayla could do was stare up at him in dismay.

“Really, can't we do this another time?” she asserted. “It's been a horrible night for everyone. I'm sure once Alex has a chance to come to terms with what happened, he would be glad to answer any questions, but come on...right now is a bit too soon, don't you think?” Kayla regretted the harsh edge she heard in her own voice, but it was unavoidable. The look in the detective's eyes was all too

familiar when he was working a case. He was in cop mode now and she didn't like the "punched in the gut" feeling she was getting.

He gently grasped her arm to turn her towards him. "I'm sorry, Kayla. It HAS to be now. We can either do this here or I can take him to the police station for questioning." She didn't know what stunned her more – the words or his unemotional tone.

Alex nodded as if in a daze, but his "Mama Bear" guardian was not going to let anyone, much less this man, bully him into answering questions before he was ready. The young man had been through so much in the last few hours. Why couldn't Billy see that? Grabbing a hold of her beau's arm before he could get to Alex, Kayla dragged him into the kitchen. "What do you think you're doing?" she reprimanded him in a stern voice she hadn't used since catching her daughter sneaking out her bedroom late one night when the girl was only fifteen and already grounded.

Weary from the long night and stressed from having to deal with the death of a young woman, Billy had little patience for his girlfriend's overprotective instincts. It wasn't hard for her to see the exasperation in his eyes. "I'm doing my job, Kayla. That's all. Alex was Brianna's date. He was quite possibly the last person to see her alive," he plaintively stated. Trying to be consoling, he added, "If it wasn't 100% necessary, I would wait. Unfortunately, time is something I don't have. The first few hours after a murder are the most crucial. Alex is a critical witness," he hesitated before adding, "...and possibly a suspect."

Stunned silent for a moment, Kayla plopped down hard onto an old wooden stool. Her legs just gave out from under her. "A suspect?" she repeated several times before her full fury returned to vehemently deny her beloved Alex could ever hurt anyone. She thought that Billy must be out of his mind to even consider it.

With his eyes pleading for understanding from her, Billy asserted, “I know what you are going to say. Not Alex. Never Alex. My gut says the same thing, but I have to follow the evidence. Quite frankly, it’s all I have to go on right now so I HAVE to talk to him now.”

Before Kayla could begin to blast Billy for having the stupidity to think Alex would have anything to do with hurting his friend, Alex himself stuck his head in the kitchen doorway. “Kayla, it’s okay. Whatever I need to do to help them find out what happened to Brianna, I’ll do it.” He looked so distraught and on the verge of crying again, but he held himself together. Standing in front of her was a strong young man. Kayla realized he’d grown up when she wasn’t looking. Still, he didn’t need to face this right now. It just wasn’t fair, she inwardly whined. Turning to the detective, Alex barely contained his grief as he sank into a chair at the kitchen table while indicating the chair across from him for Billy to take.

Not knowing whether to beam with pride at how brave and adult Alex was being, or whether to smash a pan over Billy’s head for showing up at her home to interrogate the boy, Kayla determined to sit down at the table, too. With both men mutely staring at her, she put on her best “Don’t mess with me” face.

Clearing his throat before speaking, Billy reflected her stubborn expression back at her. “Actually, I took the prerogative of calling your attorney of record. Dean should be here in a few minutes. I won’t start questioning the boy before he arrives.” Kayla realized he meant to sound reassuring, but it came off more chilling. It was then she understood...Alex really was a suspect. This wasn’t just a complimentary house call so the young man didn’t have to endure going down to the police station to give his statement. Regardless where the interrogation was being held – in her kitchen or in a tiny interview room in the municipal building -- Billy fully intended to question him as a suspect.

Preparing to let into the detective, Kayla was interrupted by the sound of the doorbell again. Alex's attorney, Dean Lattimore, had arrived. She could hear his tongue-tied greeting to Jessie. For a smooth-talking courtroom lawyer, he barely managed complete sentences when around Jessie. Kayla had always considered it rather cute, but now that Alex needed his professional expertise...not so cute anymore. Actually, at this moment, it sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard.

The door into the kitchen swung open to allow the tall, slender attorney in. The usually stylish-clad gentlemen had apparently been contacted before his morning coffee. He looked disheveled in mismatched sweats and long hair covering his eyes instead of slicked back like a debonair young Frank Sinatra. With his entrance, Kayla was asked to leave while her supposed boyfriend questioned her surrogate son regarding the death...murder...of Brianna Swindall.



Chapter 5

After the interrogation, as Kayla chose to think of it, Billy left quickly. He tried to kiss Kayla on the cheek on his way out, but she was not in the mood to deal with him right now. Dean, the attorney, declared he had a client to meet in the next fifteen minutes but would gladly discuss the matter with them afterwards. He attempted to be reassuring, as it was easy to see Kayla and Jessie's anxiety. Alex meekly requested to be left alone to shower and nap. However, she doubted the boy slept a wink. At least not according to the sobs emitted from his room. She desperately wanted to go in there and wrap her arms around him and tell him everything would be okay. It had to be okay, right? Alex, obviously, didn't kill Brianna. The idea was absurd! Finding the real killer, however, was paramount. Even though the knowledge wouldn't bring back Alex's dearest friend, perhaps it would bring him and the rest of her loved ones some peace.

Being the day after the prom, The Flowers of Folly Beach – Kayla's floral shop, was usually closed. An official florist holiday after the chaotic preparation for the prom. The first year she closed the day after the prom had been a risk, she knew. Luckily, the citizens of Folly Beach were a forgiving bunch and even supported her "day off". After last night's unfortunate events, Kayla decided to burn off some adrenaline-fueled energy with a long, strenuous run and then stop by the shop. Anything to occupy her time as she sorted through this crazy mess in her own head. With Alex asleep, or at least pretending, and Jessie camped out on the sofa in case her baby brother needed anything, Kayla excused herself for a run.

Late May in Folly Beach, South Carolina can be summed up in two words – hot and humid. Not even five minutes into her jog, Kayla was drenched in sweat. Undeterred by the heat, she cranked up her speed as she made a left turn towards the ocean. Just the other morning, she did the same thing. That time it was to mull over Billy's not-so-subtle

comments during their date. It had started with him asking her to join him for an out-of-town family wedding. Up until now, she successfully avoided Randall Family events. However, this time Billy was not letting the issue drop. Kayla sensed why and he readily confirmed it was because he wanted her as a part of his family. Simple enough request. Not so simple for her, though. She had done the family thing before – with her ex-husband and Candace’s father. When he left, all contacts with his family had ceased. She didn’t know if it was because they never liked her in the first place or they felt embarrassed by the way he treated his wife and child. Broaching the point in the relationship where the “family” comes into play had thrown Kayla for a loop in the other direction.

That was the other day. Today was an entirely different matter. Kayla’s head was filled with images from last night, worry for Alex, and sorrow for the loss of such a beautiful young woman. So consumed with her thoughts she barely escaped a too-close encounter with a minivan as she sprinted across the boulevard towards the ocean. Stopping on the other side of the road to catch her breath after almost being flattened like a pancake, she witnessed a group of early vacationers playing beach volleyball. One was a girl, approximately the same age and build as Brianna. A strapping young man picked her up and spun her around after she made the winning point. They were smiling and laughing. Kayla smiled sadly. The nostalgia of moments that would never be with Brianna and her friends weighed heavily on her heart. Turning back as a stray tear slipped down her cheek, Kayla looked both ways before heading back into town at a breakneck speed, away from the jovial teens and towards her comfort zone – The Flowers of Folly Beach.

By the time she arrived at her flower shop, Kayla’s clothes were completely drenched in sweat. With her hands slick with sweat and her body trembling from hard exertion, she fumbled with the keys to the back door of the store. Everything was dark, but she knew her way around in the pitch black dark.

The perfume of a variety of flowers filled the air, with the most dominant scent of roses rising above the others. Yes, roses were the primary flower for proms. Her business had been filled with thousands of roses for the last week and a half. With wedding season coming up, she expected to be knee-deep in the beautiful buds and blooms for the next three months at least. She'd always loved roses. Loved the silken feel of the petals. Loved the unique colors and styles of designer bouquets. Loved the fragrance they emitted, especially when first in bloom. She even loved the contradiction of the beautiful flower and its prickly thorns – how something so lovely could be so hurtful, even deadly. Rather like love, she thought. There were countless sayings about roses and their thorns. One of her favorites came to mind as Kayla somewhat reluctantly turned on the lights. It was from Mark Overby, “Love is much like a wild rose, beautiful and calm, but willing to draw blood in its own defense.” That pretty much summed up love in less than twenty words. Kayla, an English Tudor history buff, had always thought it strange that King Henry VIII never seemed to figure that out, especially after he had his own botanist create the first rose without a thorn for his fifth young bride – even though she shortly lost her head after being caught cheating on the king with a younger courtier. “No,” Kayla thought, “thorns are as much a part of the rose as the pretty petals.”

Despite the shop being closed for the day, it was still a mess from the previous day's frantic rush to complete the hundreds of ordered nosegays, boutonnieres, and assorted bouquets for last night's prom. Kayla had hoped Javier would clean up the mess as an unspoken favor. It wasn't in the young man's job description, even though he had been her assistant for months, as well as living in the tiny apartment above the floral shop now that Jessie was at Clemson and Alex had his own room at Kayla's house. As he was also working as a weekend caddy at the local golf course, she hadn't relied on him as much as she had Jessie. Considering she still had excess energy to burn, Kayla decided it was a good thing she had a mess to clean up here. The “other” mess regarding finding Brianna's killer would be

much more difficult. At least the task kept her hands busy while her brain raced as she tried to resolve the situation in her own mind.

So preoccupied with her rampaging thoughts, Kayla almost didn't hear the phone ring. It wasn't her cell phone ringtone, currently "Cruise" by Florida Georgia Line. No, it was the store's business landline phone. Considering the store was officially closed, she almost let the call go to voicemail. Something told her to answer it though. Kayla was glad she did. It was Brianna Swindall's father. The gentleman was trying so hard to hold it together, but the tears were evident in his voice. He tried apologizing for calling on her day off, but she assured him it was no trouble whatsoever. She could barely utter the phrase he had probably heard hundreds of times by now – I'm so sorry for your loss. Then his next words nearly broke her heart. In barely contained misery, he asked to place a flower order for his daughter's funeral. With her heart pounding in her chest, Kayla listened as he explained that his wife was still nearly catatonic in the hospital; the police couldn't give him a date when they would release Brianna's body to her family for burial; and that he really hoped Kayla could come up with more of those gorgeous roses Alex had given Brianna for the prom. He went on to tell how she had gushed over them so much when Alex gave them to her. She had even teared up, but with the most beautiful smile on her face. He wanted to remember his little girl just that way and thought the roses would be a small way to do just that.

What can someone say to a request like that? Kayla lost her sense of speech for a few moments as she was overcome with sorrow and grief. Once she was able to open her mouth again, she reassured him that she would do everything in her power to get as many of the elegant roses as possible. She had no intention of charging the family so much as a penny for the flowers either. Whatever small thing she could do to ease the pain of Brianna's loss, Kayla vowed to do. The rest of the call was short. Mr. Swindall needed to check in on his wife and Kayla had some roses to find. She may not be able to uncover who hurt the young woman. She may not be able to protect Alex from

being considered a suspect, although she still wasn't sure why he was one. The one thing she could do though – arrange for the largest, most beautiful rose display in honor of Brianna. Yes, that was probably the only thing Kayla felt qualified to do at the moment.

Just as she was about to lock up the store again and run back to the house to check on Alex, the strands of “Cruise” startled her from her cell phone. It was Jessie. By the sound of her voice, Kayla was on instant alert. Something was definitely wrong. The younger woman quickly informed her that Billy had called the house. Apparently, the new district attorney wanted lightning fast movement on the case. Alex was being ordered to the police station for a lie detector test! As soon as she hung up, Kayla sent a quick text to Dean Lattimore to meet them at the station. With her hair and clothes a mix of sweat and a vinegar cleaning solution she used to clean the counters, the forty-four year old florist raced the eight blocks from her floral shop to the police station.



Chapter 6

Kayla hadn't seen the police station this busy in years – almost two years to be exact when Brandi Carroll was murdered at the annual wedding showcase. All because her snobby half-sister wanted Brandi to destroy Kayla and Jessie's new designer calla lily varietal. Now the place was bustling with activity. Everyone wanting to find the horrible person that killed a young teenage girl. Kayla wanted the same thing. She just KNEW the cops were following the wrong lead. She'd said it before and she'd say it again. There was no way Alex had anything to do with Brianna's death. Before Alex took any lie detector test, she intended to give the cops (i.e., her boyfriend) a huge piece of her mind.

Just as she burst through the doors into his office, she stopped abruptly upon seeing another young woman sitting across the desk from Billy. Dressed in a flattering navy pantsuit, the woman looked up at her inquisitively with large dark brown eyes behind stylish Katie Spade black-rimmed glasses. Both women assessed the other intently. The lady's smile was friendly, it seemed. Kayla realized she must look ghastly in this woman's eyes as sweat dripped down her nose. She initially tried to apologize for the intrusion and stepped back from the doorway, but Billy was already on his feet. "Kayla, I've been expecting you," he touched her elbow before she had a chance to retreat further. Self-conscious of her appearance in front of the pretty, waif-thin brunette, she nervously tucked a strand of her own hair behind her ear as she re-entered the office.

Looking up into Billy's usually comforting eyes, Kayla saw regret and anxiety. He knew why she was here so quickly. Guessing he hoped to avoid a confrontation in front of anyone else, she bit her tongue to avoid lashing out. Instead, she allowed him to introduce his colleague, Jill Henson. Shaking hands with the woman, Kayla apologized for her sweat-slicked palms. The other woman didn't seem

fazed at all. Jill offered to let Billy and Kayla have a few moments alone while she settled into her temporary digs in the back office area. She explained that she was “on loan” from FBI Headquarters in Quantico, Virginia as a forensics expert for the Swindall case.

After the woman left the office, Billy turned nervous eyes to Kayla. He wouldn't need a translator to read the stress and unbridled fury in her expression. The idea that Alex was being put through a lie detector test was ridiculous. However, the words never had a chance to escape her lips. There was a loud uproar in the outer lobby. Someone was screaming obscenities. They both rushed out of his office just in time to see Alex walking in the lobby with his lawyer and sister. Another student from the high school, an oversized hulk of a teenager known as Tommy Brennan, was shoving and screaming at Alex. Other students from the high school were there to give their own statements, as well as the school principal. Most stood by with shocked looks on their faces. Three other boys, fellow football teammates, jumped in with Tommy to eviscerate Alex for “killing” Brianna. Stunned, Kayla stood by as a group of police officers pulled the boys off of Alex. Billy led the boy and his lawyer to his own office, while the other boys were escorted away for a good “talking”. It wasn't until Jessie touched Kayla's arm lightly that she broke out of her shock. “How those boys possibly think Alex had anything to do with what happened to Brianna?” she mused out loud. Along with Dean, they joined Billy and Alex in the detective's office. Just as Kayla thought her heart can't break anymore, the vision of the young boy slumped over in a chair with fresh tears spilled out of his red-rimmed eyes cracks released the pain again.

“Alex, don't let those idiots get to you. They have no idea what they're talking about and are just lashing out as a means to cope with their emotions,” Billy tried to explain. Nice words, but considering Billy was a police officer and had called Alex in for a lie detector test, Kayla wasn't buying his drivel.

“So, why don’t you explain why he’s even here in the first place,” she dared him. “A lie detector test? Really? You can’t possibly…” she began.

“No,” he interrupted, “I can’t believe Alex would have hurt that young woman, but based on certain evidence the district attorney insisted on a lie detector test. Kayla,” he pleaded, “you have to know I’m on Alex’s side, on your side.” Looking up into his beguiling dark eyes, she wanted desperately to believe him, but was too wound up to let herself trust his words.

“Why can’t you put a stop to this nonsense then?” Kayla questioned.

“Kay, I’m a cop. I don’t make these decisions, I just carry out orders. If the district attorney wants someone brought in for questioning, then that’s what I do.” He hesitated before continuing, “If Alex can satisfy the ‘machine’, then this whole ordeal will be over.” She wasn’t stupid. This would be far from over. Alex just lost one of his best friends in the entire world. Now there were fellow students that considered him guilty of something so atrocious! No this would be far, far from over.

Thankfully, before she commenced another tirade upon her boyfriend’s head about the injustice of it all, more level thinking prevailed. Alex’s attorney, Dean, piped up to interject with his own questions to the detective. “Billy,” he began before correcting himself, “Detective, can you at least inform us what exactly led the district attorney to the conclusion that Alex may somehow be involved with the death of Miss Swindall?”

“Yes, please,” Kayla insisted in an angry tone, “please tell us what could persuade anyone to believe that because it’s absurd at the very least.” Jessie gently put her hand on her arm and then applied the slightest pressure. It dawned on Kayla that her evident agitation was not making things better for the younger woman and her brother. They needed her strength, but right now her ire was getting in the way.

Taking a couple deep breaths and casting apologizing looks to Jessie and Alex, Kayla nodded for Billy to enlighten them. His story was short. According to various accounts from last night, Alex was the last person to see Brianna alive. Normally, that doesn't automatically make one a suspect, but there was more. Quite a number of students, as well as a couple of chaperones and even the principal, reported witnessing a huge fight between Alex and Brianna just before she stormed off and was not seen alive again. When Billy interviewed the boy earlier, Alex explained about the fight. The problem was that the district attorney didn't believe that was "all". He firmly contended that there had to be more to the story, so he ordered the lie detector test.

Finally, Alex spoke up for himself. "But, I told you everything, Billy. It was a stupid fight. That was all. We would've probably laughed it off by the end of the night, or at least by this morning. Bri and I have never stayed angry at each other for any length of time. She's my best friend," then he stopped himself. "She was my best friend," he finished before laying his head back into his hands. A small sob escaped.

Jessie knelt beside her brother to console him. Dismayed at the scene in front of her, Kayla glanced up at Billy. "So how exactly does a small argument between two teenagers at the prom amount to a motive for murder?" she asked with more than a little sarcasm in her voice.

Dean Lattimore was a good attorney and friend. He knew it was time to intercede and did so just in time. Kayla was about to go ballistic on an innocent police officer. Even though he agreed it was a bogus reason to think the boy capable of murder, it wasn't going to do anyone any good, especially Alex, if she continued down this path. "Detective, can I have a few moments with my client, and his 'guardians' before the test? He had been privy to Alex's description of the fight when he first met with Billy. Admittedly, it seemed an

innocent disagreement, at best, but he sensed where the district attorney may be going with this line of thinking. He needed to know what other students and adults were saying in their statements that could be adding significance to the fight.

Billy gladly excused himself to get some coffee from the breakroom. As the small group huddled around the desk in the tiny, cramped office, the tension weighed on them all. Dean looked Alex straight in the eyes and asked, “Alex, I know you thought the fight with Brianna was minor. It probably was, but we have to know before they hook you up to the lie detector machine if there is anything, anything at all that would cause anyone to think it as something more. Walk me through everything you remember just prior to the argument.” His tone was soothing, but Kayla felt less than comforted. Exchanging glances with Jessie, she knew the young woman felt the same.

Alex looked up at the adults hovering over him. “I just don’t get why anyone would think my argument with Brianna would result in her death. It wasn’t anything worth anything.” Shaking his head, he continued to retell the story to his attorney. For the women, it was the first they heard the tale.

Alex and Brianna had started the night off in excellent spirits. She raved about the gorgeous roses and even teared up when he gave them to her at her parents’ house. After an elegant dinner at the yacht club with another couple, they headed over to the school. The evening was going great, until Natalia Peterson asked him to dance. It had been a slow ballad, although he couldn’t remember the actual song. Not her usual self, Brianna took offense that her “date” danced with someone else, even if they were ‘just friends’.

At this, Kayla rolled her eyes. Natalia again! First she wants Brianna’s roses, then she wants Brianna’s date. She bet Brianna was upset about Natalia making moves on her prom date. She wondered what Natalia’s date had thought about the situation.

The teen continued. After the dance with Natalia, he returned to their table to find Brianna shaking with fury and near tears. She blasted him for deserting her for “that” skinny tramp. He had tried to explain he didn’t leave her for Natalia. It was just one dance. Brianna wasn’t satisfied with his answer. After a few choice words he had never heard from her before, she stomped off. For whatever reason, she only took a few steps before turning around to snag her bouquet of roses and then ran off. He started to go after her, but Tommy – the same Tommy that had accosted him in the police department’s lobby moments ago – stopped him. The other boy had urged him to give her time to cool off. He even offered to track her down after a few minutes to talk to her himself so she’d come down. Alex had thought that strange, since Brianna didn’t particularly like Tommy that much. They had a barely tolerate each other type relationship, although lately Alex noticed Brianna’s dislike for Tommy growing, while Tommy seemed to be cozying up to her whenever he could. He had guessed it was because the young man wanted the newspaper to do a glowing write-up of him in the last edition of the newspaper for the school year. Tommy needed all the good press he could get before his senior year if he wanted to get noticed by college football coaches. Alex drummed up Tommy’s attempts to be friendly with Brianna as nothing but that. Regardless, he had been so confused by his date’s outburst at prom that he gladly took Tommy up on his offer to play peacemaker. Over an hour later, he started to get worried because she hadn’t come back to the gym. “...and you know what happened next. Kayla found her...” he ended the sad story.

The attorney was deep in thought for several minutes after Alex finished. In the interim, Kayla interjected. “Well, that sounds like a nonsensical teenage fuss to me. I’m still unclear how that amounts to suspicious activity in the district attorney’s eyes.”

Dean shook his head. “Honestly, I’m in agreement with you. However, I think it would be important to discover what the other witnesses to the argument claimed in their statements to the police.

Someone could purposely, or not, made allegations that it was more than what it was.”

Before they had a chance to brainstorm who could've said what, Billy knocked on his own office door. “Sorry, guys. They need Alex for the test now.” Dean went with his client, but Jessie and Kayla had to wait it out. Billy offered his office for them to use while they waited, but they were too anxious to sit still. Besides, Kayla still wasn't ready to forgive her beau for bringing Alex in for the test. Even if it wasn't his call to do so, she still needed to hold onto her anger.

Lounging in the department's waiting room was quickly ruled out. Those gathered there in order to give their statements to the police were talking. They were talking about Alex. Gossip had already run rampant and some were already convicting him. Neither woman could stand it, so they retreated to the tiny breakroom in the back of the building. Normally, it was just for officers and other police department personnel. However, Kayla had spent enough time there over the last couple years that she felt no qualms about camping out at the outdated Formica table in the far corner next to the vending machine.

The wait seemed to drag on for hours. Jessie made attempts at small talk but neither felt like keeping up the ruse. They sat in silence for a long time while the only sound in the room was the humming vending machines. Occasionally someone came in to get a soda, but it was surprisingly empty. Twenty minutes went by without another soul entering the room. Then a new, but familiar face appeared in the doorway. It was the lovely young woman who was in Billy's office earlier. She smiled at Kayla and sat down in a chair close to their table.

“Hi, it's Kayla, right?” she asked tentatively. Kayla introduced Jessie to the new forensics technician – Jill. Somehow, the young woman pulled them into small talk and time began to fly. After explaining how she had driven down this morning and still hadn't so much as

found lodging for her stay in town, the girls were happy to provide her with leads on housing. Kayla even put in a call to a friend of hers in the realty business to secure Jill a small condo on the beach. It was nice to think about, talk about, anything not dealing with Brianna's death. It was a fitting, and much needed distraction.

Although curious, Kayla was not the one to ask how Jill knew Billy and for how long. Jessie did the honors. As it turned out, they worked together on quite a few cases during Billy's tenure with the Bureau. Jill remarked she was surprised to get the call from him late last night requesting her assistance. One late night call to her supervisor and she was on her way to South Carolina. Jessie remarked about how it was to call a boss so late at night, but Jill assured her that it happened all the time in her business. She was glad to help out. "Besides," she continued, "it's better than dredging through the email server for a certain former senator trying to decrypt sensitive information." Both women looked shocked, but Jill seemed nonchalant about her revelation. Kayla thought she'd prefer staring at a computer, peeking into other people's emails than investigating the murder of a young teenage girl.

The ladies talked at length. By the time, Dean and Billy peeked around the corner looking for them, it felt like Jill was "one of the girls". At first, Kayla realized she had been apprehensive that perhaps Jill and Billy knew each other much too well to be "just friends" or beyond professional, but now she had no such qualms. However, her new-found ease of mind was broken by the anxious look on the attorney's face.



Chapter 7

Dean offered to drive everyone home so they could discuss the events at the police station in private at her home. On the way out, Tommy Brennan sneered as Alex passed by but avoided saying anything else to the young man. Personally, Kayla would've preferred to smack the petulant boy. He had no reason to treat Alex in that way and was only making matters worse. She refused to dwell on the poor parenting he must have received growing up. He was acting like Alex took away his toy prize in his kids' meal or something.

It wasn't until Kayla caught her own reflection in the glass door that she remembered she was still in her workout clothes with her normally glossy hair pulled into a nappy looking ponytail. She cringed.

Just as Dean held the door open for the others to exit, three others entered the building. All Kayla saw at first was a flash of long, golden blonde hair. Natalia sprinted to Alex, enveloping him in a hug. Her more somber brother, Davis, followed. The young woman was rambling on quietly about how sorry she was about Brianna and how horrible the whole situation was. Alex at this point had nothing left in him as evidenced by his lackluster return embrace and vacant stare. The moment didn't last long though. Natalia father, Paul, pulled her away from Alex rather roughly, Kayla thought. Paul was the high school swim and dive coach. His obvious goal throughout his career as a coach was to propel his children to the top in the two sports. Kayla had thought for some time that his ambition for them clouded his judgement as a coach, as Paul had never taken well to coaching Alex over the last three years. Actually, he was Alex's primary critic. Although Kayla realized her senses could be off regarding Paul since she was not objective when it came to her young houseguest and friend. However, the harsh expression on the coach's face upon seeing his daughter hugging the boy...well, that look could melt the polar ice

caps faster than climate change. “Natalia,” he warned his daughter, “you are to stay away from that miscreant from now on.” Pulling both his children away, he muttered under his breath, “Always knew he was a bad seed.” It wasn’t meant to be overheard, but Kayla heard it loud and clear. As she started to take off after the coach to give him a piece of her mind, a firm but gentle hand held her back. Looking up, it was Alex. He had heard everything. He just didn’t want a scene and was too exhausted to let it get to him right now. With an “as evil as she dared” glance back, Kayla relented.

The lawyer wanted to wait until they got back to the house before discussing the lie detector test. He assured them that Alex did a fantastic job. There was no way the test could indicate he was anything but honest. However, he had a better idea what drove the district attorney to call for the test. Based on the questions asked, and re-asked, and asked yet again, some witnesses from last night described the fight between Alex and Brianna as a huge blow-out. Some possibly indicated that Brianna was crazy jealous and Alex was a thoughtless creep who cared for no one but himself. One of the questions seemed to indicate someone thought Alex wanted Brianna to write a story about his swimming career at the school to help him out for college, but she resisted. Kayla thought, “Well, that sounds familiar but wrong guy.” The questioning seemed to convey that Alex was angry that Brianna wouldn’t write the desired “puff” piece for him. A little while later, the questions turned to whether Alex was aware of stories Brianna was working on regarding the athletic department. He had not been, but the officer conducting the test didn’t seem to believe him and kept hammering him on the subject.

Alex was exhausted, as well as distraught. He excused himself to go lay down in his room for a while. The poor young man had a lot thrown at him in the last 24 hours. It was no surprise he needed some time alone. No one could blame him. However, Kayla wasn’t done grilling Dean on the questions asked during the lie detector test. Jessie had other ideas though. “Kay, no offense honey, but you need a

shower. It's okay, I can handle the inquisition of the young lawyer while you freshen up," she teased.

Being 44 years old, she could sense when she was being shooed away. Whether for her benefit or not, was questionable. But a long hot shower was definitely in order. By the time she exited the shower, Dean was long gone. Jessie already ordered pizza for the trio, including Alex's favorite – pepperoni and jalapeño peppers. Unfortunately, the delivery had not showed up before Kayla's phone rang. There were several missed calls on the log, but no messages. However, the phone's display flashed a familiar number. It was her good friend, Trish. With everything that had been going on with Alex, Kayla felt regretful for neglecting her friend who was mourning the loss of her own niece.

Although it was getting rather late, Trish needed a huge favor from her friend. The police had just called to say they were on their way to the house to search through Brianna's things for clues as to why someone would murder her. With Brianna's mom still in the hospital recovering from stress, and her father refusing to leave his wife's side, Trish was tasked with being at the house when the cops showed up. Although tough as nails, this was one task Trish didn't want to do alone. She needed emotional support. Grabbing a jacket and Jessie's car keys, Kayla ran out the door with her hair still wet and her stomach still empty.

If there is one thing Southern women are good at, it's making casseroles and the like in abundance whenever a family is in need. Thankfully for Kayla's growling belly, the Swindall kitchen was packed with a vast assortment of casseroles and desserts. With no other family in the house, Trish spooned up hefty portions for her guest as they waited on the police to finish their sweep of the house. Kayla didn't believe she would ever really have an appetite again, but the aroma of homemade chicken pot pie, hash brown casserole, and a still piping hot apple pie worked its magic. Trish prepared coffee and

various gourmet teas for the officers. Despite the situation, she remained the ideal Southern hostess.

The two were on their second helping of apple pie when Billy entered the kitchen carrying a clipboard. He greeted them both, but with a wary eye towards Kayla. It didn't take a genius to figure out she wasn't happy with the situation, and she wasn't happy with him at the moment. Trying to ease the tension in the room, Trish offered to fix the detective a cup of coffee. He declined, but placed a small storage box on the kitchen table. Trish recognized it as Brianna's photo keepsake box. "Trish," he began, "I need to ask you about the contents of this box we found under Brianna's bed. There's some rather interesting items."

Opening the box revealed a jumble of scrawled notes on everything from post-it notes, torn pieces of notebook paper, and even napkins along with several photos. Billy elaborated, "From the looks of these items, Brianna may have been working on a couple huge stories affecting the athletic department. These weren't simply "outstanding player" editorials. We are talking about unethical, not to mention illegal, activities being carried out by school personnel." He paused to let that sink in before continuing. "Some of these notes indicate Brianna was convinced there was a "pay-for-play" scheme being carried out by one or more of the football coaches. Another story centered on the suspected use of performance-enhancing drugs across several sports."

The women were shocked. Trish voiced that she had not known what Brianna was working on for the school newspaper, but seemed incredulous that these stories were typical high school newspaper fare. She knew Brianna wanted to be an investigative journalist, like Kayla's daughter Candace, but those stories seemed way above the caliber of a high school junior. She knew her niece was excited about some information she discovered, but she never elaborated to anyone in the family. The last time Trish asked her about her work, Brianna simply replied that there was someone adamantly against her work

and had ordered her to stop. The young woman never revealed who put the kibosh on the stories, but she never mentioned her work again.

With a hesitant look at Kayla, Billy pulled out some neatly folded letter on delicate stationery. “These are love letters to Alex,” he stated. “Looks like she never got the nerve to give them to him.” He handed one to Kayla, but she declined to take the letter.

“No, those are private. Meant only for Alex, but apparently she didn’t want him to see the letters. It’s not my business,” Kayla iterated. Shaking her head sadly, she mourned the lost chances that Alex could’ve had if Brianna had given him even one of those letters. To discover her feelings now would only make the young man grieve more.

Billy continued rifling through the box. “There are a couple of notes here that don’t appear to be in Brianna’s writing.” He showed Trish the notes, who confirmed that was not the young woman’s handwriting. Kayla leaned over and read the words on one note while Trish studied the writing. She was shocked to read what was clearing a warning for Brianna to back off or else.

At that moment, Jill Henson, the FBI’s forensics technician, came into the kitchen carrying Brianna’s laptop, phone, tablet, as well as a plastic bag filled with several flash drives. She handed a handwritten log to Billy detailing every item that was taken into police custody. “Mrs. Collins, we will need to examine everything on that list. I personally promise to return these items to the family as soon as possible.” Kayla was struck by how kind and empathetic the woman was, considering she didn’t even know the family.

With everything bagged up and ready to go, the officers left altogether. Billy, however, stayed behind. Sensing the need for the two lovebirds to talk, Trish made herself scarce with the excuse of tidying up. Alone for the first time in what seemed like days, Kayla and Billy faced each other across the kitchen table. Moments passed

without either one speaking. Kayla now realized what the term “crushing silence” meant. It felt like the air in the room had gained weight and was pressing her down into her chair, making her immobile. Finally, Billy stretched his hand across the table and placed it on top of hers. She half expected herself to flinch away in a vain attempt to hold onto misplaced anger, but she didn’t. His touch was warm and comforting, with just a smidge of electricity that always seemed present when they were close. Physically and emotionally exhausted, Kayla realized she still trusted and needed him.

Trying to apologize for having to treat her beloved Alex as a suspect, Kayla stopped him. Shaking her head, “I know. I know. I’m the one that should apologize for being so hostile. I hate this. I hate the entire situation. I hate what happened to Brianna, and particularly what it’s doing to Alex. But I don’t hate you.” She tried to continue, but he wouldn’t allow it. Leaning over the short distance across the table, he cupped her cheek in one hand while planting a soft, chaste kiss on her lips.

“Kayla, you must realize that in order to find out who killed Brianna and to clear Alex, I have a difficult job ahead. I’m already in deep trouble with the district attorney who thinks I can’t be objective and partial because of my relationship with you. The only way I can help Alex is if I am allowed to stay on the case, so I’m going to HAVE to remain impartial. You need to realize though – I do not doubt Alex is innocent, but I have to follow the evidence. This investigation has to be done strictly by the book. Otherwise, they will take me off the case. No offense to the other detectives, but they will not think twice about taking the easy route and putting Alex under the microscope.” He continued, “The chief already wants to hand this over to Johnson and Hadley since I don’t currently have a partner to help me out. I can’t be seen to favor anyone, including Alex, or I’ll be tossed off the case.” If there was one thing Billy was good at...it was playing the job so he remained without a partner for most of his tenure with the Folly Beach police department. The most recent attempt at forcing another detective on him had not ended well. The fresh out of college,

idealistic young man hadn't lasted a month before resigning for a cozy security guard gig at English Enterprises.

After discussing how they could, and could not, handle themselves while the investigation continued, Kayla felt better about the situation. She knew he had to do his job and she agreed having him as the lead detective on the case could only benefit Alex. However, she regretted the strain it was going to cause Billy. Kayla also knew the limits to her "understanding". Until Alex was completely cleared, her temper was apt to flare up with Billy bearing the brunt of it. It wasn't exactly fair, but that's just how it was.

Once Billy left to make sure all the evidence was cataloged properly at the station, Kayla went in search of Trish to help clean up after the police. All the officers were nice, but somehow they weren't exactly considerate enough to clean up the mess they made searching every nook and cranny in the house. Straightening up the small room that Brianna used as her own personal office for homework and writing, Kayla picked up a paperback book that had fallen to the floor in between the desk and the bookshelf. The older woman mused as she read the title, "Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen. It had been one of Kayla's favorites, but she hadn't read it in a very long time. Flipping through the pages, she was startled when a yellow piece of paper fell out. Thinking it was just a bookmark, Kayla began to reinsert it but saw scribbled writing on it. Feeling her eyes grow large in shock and horror, she read, "Stop snooping around something that is none of your business, otherwise they will need bloodhounds to snoop around to find your body." Trembling, Kayla pulled her phone out of her pocket to dial Billy.



Chapter 8

After Billy picked up the threatening note from Kayla, she didn't see him again for a couple of days. Due to the death of a student, the principal actually decided to close school on the following Monday. Instead of classes, grief counselors were made available for students and faculty. In addition, there were a handful of cops canvassing the hallways as students mulled around. There was a line of students outside the guidance counsel offices, while others stood around looking shell-shocked. The principal, Robert Rickles, a middle-aged man with the beginning signs of the middle-age pudge around the belly, accompanied police officers around to search Brianna's locker, as well as classrooms she would've frequented.

Despite the large number of people occupying the building, a sad silence settled over the entire school. A candlelight vigil was planned for that evening, just outside the front steps leading into the school. Several teachers and parent volunteers were busy in the lunchroom preparing plastic cups with holes in the bottom to accommodate small white candles. Kayla had not thought it a good idea for Alex to go to the school that day, but the young man insisted. She offered to stay with him, as did his sister, but he wouldn't hear of it. He needed to experience the hallways, now empty of his best friend and strongest supporter, before classes began again and he would need to face a "normal" school day without Brianna.

Alex's decision didn't go as well as he planned. He didn't take into account all the students who now believed he was involved in Brianna's death. Many shunned him in the hallways, even some students he had believed to be true friends. As he walked toward the guidance counsel offices, he felt the magnitude of stares at his back and heard the loud whispering – "There he is," "How dare he show his face here," "What nerve showing up here"... The only person willing to speak kindly to him was Natalia Peterson who approached

him to apologize for her father's rudeness at the police station. She hooked her arm through his and strolled with him the rest of the way down the hall. Even her brother, Davis, who was friends and teammates with Alex on the swim team could do little but give Alex a sad smile. Natalia ignored the aghast stares as she laid her head on his shoulder and did her best to distract him from the obvious horde of students who chose to think the worst.

The real trouble didn't start until after he exited the guidance offices. The session with the grief counselor had done little to assuage his sorrow. Even the counselor failed to grasp the severity of the situation. This was the death someone closer to Alex than anyone else in the school. They had been through all the teenage angst together, including sneaking out just to watch the sun rise over the cool Atlantic Ocean waters; wiping each other's tears for one reason or the other; studying through the night for exams and completing last minute science projects; being each other's test dummy when learning to drive for the first time; as well as a multitude of other normal events in the lives of exuberant youth.

With his eyes red and swollen, he ducked his head down and made his way back out of the building. Passing Brianna's locker, Alex became further distressed as he witnessed an officer carelessly toss the girl's things into a plain cardboard box. He paused just a moment to stare as her favorite pictures posted up in her locker were torn down along with a strand silver-colored beads Alex won for her at the spring fair just a few weeks ago. Not able to cope any longer, he made a beeline for the exit.

However, his escape was prevented by a still anger-fueled, oversized football player. The same one that had accosted him at the police station. Tommy was looking for vengeance. No one understood why the young man was so distraught and furious over Brianna's death, but no one questioned it. Alex was too wrapped up in his own misery to think twice about it. Just as he reached the door that would lead him to freedom from the overpowering oppression emitted from the

school's corridors, Alex was grabbed roughly from behind and slammed against a row of lockers. The bigger boy repeatedly shoved him into the lockers while hurling curses at him. So in shock, he couldn't even make out what Tommy was yelling at him, much less why. Too stunned to react, there was little Alex could do to help the situation. No one standing around took it upon themselves to help him out either. At least not until Principal Rickles pulled Tommy off of him. Before he could even utter a word, Tommy told a rather tall tale to explain the situation. Alex can't believe the words coming out of the other boy's mouth. With a straight face, Tommy made up a preposterous story that Alex had badmouthed Brianna; Tommy had heard him; and being severely distraught over the girl's death, Tommy decided Alex was being insensitive and took action on his own. The worst part was that the principal believed every word out of Tommy's mouth. Instead of Tommy being reprimanded for beating up on Alex, Alex was berated loudly by the principal in front of everyone in the vicinity. He even ordered Alex off school property for the remainder of the day.

Once Kayla and Jessie heard the story, both nearly flew into a rage. They would've gladly stomped up to the school and let the principal have a piece of their minds, but Alex begged them to hold their peace. Picking a fight with the principal would only make matters worse. He contended that those that mattered, surely would realize Tommy told nothing but lies. Surely, no one really believed he would badmouth his now deceased best friend. Not wanting to cause the boy even more stress, Kayla held her tongue this once. But she did so reluctantly. Besides, she knew the worst was yet to come. Tonight was the candlelight vigil for Brianna. She considered appealing to Alex to not go, but realized her words would be for naught. He was already feeling he let Brianna down in life. He wouldn't dream of letting her down in this.





Chapter 9

Considering it was mid-May, the sun wouldn't disappear over the western horizon until much later in the evening. Thus, the vigil didn't start until later when the sky began to darken. It didn't matter what time it commenced, every student/teacher/coach/parent in the Folly Beach High School district was in attendance. Missing was Brianna's mother, who was still in the hospital; however, her father took time away from his wife to be there. The poor man looked like he'd been through the ringer. Everyone seemed to float around him, but most were too afraid to even give their condolences. What do you say to a father who just lost his seventeen year old daughter? There just aren't words. Due to Alex's close relationship with Brianna, Kayla and Jessie were very familiar with the family. Enough so that it was natural for them both to go up to the man and embrace him.

Later Kayla stood by Trish the remainder of the vigil while several people spoke to the gathered crowd. Mr. Swindall was unable to speak. No one expected him to try. However, there were plenty to voice their memories and recollections of Brianna's brief life. Principal Rickles gave a somewhat stilted speech. Honestly, he probably showed more emotion than his students had ever witnessed from the man. The honor club sponsor, Mrs. Hardy, gave a short, tear-filled testimony of the young woman. Brianna had been an honor student her entire life and had gladly served the community in many ways throughout her school years. However, it wasn't until the journalism teacher and school newspaper teacher-sponsor, Mrs. Henderson, stepped up to the makeshift podium that Trish began to tightly squeeze her friend's hand as tears flooded down her cheeks. Looking over at Alex being held up by his sister, Kayla saw him trembling. She had been afraid attending the event would be too much on him. Looked like she may have been right.

“Brianna was not only a brilliant student, but showed a true natural gift for journalistic instinct and love for the truth,” Mrs. Henderson began. She went to describe the young woman in glowing detail. Every word true. Every tear shed sincere. If there was one adult who understood the uniqueness and inner beauty of Brianna Lynn Swindall, it was her journalistic mentor. Alongside the tall, lanky woman was the newspaper’s senior editor, Laurie London, who was barely holding it together as Mrs. Henderson continued her extolling of Brianna’s virtues.

Kayla noticed from the corner of her eye that Jessie had to practically carry Alex over to the large rock in front of the school that was normally used for birthday wishes or congratulating someone on an accomplishment. He was bent over with his sister softly rubbing his back. Kayla would’ve gone over to check on him, but Jessie gave her the “it’s okay” signal so she stayed beside her friend throughout the remainder of the ceremony. She was having a hard enough time holding it together to be strong for both Alex and Trish, but once the school’s choral group ascended the steps and began the first strands of “Amazing Grace” as everyone held up their candles, even strong Kayla could no longer contain her own sorrow. Her body softly shook with sobs finally released.

It wasn’t until the crowd started to break up that Kayla noticed an odd grouping of people standing towards the back, almost hidden behind the school mascot statue. What made the sight more unusual was that none of them appeared sad in the least. They weren’t exactly smiling or joyful, but none seemed affected by the departing of a young teenage girl that they all knew. Especially disturbing was that one of the group was none other than Tommy Brennan, the one leading the charge to blame and attack Alex for Brianna’s fate. Just hours ago he was bellowing his ire at Alex and slamming him into lockers all in the name of justice for Brianna. For someone so “upset” over her death, there were no tears. Not even an expression of sadness. Instead, he and the others surrounding him appeared stoic, yet relieved somehow. The boy wasn’t hanging with a group of friends to share

their grief. The ones around him were all adults – his father whose expression seemed almost smug to Kayla, but she discounted her gut feeling as being unrealistic; the principal, with a blank stare; Coach Aldon Cashion, the head football coach; and an assistant coach and trainer for both the football and swim teams, Coach Louise Montgomery. Kayla normally wouldn't rush to judgment about someone's facial expression because some people are impossible to read, but for the entire group hovering around Tommy to all have the same expressions...that was beyond strange. No one else seemed to notice the group, so Kayla shook off the bad vibes she was getting as her overactive imagination. Not to mention, her current dislike for Tommy and the principal regarding the incident with Alex earlier today could perhaps be clouding her judgment.

Jessie approached Kayla to let her know that she was taking Alex home immediately. He had reached the limits of his endurance. Trish helped her brother-in-law back to her car so she could get him home for some much needed rest while she went to the hospital to sit by her sister's bedside. However, Kayla wasn't ready to call it a night. Ever since finding the note in Brianna's book, she had wanted to talk to the journalism teacher and the newspaper editor to determine what they knew about the stories the young woman was working on. She had been friends with Mrs. Henderson for years since Candace had been her star student just a few short years ago it seemed. The woman had aged well, but now approaching sixty, she could barely keep the grey hair at bay anymore.

After a brief embrace and initial exchange of condolences, Kayla decided to get to the point quickly by asking what she knew about Brianna's last stories. At first the woman was confused because her last article, intended for publication next week, was a puff piece on the cohesion, or lack thereof, between academics and athletics in the school. Mrs. Henderson asked the young editor to chime in with anything she knew. Kayla struggled with how much to reveal, but decided in favor of being completely honest. "Are you sure that was really Brianna's last story? I have reason to believe she was working

on something a lot more detrimental to the athletic program. So much so that she received threats for her to stop looking into the matters.”

Exchanging knowing looks, the teacher and student editor nodded, but Laurie looked especially nervous and let her teacher do the majority of the talking. “Well, she had been working on a couple stories, but we had to shut down her investigations.” When questioned why, Mrs. Henderson nodded her head in the direction of Principal Robert Rickles, who was currently deep in conversation with Mr. Brennan.

Kayla had to ask, “Was Brianna ever threatened to stop her work?” Mrs. Henderson grew tense, but Laurie turned downright ashen at the question.

The teacher answered, “Brianna did show me a note found in her locker, but she wanted to continue. The girl wasn’t easily frightened. To her, the note simply confirmed she was on the right path. It made her more determined to uncover the truth. However, shortly after the note Principal Rickles called me into his office and told me to shut down the stories. Period.” The last part was said with emphasis.

Sensing Laurie may have something to add, Kayla gave her an inquiring look. “Laurie, if there’s anything else you can tell me about Brianna’s work and who may have felt the need to leave her a warning note, please tell me. If not me, then please tell the police. They need as much information as they can get to find her killer.”

With her eyes shifting around to see who may be watching, the young girl lowered her head. “It wasn’t just the one note. There were several. Each one more and more menacing. Bri even found one inside her locked car after school. She wouldn’t stop though, even when she started receiving texts on her phone from “Anonymous” reiterating what the notes said. I told her to contact the cops and report it, but she never did. After the principal interfered, I thought that was the end of it.” Kayla could tell Laurie desperately wanted to believe that had been the end of the story. Perhaps it would’ve been, but even she

doubted Brianna would stop investigating if she truly believed in her work. She had the same stubborn streak as Kayla's daughter, Candace.



Chapter 10

The next morning Kayla sent a weary-eyed Alex off to school again with apprehension. Honestly, he didn't look ready to face Folly Beach High School. He insisted though. Jessie encouraged him, and kept Kayla from over-mothering him by making him stay home. As the trio sat around the kitchen table drinking coffee and picking at cranberry muffins, Jessie informed them she had taken a leave of absence from the university until the situation here was more settled. The relief on Alex's face was evident. Kayla had to admit, she was relieved too.

With Jessie sticking around, Kayla invited her to “feel free” to come by the floral shop later. She had spent little time there since prom, except for an emergency session yesterday for all the flower orders for the candlelight vigil. Javier had been a godsend. He worked speedily, and set aside his penchant for perfection in order to get the orders completed on time. He also had zero complaints and not one sarcastic comment. It truly was a miracle. She called him on her way out the door to ask if he could open the shop. She had one errand to run that morning. After stopping by the corner deli, Kayla toted an extra-large coffee cup (cream, no sugar) and a sausage, egg, and cheese sandwich on a Kaiser roll – Billy's favorite. She hoped he'd accept her peace offering after her horrid behavior towards him the last couple of days.

She couldn't believe how nervous she was walking into the police station. She'd been there hundreds of times before to meet up with Billy for a lunch date or the like. She'd also been there plenty of times during that awful murder investigation of Brandi Carroll. After everything that had happened so far in the investigation of Brianna's death, Kayla hoped her visits went back to strictly personal ones.

Taking a quick glance at her reflection in the glass door, she took a deep breath before walking into the building. As she neared Billy's office, Kayla could see he wasn't alone. The stylish, yet somewhat geeky looking, FBI agent and forensics tech was seated across from him. They were in an intense conversation with both leaning over the desk with their heads close together. She hadn't gotten an underlying romantic vibe from them before. Actually, she really liked the young woman, but it was hard to ignore the intimacy of the scene. Kayla almost turned around to leave, but caught a snippet of their conversation. Too intrigued to drag herself away, she tried to blend into the background as she eavesdropped on their confab.

Jill was speaking. "No, Billy. There is no way this was some freak accident. I've reviewed the coroner's report. This girl didn't even die of drowning. She was dead before she hit the water."

Billy sighed in frustration. "We really knew that already, but there was a huge part of me that hoped the autopsy proved otherwise." The two continued to discuss Jill's review of the evidence thus far. Kayla could barely stand to listen to the gory, ghastly details, but she couldn't pull herself away either. According to Jill, there was pre-mortem head trauma as if the top left side of her skull had been bashed into something hard. She was still analyzing trace fibers and what appeared to be paint flakes found in the victim's hair.

It was the first time Kayla had heard the young vibrant woman she knew as Brianna in that way – the victim. She shuddered while fighting off the bile rising in her throat. Unable to move her feet so she didn't have to listen anymore, Kayla took long, cleansing breaths. Although her mind screamed to shut it all out, she couldn't help but continue to listen as Jill described her findings so far. After assisting with the autopsy, she decided to analyze the evidence gathered at the school. Blood was found on a set of lockers in the swim team's locker room. Billy asked the question that Kayla realized she did not want to hear the answer to... "Did one of those lockers happen to belong to Alex Ward?"

She was right to be wary of the answer since Jill didn't even hesitate to confirm Billy's suspicion. "It was one of many, but there's more. Blood was also found inside the boy's locker. Just a speck, but enough to test. Two blood types were discovered – one was Brianna's type of A negative; the other was O positive." Kayla cringed. That was Alex's blood type. Jill continued, "I sent the blood samples for DNA testing, but there's little doubt that the A negative blood was the victim's." Again, that term again – "the victim".

The forensics tech slipped her glasses off her face and rubbed the bridge of her nose. There was more she knew, but seemed reluctant to say. With some prompting from Billy, she revealed the discovery of a bloody towel found in the trash just outside the building in the back. The blood on the towel matched the blood found in the locker. "There was also traces of light brown hair fibers, along with pool chemicals. The hair will also be tested for DNA." After a moment's hesitation she said the words Kayla did not want to hear, "It's not looking good for the Ward boy. I'm sorry."

Shaking his head sadly, Billy slumped over his desk. "There's just no way the kid would do something so horrific. He's a good kid. A really, really good kid." Kayla glimpsed inside the office to see the pretty, young tech gingerly place her hand over Billy's hand. It looked too intimate for Kayla's comfort. After hearing all the evidence looking to be against Alex, this scene was something she could do without. Trying not to make any noise to avoid being noticed, Kayla turned to go. She wasn't fast enough though. Just as she took her first step her phone's ringtone loudly played. Determined not to deal with Billy nor Jill at the moment, she ran off as now cold coffee spilled over her blouse.

Hoping, but not optimistic that she wasn't discovered, Kayla threw the coffee cup into the trash and frantically fumbled with the phone to answer it before it went to voicemail. It was her friend, Trish.

Trish had been a rock for her family through this crisis, but the strain was becoming unbearable. With her sister still sedated in the hospital

and her brother-in-law avoiding the house by remaining with his wife, Trish had kept busy maintaining the house, answering phone calls, and making funeral arrangements for her niece. All the while, her own catering business doors remained closed.

Brushing past a couple officers she knew without acknowledging them, Kayla burst through the double doors and out into the heavy heat of May in coastal Carolina. “Hey, Trish,” she began before quickly being interrupted by her friend.

With a conspiratorial tone, Trish told Kayla about a discovery she made while doing laundry at her sister’s home. She refused to reveal anything over the phone, but requested Kayla to get there as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, that errand would have to wait as another call came in just as she crossed the street to her parked car. Surprised to see the school’s number on her phone display, Kayla’s stomach knotted. This couldn’t be good. When she answered it was none other than Principal Rickles on the line. He had called her only once the entire time she had known him. That had been when her own daughter, Candace, had skipped school to attend a town hall meeting in Charleston when her favorite political candidate came to town. This time she wished it was something as simple as skipping school.

Within minutes Kayla’s car pulled up to the front of the high school. She didn’t even bother to park in a designated spot in the large lot. Instead, she pulled up the front steps (a tow-away zone) and jumped out of the car. Without waiting for the secretary to announce her arrival to the principal, she burst into his office. Her first visual of the interior of the office made her stop in her tracks. Alex was bloodied with his left eye swollen shut and a busted lip. Kayla warred within herself whether to check on Alex first or throttle the principal until she found out who was responsible, then she’d throttle that person. Her “mom” side won out and she knelt beside the disheveled boy holding an ice pack to his face.

Ensuring there was no permanent damage and that Alex was emotionally okay, Kayla turned an angry face to the principal. Looking back at her was an equally red-faced, yet pudgy, balding, middle-aged man with malice radiating from his squinty ice-blue eyes. She had never liked the man. She had always thought he had no business being a high school principal due to his obvious disdain for teenagers. Maybe he cared about the kids at some point, but that had to have been long, long ago.

Principal Rickles cleared his throat before addressing Alex's guardian. "As you can clearly see, Mrs. Ballantyne, your charge has gotten himself into quite a bit of trouble. It was quite irresponsible of you to send him back to school so soon after Miss Swindall's death since he appears to be the primary suspect." Kayla started to interject but he only raised his voice louder and continued. "The students at this school deserve a safe and wholesome environment to learn. There was an altercation yesterday when the school was closed between Mr. Ward and another student. Now that school is back in session, this boy is involved in yet another fight. It's not even lunchtime on the first day back in class. Having this disruptive troublemaker on the premises flies in the face of reason and civility!"

At this point, Kayla had had enough! She stood up and leaned across the principal's desk with her finger in his face and fire flashing from her eyes. Demanding to know how Alex's presence at the school could be "disruptive", she shook with anger. "He just lost his best friend," she practically screamed. "It is ridiculous to think he is really a 'suspect' and anyone with one iota of sense can see that!" Taking it a bit further, she added, "Obviously common sense appears to be something you lack!"

Just as she was about to get really going on her own tirade against the principal, the door opened and the school's resource officer (e.g., security guard) entered. He had been friends with Kayla for years and years, but the expression on his face revealed his intention.

Regardless what he personally believed, he was there to maintain the peace. Principal Rickles used the momentary break in Kayla's argument to reassert his dominance in the discussion. "Mrs. Ballantyne, it is not the school's business to sort out innocence or guilt. HOWEVER, it is clear that Alex's presence at the school is harmful – not only to himself but mostly to others. Tensions are high after the unfortunate incident this past weekend. There are those that believe Alex responsible for Brianna's death. Apparently, emotions are too high strung for us to allow him to remain on school property." He added with a smile beginning to form on his face, "As of this moment, Mr. Ward is suspended from this school for the remainder of the week, possibly longer."

Alex's head shot up, "What?!" If it hadn't been for the resource officer, Kayla was pretty sure she would've slugged Rickles right then and there.

"This is bull* and you know it!" she seethed at the gloating man. At her remark and her involuntary movement towards the principal, the resource officer intervened by gently grabbing her arm and pulling her back.

With sorrowful eyes, he stated, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Ballantyne, but I have to escort you and Alex out of the building." Not believing this insanity, Kayla's eyes shot daggers at the principal while allowing the officer to walk her and Alex out to her car.

Trying to keep a hold of her fury for Alex's sake, she drove quietly home after notifying Jessie to meet them back at the house. Kayla made another quick call to Javier to hold down the fort at the shop because she wouldn't be in for a while. After tending to Alex's wounds, she fixed him some chamomile tea while he changed out of his blood-spattered clothes. He had yet to confide the details of what happened at the school.

Jessie arrived back at the house in record time. After Alex had left for school that morning, she had driven over to a well-known flower mart

in Charleston to pick up some supplies for Kayla's shop. She didn't even bother to stop at The Flowers of Folly Beach to unload her purchases of lilies, lavender sprigs, and white satin ribbon. Waiting on Alex to return to the kitchen, Kayla filled her in on what little she knew – There had been some sort of fight and Alex was suspended. She had no idea who the fight was with or whether the other(s) were also suspended. She rather doubted that last. It would be just like the principal to single out Alex for punishment.

Alex returned for his cup of tea looking a bit better, but the eye was completely swollen shut now and bruising had already started on several areas of his face and neck. His knuckles had a bit of dried up blood where he tried to fight back. He nervously sat down at the table. With his eyes still downcast, he told his side of the story. The side that the principal conveniently overlooked when deciding to suspend him. Alex arrived at school without incident, but there were lots of overt stares of astonishment as he walked down the hallway to his first class. He heard the loud whispers as he walked past several groups of people – some he had even considered to be his friends up until that moment. Just as he was about to enter chemistry class, Natalia came up to him and placed her arm around him. She was the only person in the entire school that even acknowledged him that day. The rest treated him like the plague. However, her act of kindness didn't sit well with some others, particularly Tommy Brennan.

Before Natalia could finish inquiring how Alex was holding up, Tommy came up behind him and roughly grabbed his arm. "Get your filthy, bloody paws off of her, you killer!" the boy had screamed at him. The poor girl tried to object, but a couple other girls pulled her away as Tommy was joined by several other friends of his from the football team. The other boys formed a wall around them as Tommy slammed Alex into the wall and continued to punch and kick him. "I don't know how long this went on. Seemed like forever before Coach Cashion appeared to pull Tommy off of me." At that point, the coach escorted both boys to the nurse's office. However, Alex had been confused when he had been the only one sent to the principal's office

after being tended to by the nurse. “Tommy just wiggled his fingers in a sarcastic wave as he waltzed back to class and I was escorted to the front office. I don’t get it. They never even asked Tommy any questions about it.”

Kayla’s ire was on overdrive. Without wishing to alarm or stress Alex out, she waited until he went back to his room to rest before breaking out her phone and dialing their lawyer, Dean Lattimore. Giving him an abbreviated version of the events of the morning, she made sure he understood what she needed from him. Dean needed to find the quickest way to get Alex back in school, and to get the school investigated by the board of education for mistreatment of Alex. Based on the boy’s version of events, Dean didn’t think it would be difficult to achieve. Needing to clear her head and focus on something else less aggravating, Kayla remembered she promised to visit Trish to see what her friend found so intriguing while doing laundry. Taking Jessie’s car so she could drop the flowers by the shop before they wilted in the car, Kayla headed back out on a mission.



Chapter 11

Kayla took a few moments to clear her frenzied mind before getting out of her car at the Swindall home. Her friend flung open the door and hurried her inside as if she had top secret information. The excitement on her face was quite evident. Trish's usual porcelain complexion was rosy. Her eyes sparkled, but there was a nervous-tinge in her facial expression. Intrigued, Kayla put aside all thoughts of Alex's problems with the school. She focused all her energy on her friend's discovery.

Trish held out a small flash drive disguised as a key chain ornament. Confused, Kayla looked at her friend expectantly, waiting for an explanation. "It's a flash drive," Trish began. The tone of her voice suggested she expected Kayla to realize its significance, but she didn't. "Oh, follow me," Trish sighed as she led her to the laundry room. "I found it behind the color catcher and fabric softener sheets in this draw," she indicated. Kayla still didn't understand the importance of the find, but nodded for Trish to continue. "The police didn't find this one when they searched the other night. They had no reason to check the laundry room. Obviously, Brianna hid it here for safe-keeping."

Now Kayla had to interrupt Trish's tale. She didn't understand why Trish assumed the flash drive was Brianna's and why the girl would've hid it in the laundry room of all places. "How do you know it's Brianna's? Wouldn't it make more sense it belonged to her mother?" she asked.

Trish shook her head. "No way. My sister wouldn't even be able to find the laundry room. She's never done the washing before, why start now? For years, her husband did the clothes but as soon as Brianna turned ten years old, it's been her job." Kayla recalled the number of occasions Trish had complained that her sister never did anything she

would consider menial. Being the baby of the family, she had been spoiled beyond redemption. She had also lucked up in finding a husband who didn't seem to mind his wife's laziness. The man lived to make her happy and if that meant he did the cooking, cleaning, and washing...so be it. Trish had always thought the man was half a saint, even if it was her own sister that behaved in such a manner.

Kayla nodded. "Okay, so it's most likely Brianna's flash drive. The police didn't find it on their initial search of the house. Did you call them to tell them about it?" She knew the answer before she even asked. Of course Trish hadn't called the cops yet. That's why all the secrecy now.

With a mischievous look that Kayla had not witnessed since Trish organized a girls' weekend retreat, Trish filled her in on her "plan". She didn't want to hand it over until they knew what was on the drive. Perhaps there was something on it that could help find Brianna's real killer. Trish didn't believe for a second that Alex had hurt her niece. Although Kayla had not filled in her friend on all that had transpired with Alex over the last few days, Trish had heard he was a suspect. She called the whole supposition – hogwash! Continuing to unveil her plan, Trish related her reluctance to look at whatever was on the flash drive alone. She only trusted Kayla with this information, and wanted her friend there for support. Also, Trish could barely work her own cell phone and business laptop. Most anything dealing with computers, she left to others. She relied on Kayla to know how to extract files from the flash drive.

Chuckling, Kayla agreed. Not a computer whiz herself, she at least knew how to do that. Trish led her to a room in the back of the house that her brother-in-law used as an informal office. It was a plain, neat room. Not so much as a piece of crumpled paper in the trash can. Certificates on the wall from college and pharmacy school. A bookshelf crammed with every Tom Clancy title available, as well as a few framed pictures of Brianna. His prized possession – a framed autographed napkin with Michael Jordan's signature – stood proudly

on the small, wooden desk. Pushing the power button on the CPU, the antiquated desktop computer roared to life. After a lengthy boot-up period, the monitor's screen saver – the Carolina Panthers NFL logo – appeared. “Ok, Kayla. Work your magic,” Trish smiled.

“It’s hardly magic, Trish. You just need to join the rest of the world in the 21st century already,” Kayla teased. She inserted the flash drive into the USB port and waited for the files to load. Thinking it may be a good idea to save whatever was on the flash drive to another device, she saved the files to the computer’s hard drive before opening the files.

Hundreds of files appeared in the directory. Some were image files. Others were documents, while others were website screen prints. Everything was sorted into four primary folders – personal, college admissions, story 1, and story 2. Although it made more sense to check the latter two folders, Trish insisted on reviewing the “personal” folder first. Kayla didn’t believe that was a good idea, but wouldn’t have denied her friend anything at this point.

The folder held what she expected to find. Lots and lots of pictures. Mostly pictures of Brianna and Alex over the years. Everything from when they dressed as Power Rangers for Halloween when they were five years old to when they were Santa’s elves this past Christmas during the local holiday parade. Hundreds of pictures of a happy Brianna with her “best guy”. Unheeded tears streamed down both Kayla and Trish’s faces.

Neither woman could bare to skip through the pictures, no matter how much pain it invoked.

There was one non-picture file in the “Personal” folder. When Kayla tried to open it, a box flashed up on the screen demanding a security password. Surprised, she didn’t think too much of it. Instead, she went on to the other folders. Brianna had applied to a number of colleges already. She had even received early acceptance at a couple schools. When asked about it, Trish confirmed that her niece had been waiting to see where Alex would choose to go to college before formally

accepting any offers – even though the early acceptances came complete with full scholarship offers.

The “story” folders held lots of notes and research on the two topics Brianna had been investigating prior to her death – use of performance-enhancing drugs and “pay for play” schemes at the high school. Kayla was shocked to read the extent of evidence the young woman had found. Names were missing from the documents, but apparently the problems were all too real. There was evidence of routine drug tests being falsified for several athletes in almost all sports at the school. There were pictures of needles and vials of a clear liquid clearly labeled as human growth hormone (HGH), including pill bottles labeled Androstenedione (Andro), Primobolan (Methenolone), and Tetrahydrogestrinone (THG) – all anabolic synthetic steroids commonly used in sports. The last one banned because drug tests were unable to detect it. Some pictures showed the bottles and syringes in what was obviously a Folly Beach High School athletic bag commonly utilized by the coaching staff.

Trish gasped in shock. “She WAS onto something.” After a moment’s pause, “Would someone really kill her over this though?” Sadly, Kayla knew that yes, someone would and most likely did.

Another file revealed a list of “donors” to the football team. These contributions were astronomical! Kayla was more than familiar with the booster club and its antics to increase member donations, but these were specific to the football team and the amounts were incredulous! It was bad enough parents had to pay the basic \$75 membership fee for little Johnny or little Jane to play a sport at the school, but these families “contributed” hundreds, even thousands of dollars! She recognized the last names of a couple boys that raised her eyebrows. At the top of the list...Tommy Brennan! She had always thought he had mediocre talent for a football player. Despite being an avid football fan and knowing as much about the sport as possible since she spent many years as a referee with the local Pop Warner team, she had never questioned why Tommy never missed an offensive play

series. His meager success record on the field had never been her concern, but this revelation certainly opened her eyes. Perhaps it wasn't just poor decisions by the coaches to overlook the other qualified running backs on the team in favor of Tommy? There were others listed, but his name definitely struck a nerve with Kayla. However, a name towards the middle of the list shocked her – Davis Peterson, the swim coach's son.

Yet another file contained notes about one coach in particular currently living well above her scant assistant coach's salary. The notes didn't appear to be complete. Kayla wondered if Brianna wasn't able to find out more or if she never got a chance to update her files.

Frustrated that there wasn't more, but sensing the information provided wasn't the entire story, Kayla slammed her fist on the desk. "That can't be everything! It just can't!" she lamented.

Pulling up a chair beside her, Trish shook her head. "What about that locked file under the Personal folder?" Kayla figured it was just personal business, but the fact that it was protected did intrigue her. An idea popped in her head...Candi! Without a word to Trish, she pulled out her phone to call her daughter. She had no idea what time it was in the Ukraine, but it was worth it even if she had to wake up her child who was thousands of miles and an ocean away working on her own story as a reporter. Yes, Candi would know how to hack into a teenager's protected computer file.

Kayla should've known her daughter wouldn't be asleep. Somehow the woman got by on less than four hours of sleep most nights. Not even sounding the slightest groggy, Candace recovered her momentary surprise that her mother needed help hacking a computer after Kayla gave her the short version of the events of the last few days. Things had been so crazy she hadn't realized she hadn't called her daughter to tell her about Brianna's death. Expressing her sorrow over the young woman, Candace quickly turned to business.

Surprised at just how easy this hacking thing was, Kayla shortly unlocked the file. Hurriedly thanking Candace and hanging up the phone, she tried to make sense of what she was seeing on the monitor. There were spreadsheets and spreadsheets of cross-referenced data. The best Kayla could tell, it was financial data for the athletic department. One spreadsheet detailed the various drugs/steroids purchased by a representative of the athletic department. Another showed transactions of money going into the booster club then immediately back out to the football program. It had names and check numbers. Everything a reporter needed to follow a money trail. Embedded in one worksheet were amateur black and white photographs of someone entering a bank. Kayla recognized it as the First Bank of Charleston located at the corner of Main Street and 5th Avenue. The dates on the pictures coincided with the dated entries on that particular spreadsheet. The person was easy to recognize. Kayla had seen the woman for the last two years every day during swim team season as an assistant coach and trainer. She also frequented the football fields as the offensive coordinator. It was Coach Louise Montgomery.

Not completely willing to hand over the flash drive to the police, Kayla made one more copy of it. She suspected the cops may want to confiscate the desktop computer, just in case it held any information as well. They had been negligent not to take it in the first place, in Kayla's humble opinion. Without a flash drive or disk of her own, Kayla did the next best thing - she emailed the files to herself.

With a copy of the contents of the flash drive now conveyed to her email, Kayla signaled Trish that it was time to call the police. Once the officers arrived, including Billy and Jill, they questioned both the women. Kayla and Trish insisted they did not know what was on the flash drive. They confessed only that Trish found it in the laundry room. By the look in Billy's eyes, he wasn't buying their story. He allowed the untruth to stand for the time being. Kayla hadn't realized she was holding her breath until the last officer pulled away from the residence.

Neither woman felt at ease with their deceit but they believed it was for the best. Finally glancing at the clock after many hours occupied snooping around Brianna's files, Trish had one last request to make of her friend. With everything that happened, she just didn't feel right staying at the home alone while she housesat for her sister. After checking in with Jessie to see how Alex was faring, Kayla agreed to a sleepover. Unfortunately, neither lady would get much sleep that night.



Chapter 12

After a hodgepodge of leftover casseroles from every neighbor within a three block radius, the women settled in for a much deserved snooze with Kayla cozying up on the daybed in the guest bedroom.

Surprisingly, she fell to sleep almost immediately. She hadn't realized how depleted she was of rest. However, Kayla bolted awake in the wee morning hours. At first she couldn't figure out why, but soon discovered the cause. There was a distinct sound of a window creaking open.

Quietly Kayla slipped out of bed and tip toed towards the bedroom door. As she peeked out, she noticed another familiar head poking out from the bedroom next to hers – Trish. Kayla signaled her to be as quiet as possible with one finger raised to her lips. She also made a motion indicating telephone. Her friend understood. While Kayla investigated the sound, Trish went back into her bedroom and called 9-1-1.

The house was mostly silent now, except for the soft sound of commotion coming from Brianna's bedroom. Kayla found she could barely breathe as she inched around the doorframe and down the corridor towards the rustling. She realized that most people would have the sense to either stay locked in another room and wait for help to arrive, but she had never been "most people". An unlucky purse snatcher found that out last Christmas when she tackled the guy before he got could get away. He had knocked over the old lady in his pursuit of the handbag, so Kayla had made sure to wedge her knee into his back as she held him down to the ground. Was she nervous at the prospect of coming face to face with whoever just broke into the house? Yes, of course. But she wasn't willing to let a little case of nerves stop her. The fact that someone had the audacity to break into the home of a family that just lost their only child – that made her steaming mad. Anger propelled her down the hall.

As quietly as possible, Kayla peeked around the corner of the doorframe into Brianna's bedroom. It was dark, but the intruder held a flashlight in his right hand as he threw items around and pulled up the mattress, obviously looking for something. From the little that she could see in the room, he appeared to be very tall and dressed all in black, even his hair and face covered by a black mask. Not really knowing what action she should take, she retreated back into the hallway. She had no weapon to protect herself, realizing too late that she should've at least grabbed something to defend herself – perhaps a bookend or pepper spray from her purse.

Finally, she opted to simply try to scare the person away by announcing the police were on their way. In her loudest swim coach voice, she yelled, "Cops are on their way!" just as the faint sound of sirens was heard. Startled, the intruder paused for a second to contemplate his next move. Just a second, though. The person bolted from the room and encountered Kayla in his path as he made to escape – this time out the back door instead of the window. Familiar eyes filled with a mixture of fear and anger glared at her as the person shoved her against the doorframe and sprinted out of the house. Pain radiated from Kayla's shoulder where she fit the door, but she recovered in time to attempt to run after the intruder. Although forty-four years old, Kayla was physically fit for her age. Just not nearly as fast as the person she was pursuing. The trespasser was out of sight before Kayla reached the edge of the yard.

Not surprisingly, Billy was part of the convoy of police squad cars that pulled up to the Swindall residence. Worry was etched in his handsome features, but was soon followed by relief when he found Kayla and Trish relatively unharmed. The other officers were immediately dispatched to search the surrounding areas for the intruder while he took their statements and had a paramedic called out to tend to Kayla's bruised shoulder. Ever the professional, Billy broke protocol to embrace Kayla while holding back the lecture he wanted to give about not confronting criminals. She heard his heart beating

fast in his chest as he held her tightly. He had been frightened for her safety. That was understandable. It pained her to have caused him such worry.

Once they were both calmed, he led Kayla over to the living room sofa where Trish was already seated with a fresh cup of hot chamomile tea for all of them. Taking their statements about the break-in didn't take long since the women had very limited information. Other than an extremely tall person Kayla saw in the shadows who ran extremely fast, there wasn't much more intel she could provide. Trish had stayed barricaded in the other bedroom so she was of little help as well. They apologized for not knowing enough to help the cops find whoever did this, but Billy shook his head. Kayla saw the glint of determination in his deep, dark eyes. He would find the person that did this. She was certain of it. Then she remembered something...the eyes. The eyes had seemed familiar, but it was of little assistance. Due to the darkness and how fast everything occurred, Kayla couldn't conjure from her memory even the color of the eyes. The only thing she recalled was the momentary thought that she had seen those eyes before. It would bug her forever if she didn't figure this out.

The other officers soon reported back to the house. The intruder was long gone. Their only hope now was to examine any forensic evidence left behind. As if on cue, the FBI's forensics specialist walked in with her bag of evidence collection kits. "Already checked around the window the intruder used to enter the house. Got lucky with that. Partial footprint from a size 14 Nike sneaker. I'll have to check the mold we took of the print to determine the exact model shoe. Unfortunately, no fingerprints around the window sill. The 'perp' was probably wearing gloves, but we'll sweep the room just in case," she explained before heading back to the bedroom. Apparently, she wasn't very happy with the job one of the officers was doing, as she barked at someone to put something back before they contaminated the evidence. Kayla grinned. The little lady had spunk. She admired that.

However, the next question out of Billy's mouth stunned Kayla. Looking into her baby blue eyes, the regret that the question had to be asked was evident. "Kayla, what size shoe does Alex wear?"

Anger flared. How dare he utter the words?! She started to protest that there was no way Alex just broke into the house and slammed her against a doorframe. It was preposterous! Before she could sputter her fiery response, Billy interceded. "Honey, I have to ask. I don't want to say things that I know hurt you, but the question has to be asked. I'd be derelict in my duties if I didn't, then I'd be tossed off the case. You may not see it, but I'm trying to help Alex (and you), but I can't do that if I'm banned from the investigation." His voiced pleaded with her for understanding, but she refused to hear it. She also refused to answer the question. She told herself it was because it was a ridiculous question, but it was also because she knew Alex wore size 14 shoes. He also wore Nike sneakers all the time, even when he dressed up for church or formal occasions. Prom had been the one time Alex had shorn the sneakers in favor of shiny, black dress shoes.

Trish realized the tension in the room was about to hit the point of explosion, so she took Kayla by the arm and led her into the kitchen to cool off while Billy finished up his notes and checked in with the forensics team. However, he made the situation much worse when he returned to the living room, just in ear shot of the kitchen. Kayla and Trish both heard Billy on the phone. It didn't take long to figure out who was on the other end – Jessie. Billy called Kayla's home to ask Jessie the questions that she refused to answer here. Kayla sprung up from the table, but it was too late. He clicked the button to end the call and turned back towards her with sadness in his eyes. The only thing Kayla could think was "Oh no!"

The confirmation that what he just learned from Jessie did not look good for Alex was clear. He didn't even need to say anything. But it was worse than Kayla realized. Billy tried to take her hand and lead her back to the kitchen, but she snatched it away as if his very touched

burned her skin. She didn't want to hear what he had to say. Whatever it was had to be wrong. Why couldn't he see that?

Her friend Trish knew when to vacate the room. The two lovebirds needed to discuss the situation alone. However, the entire house was privy to the words exchanged between the two. Although Billy tried to remain calm and keep his voice down, Kayla's fury echoed through the halls. Jessie had indeed confirmed Alex's shoe size and his penchant for Nike. She had also informed Billy that the young man had gone to the YMCA swimming pool earlier that night to swim laps and had walked home. Oddly, he had come home in his swim flip flops because he couldn't find his shoes after he completed his laps. After returning home, he ate and went to bed early. Jessie had spent the rest of the evening on the computer with her headphones on while she worked on a research project for her graduate degree. She even ran out to the convenience store sometime after midnight to pick up some much needed caffeine to power herself through the rest of the night. According to Billy, the time period where Alex was left unsupervised coincided with the time of the break-in.

The blow up from Kayla was nothing less than epic. She couldn't even remember being that angry when her ex-husband deserted her for a tattoo-covered slut and stole all their savings to escape to the Caribbean while she was left alone and near penny-less in Folly Beach. Surprising, that event paled in comparison to what she felt at that moment for Billy. He saw the storm coming towards him and didn't back down. There was no escape from her fury. The very walls reverberated from her shouted frustration. In the end, there was nothing Billy could do to placate Kayla's anger. She felt betrayed deeply. How could he dare suggest Alex had anything to do with what happened tonight, much less implicate him in Brianna's death? Announcing to the world that she was done with him for good, Kayla stomped out of the house while slamming the front door in her wake.



Chapter 13

With eyes bloodshot from crying for hours, Kayla unlocked the doors of her flower business just as the sun began to rise. She hadn't slept and knew she wouldn't, so she reasoned that she might as well pay some much needed attention to her work. Honestly, she felt that The Flowers of Folly Beach was all she had left. Besides, she desperately needed a distraction from replaying last night's events continuously over in her head. It was easier for her to see that perhaps she overreacted, but she was nowhere near ready to concede that point.

As she walked into her darkened shop, the fragrance of roses assailed her nostrils. Once she had thought it was the loveliest scent, second only to lavender. Today, she found it nearly revolting. The whole connotation of the sweet-smelling rose no longer held up. Considering their relation to the horrific event that led to so much heartbreak, roses were not on Kayla's list of most favored flower anymore. Considering it was the mainstay of her business, she would have to overcome that in order to keep going. What florist can run a successful business that doesn't deal with roses?

After checking the company's voicemail and website for incoming orders, she got busy conducting inventory. Along the way she had to throw out several batches of dead and decaying flowers. Javier should have completed that task, but Kayla reasoned he was probably so busy running the store himself yesterday since she had been otherwise occupied that she chose not to reprove him for the oversight.

It would be a couple hours before the shop opened for business, so she lost herself amongst the flowers and foliage. The respite from her worries was needed to replenish herself. The therapy did wonders for her mood. Kayla actually found herself tapping her toes to a country tune playing over the radio as she rearranged the rows of fragrant

lavender and eucalyptus sprigs. The comforting and relaxing scents blended to assuage her mind of stressful thoughts, if just for a while.

Just as it was time for The Flowers of Folly Beach to officially open for business, a firm knock came at the front door of the store that startled Kayla from her therapeutic work. Her respite from the real world over as she noticed it was Jill Henson peering into her windows. “What does she want now?” she muttered to herself while trying to put on a fake smile before opening the door.

Jill seemed chipper for someone who had been at work all night. After supervising the crime scene investigation at the Swindall house, she had spent the remainder of the night in her temporary office looking over evidence. “Good morning, Kayla.” Despite the fact that Kayla had a gut feeling that Jill and Billy were closer than they let on, and despite the fact Jill appeared to be the one uncovering all the evidence linking Alex to two crimes now, Kayla couldn’t help but like the woman. All things considered, they probably would’ve been good friends if all of the above wasn’t blocking the way.

Jill held out a large Styrofoam cup of steaming hot coffee from the corner coffee shop for Kayla to take while she sipped from her own cup. “Thought you could use this,” she offered. Not knowing what else to do, Kayla invited her into the store. She realized the forensics technician probably had business to discuss, but Jill didn’t seem in a hurry. Instead, she started asking question after question about the various flowers around the store. She wanted to know how Kayla kept her cut flowers so fresh and vibrant. Jill asked what flowers were best-sellers and why were tulips so hard to come by after the middle of May. The petite criminal investigator reflected on her personal favorites – sunflowers – and how she grew her own sunflowers in her tiny backyard in northern Virginia.

Their conversation was so light-hearted that Kayla began to relax a bit. She talked about how she became interested in flowers as a young girl when she saw how the elderly in the retirement home she visited

once a week would brighten up whenever flowers were delivered there, no matter who received the bouquets. Flowers made people happy. Kayla loved making people happy. It was the perfect vocation for her. Until recently. She tried not to delve too deeply into the story about the golden calla lilies from two years ago that led to the death of Brandi Carroll. Afterwards, Kayla never wanted to see a calla lily again – even though she and Jessie won the Pee Dee Semi-Annual Plant and Flower Festival with the lovely flowers. Now with Brianna’s death, roses no longer held their favor with her either. “If this keeps up, I may give up flowers completely!” she said exasperated and with more than a tinge of truth in the statement.

“But,” Kayla began again, “that’s not what you’re here to discuss, is it?” She found that she was sad that Jill hadn’t just stopped by to chat.

Shaking her head sadly, Jill acknowledged the truth in the question. She asked about Alex’s relationship with the victim. “I’ve heard it from everyone else, but I kinda figured you knew the real deal with them. Were they fighting? Was Alex aware of Brianna’s romantic inclinations?” She had lots and lots of questions, but she didn’t ask anything in any way indicative of an interrogation. It seemed more like Jill was just highly interested in the couple, as if they were good friends discussing their children.

Kayla found that she wasn’t offended being asked questions she had already answered for others. She responded to every question, while acknowledging that she may now know everything. However, the one thing she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt was that Alex never would’ve hurt Brianna, much less kill her. Jill appreciated her honest answers and even provided some answers of her own.

The forensics specialist had a knack for observing people and how they interacted. Her observations had been found to be amazingly accurate. So much so that she sometimes assisted the FBI’s profilers on cases. From her vantage point, she did not believe Alex capable of such a horrendous deed. He showed every sign of true grief. However,

Jill was curious about another girl in his circle of friends – Natalia Peterson and her brother Davis. The girl didn't seem overly concerned about the death of her friend, but she was overly concerned with Alex's well-being. That had been plain to see at the police station. Being part of the team searching for evidence at the school, she had seen how Natalia had latched onto Alex almost as soon as he entered the building. "It just brought up the possibility of a love triangle gone bad as a possible motive, so I wanted to rule that out," Jill admitted.

Kayla thought a few moments before answering. Yes, Natalia seemed to have her eyes keenly fixed on Alex. She explained the silly ruckus over the roses for prom and how Natalia had been so insistent on getting the same flowers as Brianna. Also, apparently the disagreement between Alex and Brianna had been over Natalia asking him to dance with her. "Honestly, Alex probably never had a clue either girl was interested in him romantically," Kayla stated. "Sometimes that boy can be so clueless." Jill agreed that most teenage men were just that. She then laughed that most men were that way, too.

Jill appeared to hesitate before continuing. "Kayla, I'm not supposed to discuss police business with civilians, but I think your unique perspective could be helpful. However, it involves information that is not commonly known about Brianna's death. This information HAS to stay confidential," she stressed.

Nodding, Kayla braced herself for what Jill revealed. Kayla had not wanted to know the details of the girl's death. She already overheard too much while listening in to Jill and Billy's conversation. She was sure she didn't want to hear any more gory details, but was unable to decline the chance to hear it.

"You already know that Brianna was dead before the pool..." Kayla gave her a shocked look. So Jill had seen her hiding outside of Billy's office that day? Jill continued, "What you may not have heard already is that the rose petals from her own prom bouquet were found stuffed

in her mouth and down her throat. Some were located halfway down her esophagus.” Looking up to make sure her audience was handling the information, she also revealed other startling news. More petals were found inside Alex’s swim team locker. “It looked too staged to be random and I’m pretty sure if the boy was guilty he would be certain to clean up any evidence linking him to the murder. It’s all too “clean” to me. There’s other things...like Alex’s shoes are now missing that just happen to match the footprints outside the Swindall house. That makes no sense. He reported his shoes missing hours before the break-in.” Kayla relaxed when she realized that the FBI’s top notch forensics technician was letting her know in a roundabout way that she believed in Alex’s innocence. Relief flooded over her, so much so that she had to sit down suddenly.

“Now here’s where you can help me out a bit,” Jill stated matter-of-factly. “To the amateur, the fragrance from these particular roses seem slightly different from the more common rose varieties. I’ve also noticed that the scent is stronger than most. The entire police station smells of roses just from the small amount I have in the evidence room.” She laughed. “Sure beats the stench from the break room that pervaded everything when I first arrived. The stuff is better than Febreze.”

She continued, “Can you help me isolate the fragrance? Since the murderer had prolonged contact with the roses, he or she may still have the scent attached to themselves, or at least to an item of clothing or something/anything.” Kayla couldn’t believe the ingenuity of this woman. It was a brilliant idea that she readily agreed to assist anyway she could.

Kayla gathered up the few remaining roses that she had actually dumped into the trash because they were so wilted. She also commented to the technician that she had ordered a large batch of the roses to be delivered whenever Brianna’s funeral was scheduled to take place. As of yet, the body had not been released to her parents. Jill took the petals to use in an experiment to try to isolate the

fragrance. They may not know who committed the murder yet, but “It’s a good bet they don’t realize they smell like roses,” Jill commented with a small laugh.

Before Jill took her leave of Kayla to return to the police station, she paused at the door. “You know, Kayla, it’s none of my business but I hope you can one day see past this whole situation and cut Billy some slack. Poor guy’s just doing his job. He hates that it’s hurting you, but he really is on your side.” When Kayla didn’t respond except with a vacant stare, she continued. “He really is one of the good guys and it’s obvious he loves you. I just hope you can see it in your heart to give him another chance.” With that, she quickly exited the store with a smile.



Chapter 14

Later that day, Kayla was interrupted by her phone while arranging a large bouquet of fresh early summer flowers. Looking at the display, she quickly answered the phone. It was her lawyer and she hoped Dean had good news for once. As it turned out, it was a mixed bag – good news and bad news. After several rounds with the county superintendent of education and the principal, Alex was being allowed to return to school the following day. However, the young man had been suspended from the school's swim team. Even though the team was scheduled to compete at the regional USA Swimming finals in Wilmington, NC in a couple weeks and Alex was their best swimmer, the swim coach would not allow him back on the team. This would be a particularly hard blow for Alex. The head swim coach from Duke University was scheduled to attend the event specifically to see Alex compete. The university had been in contact with Alex for over a year as a high level prospect for their collegiate swim team. Kayla knew he would be devastated, so she took matters into her own hands.

Leaving Javier in charge for the rest of the day, she sped off to the high school to confront Coach Peterson in person. Personally she found the man lacking in the leadership skills necessary to coach at the high school level, but had put her opinions aside in the past. Knowing he would hide behind emails to avoid having to discuss the matter face to face, she found the right approach was the element of a surprise meeting as the best course of action. Sure enough, she surprised him in his office. She had even entered the building through a back entrance to avoid her visit being announced by the front office staff. Needless to say, the man was highly perturbed to see her standing in the doorway to his office.

The man really was a wimp behind all his blustering about being a top collegiate swimmer back in his day. Now, all he did was focus on

turning his son Davis into another version of himself even though the boy really didn't appear as interested in the sport as his dad. He lucked out in that his daughter, Natalia, was a natural on the dive team and well on her way to competing at the college level. But that wasn't what she came to discuss.

Sadly, the man had chosen that day to grow a backbone. No matter what Kayla said or how valid her arguments, Coach Peterson had no intention of allowing Alex back on the team. In his estimate, the boy was trouble and a huge distraction. Until the boy was found to be innocent of the charges...although Kayla pointed out that there were no formal charges against him...it would be detrimental to the team to have him around. He was prepared with written statements from the principal, the booster club, and the county's board overseeing school athletics – all in his favor. Miraculously Kayla's temper stayed in check. Deep in the recesses of her mind, she knew that once Alex was free of false allegations and suspicions, he would have to be allowed back on the team. The only thing to help him out now would be to find the real killer...fast. With a "You haven't heard the last of this," warning to the coach, Kayla slammed the door causing all his plaques to fall off the walls of his office. She smiled satisfactorily as she heard his cuss-laden tirade.

On her way to the front office to give Principal Rickles a few choice words about his support of Alex's suspension from sports, Kayla noticed Coach Louise Montgomery in her office down the hall. Louise had once played amateur women's football. Somehow that had qualified her to be an assistant coach/offensive coordinator for the high school football team. For a few weeks last season she had acted as the head coach of the junior varsity team, but after incredibly poor coaching decisions and play-calling, she was quickly relieved of that particular post. Kayla hadn't taken an immediate like or dislike to the woman, but knew many others that had. Although mostly disliked by parents of student athletes, the woman seemed to have survived. As for her off-football season duties as an assistant swim coach and trainer, she was considered to be less than spectacular. Kayla had no

personal complaints about the woman, but did think she was in way above her head.

Kayla had a flash of memory seeing Coach Montgomery with Tommy Brennan and others at the candlelight vigil honoring Brianna. She had thought it strange at the time, but had been so caught up in all the drama since then that she had forgotten until just now. Deciding to take a chance to solicit information from the coach, she knocked on the door to her office. Louise's expression said it all. She was unhappy to have Kayla Ballantyne at her door. However, with a forced smile, she waved her inside.

“Louise,” Kayla began to say before the chagrined expression on the coach's face made it clear she resented being referred to so informally. Correcting herself, Kayla started again. “Coach Montgomery, I don't mean to disturb you but I was hoping you could help me understand a few things about why Alex is being treated so badly by people in this school when he has done no wrong. I simply don't understand the decision to suspend him from the swim team.” She already knew the woman didn't like her decisions or actions to be questioned. There had been many an incident during the football season that made that abundantly clear. Several poor kids never saw play time on the field again after simply asking her question about how to earn more reps in practice in order to prove themselves for more plays during a game. Kayla had overheard the stories, but had brushed it off as parents simply upset about their child's lack of playing time during games. However, Alex had backed up the stories when she'd asked him about it. One poor boy, unquestionably the fastest kid in the school, had been regulated to the practice squad after he asked Coach Montgomery a similar question. Considering Brianna's investigation into a “pay for play” scheme, Kayla began to think there was some truth to the stories.

Deciding she might get the coach to slip up and say something meaningful by asking provoking questions, Kayla took that route. She rather felt like she imagined her daughter did when she was on the

lead of a big story. Except this particular story affected Alex in a very big way.

Of course, Coach Montgomery took offense to the question, but she at least tried to maintain her composure as she gave Kayla the company line – “What’s best for the team...” Kayla thought that excuse was totally bogus, so she continued.

“I am trying to understand Coach Peterson’s point, but considering Alex has no charges pending against him – and he won’t because he is innocent – why is having him on the team a hindrance to his team as a whole? Wouldn’t having him no longer on the team be more disruptive since he leads the team in every category?” She waited while Coach Montgomery considered her reply. Kayla could tell anger was building behind her eyes. This woman really did not like to be questioned. Of course, that infuriated Kayla as well. No person was such an expert in their field that they shouldn’t have to answer for their mistakes or bad decisions that turn detrimental to their athletes.

Taking a haggard breath, Coach Montgomery essentially repeated what she just said. “WE,” she emphasized, “believe it is counterproductive and even a detriment to the team to have Alex continue to participate. Clearly, he has some problems right now and he should focus on those. The team shouldn’t have to suffer for his poor choices and actions.” That last said with more than a touch of snippiness in the remark. It only provoked Kayla to continue questioning the woman.

They went back and forth for several minutes with Kayla asking seemingly innocuous questions and Coach Montgomery providing the canned mantra. Each time Kayla asked another question, the firmer the coach set her jaw and the more sweat beaded on her brow. Each time the coach replied with a nonsensical remark about what was best for the team and how Alex was a problem, the more Kayla’s ire and determination grew.

Finally, Kayla prodded the coach just a nudge forward that was obviously the cut-off point for the woman's civility. "It seems to me that Alex being banned from the swim team is oddly familiar to the allegations against the football program for certain players being favored over others for reasons other than their performance or potential." The statement hit the head of the nail. Coach Montgomery jumped up from her seat. For a moment, Kayla thought the woman was going to lunge at her over the desk. Instead, the coach got just enough control over herself to order Kayla out of her office and then stomped off herself to get the security guard to throw her out.

Feeling rather happy about provoking the woman after her snide remarks about Alex, Kayla made to leave voluntarily before being escorted out by the school's resource officer. However, something stopped her dead in her tracks before she made it to the door. There was a strangely familiar scent in the air. Looking around, Kayla noticed Coach Montgomery's trainers backpack on a chair next to the door. She would know that scent anywhere – it was the same fragrance as the creamy ivory roses with the deep crimson edging that she used for Brianna's prom flowers!

Knowing she couldn't just take the coach's bag, Kayla quickly walked down the hall and out the back door while dialing the most recent addition to her contact list...Jill Henson. She waited outside the school until Jill and a few other officers arrived in the guise of needing to scan the locker rooms again, as well as the coaches' offices. She heard Jill trying to explain to a distressed Principal Rickles the need for yet another search of the premises. The man was unhappy. He was quickly followed by Coach Peterson's objections to disrupting his swim team's practice. Jill was not to be deterred though. Again, Kayla was impressed with the woman's spunk.

There was a rather loud ruckus clearly heard outside the building when Coach Montgomery attempted to gather her "things" from her office and leave. Jill wasn't about to allow that. That office and that bag were her primary focus, but she couldn't reveal that to the school

officials standing around taking turns expressing their frustrations and glancing nervously at each other. She would later describe the event to Kayla while trying unsuccessfully to hold in her own laughter. Kayla would've paid big bucks to witness what happened when an officer took Coach Montgomery's bag into evidence. Apparently, the coach had no intention of allowing the police to take her trainer's backpack. She tried wrestling it back from the officer while screaming obscenities at the poor guy who was just doing his job. When he didn't let go of the bag, Coach Montgomery slugged him in the face. Jill took great satisfaction in slapping the handcuffs on the hotheaded coach for assaulting a police officer, as well as obstructing a police investigation.



Chapter 15

Early the next morning Kayla stopped by the police station to see Jill who had called her before dawn. Apparently, there was something going down at the station that didn't make the forensics tech too happy. As requested, Kayla brought by Alex's boutonniere which had also been made with the same roses as Brianna's nosegay. The petals from the trash can that she provided yesterday were contaminated with other dead and decaying flowers in the same container that they were useless in breaking down the particular rose fragrance. But that wasn't all Jill needed.

Kayla felt almost like a co-conspirator with Jill. First, calling her in to search the coaches' offices so she could snag Coach Montgomery's bag because it smelled like Brianna's roses. Now, sneaking in more roses for forensics testing without alerting the other officers on the case, including Billy. Clearly, he wouldn't approve of her involvement in the case.

Thinking of Billy caused an electric shock of pain right in her heart that stopped her in her tracks just as she pushed open the double doors of the police station. She had waited outside in her car for nearly thirty minutes trying to muster up the courage to waltz into his place of business. Her prayers that he be out on a call or something else kept him away from the station went unanswered. There in the parking lot was his big red Toyota Tundra truck.

Ever since their big blowout the other night she had replayed their fight over and over in her head. Every word she said, rather screamed, had been out of a mixture of anger and fear. She realized now some of that fear hadn't been about the murder case or Alex being a possible suspect in Brianna's death. It had been her fear of losing her heart again which cumulated in her fear to commit to Billy. Too late, Kayla knew deep down that she was using the investigation as an excuse to

protect herself from potential future pain. It was her “easy out”. Too bad, she already regretted her subconscious course of action. However, she was nowhere near the point where she felt she could or even should apologize.

Shaking off her unease of returning to the police station while forcing herself to march straight ahead and NOT look in the direction of Billy’s office, Kayla held her breath until she reached Jill’s office. The forensics specialist did not look to be in a good mood, but she offered up a smile as Kayla entered the room. “Is that it?” she asked, glancing at the brown paper bag in her hand.

“Here you go,” Kayla replied. “One boutonniere. Mostly dried up by now, but it’s all yours.”

“Have a seat,” Jill offered. “There’s something I have to tell you.” The expression on her face momentarily startled Kayla. “We weren’t able to hold Coach Montgomery long. Some big shot attorney from Charleston was here before we even finished booking her. Somehow he managed to get a hearing with Judge Miller. From what everyone here at the station said, it was unprecedented. The end result? The coach posted \$25,000 bail late last night and has already been released.”

Shocked speechless, both women sat staring in disbelief at each other. Kayla asked the obvious question, “How did a poorly paid assistant coach afford that?”

“Easy. She didn’t.” Jill answered. “Get this. Coach Cashion paid her bail.”

Incredulous, Kayla replied with another question. “How did HE afford it?” Last she checked high school football coaches in small South Carolina towns didn’t have huge incomes.

“Here’s the truly interesting part. Coach Cashion didn’t come alone to the police station, although his buddy stayed outside in the car. One of the other officers remarked about the other person after both coaches left.” She paused long enough to build up the suspense. “The person waiting in the car was Tommy Brennan.”

Kayla could not have been more shocked if she’d said Bill Gates had been waiting in the car. “Well, that could explain the high priced attorney and the ability to post bail so quickly, if Tommy’s parents were involved.” Jill agreed. But the question remained – Why would the Brennan’s help out Coach Louise Montgomery in such a lavish manner? Also, why was Coach Cashion involved? None of this made sense.

As the two women pondered the possible reasons for the strange alliance between the coaches and the Brennan family, the chief of police knocked on Jill’s closed door. He didn’t bother to wait for a response, but walked right in. Glancing at Jill, Kayla easily saw the irritation his lack of respect caused. In return, the chief did not look thrilled to see Jill’s guest. He had tolerated Kayla’s frequent visits to the station when she dated Billy. Now, he probably deemed her presence a nuisance.

Kayla noticed a slight movement from Jill. The brown paper bag Kayla brought to the station disappeared under the desk. The move was so sly that it went unnoticed by the chief.

“Agent Henson, I need to speak with – alone – for a moment,” the chief stated coldly. Behind him, Kayla made out the figure of a very well dressed man with thinning, grey hair. His pompous expression did not sit well with either woman, but Kayla really had no choice but to exit the office. Not wanting to risk running into Billy, she decided to leave for work. Hoping that Jill would fill her in on the progress of the case later.

She didn’t have to wait long to hear from her new accomplice. Just as Kayla pulled up to her own business, her phone rang. Not only had

they been forced to release Coach Montgomery for assaulting a police officer while he took evidence into custody, but now that evidence had been released back to the coach. Her lawyer had apparently persuaded the judge to declare the police had no reasonable cause to keep the bag as it didn't meet the criteria as evidence. Needless to say, Jill was beside herself with exasperation. Although forced to give up the bag for forensics testing, she managed a small victory. Before handing over the bag, she snagged a wad of unused tissues from the bag. It was a long shot, but if the roses had been in the bag, Jill hoped to find their unique scent still absorbed by the material. Opening the door to the shop, Kayla smiled. "Yes," she thought, "that woman has spunk."

Mid-day, Kayla received another very welcome call from her daughter. It would be impossible to describe the emotions that flooded her entire body upon hearing Candace's voice from so far away. It had been months since Kayla had seen her daughter. Being the busy, and quite successful, investigative journalist left little time for her to call or write her mom so every chance Kayla had to hear her voice made her heart beat faster with happiness. With Candace taking one dangerous assignment after another with her new job, Kayla always felt a wave of relief whenever she called.

"Hey, Mom." – The two sweetest words Kayla had heard in weeks. Even better, Candace was coming home. Her assignment in the Ukraine was over. Claiming to her boss that she needed a break, she intended to head straight to Folly Beach to help clear Alex of any wrongdoing. If there was anything the young woman was 100% sure about, it was that her "surrogate" brother wasn't capable of hurting anyone, much less murdering his best friend. Confidant that she would get to the bottom of it quickly, she was already home-bound on US Airways Flight 2167 to arrive in Charleston around midnight. For the first time in what seemed like forever, Kayla truly smiled.



Chapter 16

Despite the late hour, and the massive amount of sleep deprivation Kayla endured over the last few days, she was wide awake as she waited on Candace's plane to arrive. It had been a joyous reunion. Seeing that beautiful strawberry blonde hair poking out from under an Atlanta Braves ball cap unleashed the floodgates again as tears of joy this time streamed down Kayla's face.

The ride home Candace talked non-stop about her recent adventures in the Ukraine. Kayla barely got a word in edgewise, but she didn't care. Her daughter was home and that was all that mattered for the moment. Tomorrow, she would refocus on the debacle murder investigation. By the time they arrived home, Candace's exhaustion took over. The poor girl's head barely hit the pillow of her bed before snores escaped. For probably the first time in a very long time, Kayla slept soundly as well.

The aroma of a fresh pot of coffee woke Kayla from her deep slumber long after the sun rose. Once she knew Candace was coming home, she arranged for Jessie to run things at the flower shop so she could spend a leisurely morning with her daughter. Alex had already left for school, although not happy about his suspension from the swim team. At least his studies should keep his mind diverted from the mess he found himself in.

She found her beautiful daughter already seated at the kitchen table with her laptop and notes scattered about its surface. "Already at work, I see," teased her mother. After pouring a tall cup of very strong coffee with a dash of vanilla creamer, she joined Candace at the table and the two Ballantyne women started to work on the case.

Trying to recall all that had happened over the last few days, Kayla did most of the talking while Candace took mountains of notes. She

explained about the flash drive Trish found that was now in the police evidence room; however, there was a copy. Jill had easily determined a copy had been made of the media, but had not ratted her out to Billy so there was a copy available for Candace to review. “Wow, Mom! Brianna did a fantastic job of compiling evidence to make the case for both stories – doping of athletes and the “pay for play” scheme. She really was good!”

Being an investigative reporter had given Candace the training, the tools, and the knowledge to find out a lot more information than Kayla could’ve found on her own. With the leads provided by Brianna’s research, she went to work immediately. Seeing she was more in the way than anything, Kayla left to check things out at the flower shop. She was expecting a large assortment of roses for the upcoming wedding season. This year though, she really dreaded the roses.

She was right. The overpowering scent of roses assailed her nostrils as soon as she opened the door. Javier was knee-deep in bundles of the flowers while Jessie busily attended the front counter with customers waiting. Too late, Kayla realized she had neglected her business long enough. The store was in complete disarray. She overheard an angry customer blasting Jessie because the centerpieces her son’s bar mitzvah weren’t ready and the completed ones lacked the royal blue satin trim she requested. The particular shade of blue satin utilized was not to her liking. Kayla jumped out front to handle the situation and spent the majority of the day dealing with pretty much the same scenarios.

The chaos died down a few hours later. Enough that the trio could take a short break for lunch. They were all surprised when Candace waltzed in carrying Chinese take-out – enough food to feed the entire Clemson football team. However, something caught her eye just as she entered so she placed the food on the counter and vowed she’d be right back. Kayla saw her daughter dash across the street to the corner deli. Believing Candace decided she wanted a sandwich instead, they

dug into the containers of Kung Pao Chicken, Beef & Broccoli, Sweet & Sour Pork, and combination fried rice (Kayla's favorite).

When Candace returned she had quite the story to tell. Just as she brought the food over, she recognized the swim coach walking into the deli. Initially, she thought she'd just go up to talk to him as if all was normal, but something strange happened. Another woman, not his wife Monica, joined him at a small table in the back corner of the deli shop. Wanting to see what the good coach was up to, Candace took a spot at the counter in order to keep an eye on them. The couple talked in hush tones, and she thought the coach looked a smidge uncomfortable. When the woman got up to leave she left a small sports backpack that she had placed next to her chair while she picked up an envelope that Coach Peterson had put down on the table upon his arrival. The woman left and the coach paid the bill and left the deli with the black sports bag.

Kayla related to the group that it certainly seemed suspicious, but the encounter could mean any number of things. Candace interrupted her though by pulling out her laptop and pulling up a group of pictures from Brianna's flash drive. She pointed at one image in particular then stated, "That's the woman". Looking closely at the digital photograph, they saw an average-sized woman with dark hair and sunglasses carrying a black sports backpack. Other photos of the woman showed the bag being handed to Coach Peterson in other places around Folly Beach. There were at least fifteen pictures of the two together and there was always an identical black bag. They still didn't know what was in the bag, or in the envelope, but it definitely signaled to the group that something improper may be transpiring between the mystery woman and the coach. The question remained – What?

"What? No one saved me any Kung Pao Chicken?" Candace proclaimed. "Now, I'm hungry." Everyone passed her the half-eaten containers. In between bites, she further explained what her research uncovered that morning. Kayla noticed how her daughter's cheeks

flamed pink whenever she was excited. Right now, they were practically crimson. She must be on to something.

“Okay, Mom, I need you to promise that you won’t lecture me about hacking or question my sources and methods. Okay?” Candace refused to continue until she elicited that promise from her mother. With an apparent look of concern, Kayla acquiesced. What the girl had to say amazed them all.

Apparently, Coach Louise Montgomery had been living well above her stated means of income. Somehow the poorly paid high school assistant coach was driving around in a new Lexus, just bought a nice townhouse, and had booked an all-inclusive vacation to Hawaii for the entire summer. “Pretty nice for a job that pays less than \$25,000 a year,” she commented. “Brianna clearly suspected Coach Montgomery of accepting money under the table for increased play time on the football field, according to her own notes.”

Just when Kayla thought that was the end of the story, Candace revealed even more intriguing details. According to a little digging into the head football coach’s finances, Coach Cashion appeared to have some heavy gambling debt. The situation was so bad, his wife had left him earlier that year. To participate in a “pay for play” scheme would’ve been a way for the coach to pay off his debts. Interestingly enough, Candace pointed out, at least three of his bookies had been repaid in full since the football season. Although, he apparently still owed at least another \$5,000 to some guy named Dynamite Dave.

The group discussed Candace’s findings, although the whole idea of butting into a police investigation did not sit well with Javier. It made him uncomfortable, so he excused himself to the back storeroom to work on an impromptu inventory of baby’s breath. Kayla thought her daughter was starting to sound like one of those television commercials with her use of “and that’s not all” phrase. The young woman was very pleased with the success of her work so far.

Somehow, and Kayla restrained herself from asking how, Candace uncovered the financial documents from the school's athletic booster club, as well as a special club set up specifically for the football program. Analysis of the financial transactions showed a suspicious diversion of funds away from certain programs – like the lacrosse team, field hockey team, and wrestling – to other programs, including the football team and the swim and dive teams. Monies in the general fund of the booster club seemed to be siphoned off to the football “booster” club with no explanations.

“But that’s not all,” Candace continued with a smirk. “There were several data entries that showed an extraordinary amount of funds being moved into the “Miscellaneous” category under “Personnel – Trainer”. Each individual transaction was just under the amount that would automatically be scrutinized by any accountant or government entity if they were so inclined to review the financial statements. However, the total amount moved to that category over the last two years was an astronomical \$45,000. “What kind of high school booster club deals with that much money? And what purpose did it serve for a bookkeeping item that should be a minimal expense?” Candace wondered out loud.

Indeed, Kayla and Jessie were both shocked at the findings. Brianna had really been on to something with her stories. However, considering it was beginning to look like it may have gotten her killed, Kayla really didn't see the stories worth the cost of the young woman's life. It made her even more determined to find out the truth. Not just to exonerate Alex of any wrongdoing, but to see Brianna's killer brought to justice and her work completed. She deserved that, at the very least.





Chapter 17

After a long, yet interesting day, Kayla felt the need to unwind as she bolted the locks on the flower shop for the night. She should be exhausted. It was late. Most of the shops in the heart of the small town had already closed. But the adrenaline coursing through her veins screamed for release. No, she couldn't go home now. Knowing that Alex was in the care of both Jessie and Candace, Kayla decided she could use a little "me" time.

Heading over to the YMCA to burn some energy off swimming laps, Kayla turned the radio up and sang along to Florida Georgia Line's "Cruise". However, she got a surprise when she entered the pool area of the building. There was Alex! Cutting through the water like a blade. Watching him in swim competitions over the years, he really had developed into what she called an artist, not just an athlete.

Kayla didn't interrupt him while he swam. She just watched in wonder. Thinking back to when she first introduced him to the water during his first swim lesson, she fought back bittersweet tears. He was a good kid, a really good kid. It was unfair that life had dealt him such hard blows – losing his parents at an early age and now his best friend's death with him as the prime suspect. Not to mention being kicked off the school's swim team. Alex deserved to be happy. With his smarts, good looks, and athletic ability, the whole world should be his for the taking.

A splash of water in her direction woke her from her reverie. Laughing, Alex teased, "You look like you're miles away, Kayla!"

Returning his laughter, she chided him, "You could've at least waited til I got my swimsuit on before soaking me!" In response, Alex lifted himself out of the pool with his arms and walked over to Kayla to

give her a giant hug – further soaking her clothes. She didn't care though. Not really, although she chose to pretend-scold him.

Kayla offered him her own towel to dry off. “So what exactly are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at home catching up on school work? Don't tell me that having both Jessie and Candi hovering over you drove you screaming away already?” she joked. They sat down on the pool's edge, dangling their feet into the warm water. After a few moment's silence, Alex leaned his head over on Kayla's shoulder which was quite awkward considering how much taller he was than she.

Alex's voiced faltered as he tried to tell his guardian what had been bothering him so much. He could've talked to his sister, or even Candace, but he always felt more comfortable telling his troubles to Kayla. Ever since his parents' deaths, she had been a mother-figure to him. If he ever needed a mom's unique ability to comfort and gently guide in the right direction, it was now.

“Yeah, that was nice to see Candi home, but those two together make a formidable duo. I think they're over-doing the 'trying to act like all is well while watching me like a hawk for signs of distress.' It's driving me nuts!” he commented with a hint of a smile. “I just don't know how many more times I can say that I'm okay.” With a look of raised eyebrows from Kayla, indicating she wasn't convinced either, he continued.

“Alright, maybe I'm not okay exactly...I thought going back to school would help, but it was just awful! It seemed like everyone was staring and whispering behind my back. No one would talk to me, except Tommy and his crew of knuckleheads. They weren't exactly trying to carry on a polite conversation,” Alex stated as he pointed to the bruises on his arm and shoulder where they had shoved him around again. Horrified, Kayla gasped. “They keep saying that I'm a murderer, that I killed Brianna. How can they say that? How can they even think it? She was my best friend for years! I miss her so much,

but those jerks won't even allow me to grieve for her." His body shook from the effort it took to hold back the tears. Not knowing the best way to comfort him, and knowing there were no words to assuage his pain, Kayla simply let him cry it out while stroking his hair.

Minutes passed and his tears subsided, but Kayla realized it wouldn't be the last time he shed tears over the loss of Brianna. Alex continued, more controlled now. "You know," he paused searching for the words, "I had no clue she had any romantic feelings for me. She never gave the slightest indication – or I was just too dumb to see it. Truth is, I don't know how I would've responded if she had told me. I did love her, in a way. I just don't think that was the way she wanted."

Kayla reassured him that Brianna knew how much he cared for her. Whether they would ever have broached the subject of being more than friends, nobody would ever know for sure. However, he couldn't feel guilty for not returning feelings he didn't know she had. "The important thing is to honor her now, remember her life and cherish the times you spent together," Kayla advised.

"That's exactly what Natalia said," Alex replied. Surprised, Kayla gave him a questioning look for an explanation. Apparently, the young woman had been at the pool that night and left just before Kayla walked in. According to Alex, she had sought him out to let him know that she was in his corner and believed him innocent. Natalia seemed to believe that most of the school thought the same way as she did, but Tommy and his buddies were being the "squeaky wheels". Alex desperately wanted to believe that everyone else knew the truth – he would never hurt Brianna. However, it seemed to be the important people that didn't have faith in him. Even Natalia's father was on the bandwagon to convict Alex before he was even officially deemed a suspect. She claimed that she and her brother had tried talking with their father, but he wouldn't listen. All he talked about was that now Davis would get his chance with Alex suspended from the team; now Davis could get noticed by collegiate coaches, like the

Duke University coach, with Alex out of the picture. Natalia even stated that she had heard him talking to the principal. Mr. Rickles told her dad that Alex would not be allowed to participate in any future swim competitions since he was a suspect in Brianna's death. Her father had seemed overjoyed. She had been shocked her father would behave in such a way. Kayla, however, was not. All the signs of envy had been there for years. Not from Davis Peterson, the son, but from his father. She had seen it time and time again. Parents living vicariously through their children to recapture their own past glories or realize success where they had failed.

Obviously feeling defeated, Alex simply shrugged. The world was against him, it appeared. Kayla tried to buoy his spirits with a promise that the real killer would be found and brought to justice. When he/she was discovered, Kayla intended to make sure Alex was not only vindicated, but that everyone who mistreated him during this time, or took advantage of the circumstances, would be very apologetic. Alex may have a forgiving heart, but she just wasn't feeling it. Trying not to agitate him further by showing her own distress about the situation, Kayla assured him everything would be alright. After all, with Candace working her investigative journalist genius, what could possibly go wrong?



Chapter 18

Thirty minutes later, Alex had showered and left the YMCA to walk home. Kayla offered to drive him home, but he insisted he still needed to clear his mind. The fresh air would do him good. Slipping into the warm water of the indoor pool felt comforting to Kayla. Being in the water always had a calming effect on her. She could lose herself for hours gliding through the water in repetitive motions. It was a lot like when she'd train for obstacle course and mud runs. There was nothing else to cloud her mind – just her and the pool. Swimming was the closest thing to yoga Kayla had ever done.

This time was different though. Yes, she lost herself in the clear water and the movement of her arms and kicking of her legs. But her peace was interrupted by the nagging sense that she was being watched. Several times she would halt mid-lap to look around the pool deck. No one was there. Still, the feeling wouldn't go away. Any nirvana she had hoped to capture while swimming became impossible to grab onto. Never in all her years of swimming at the YMCA, as an athlete and as a coach, had she felt this uncomfortable. Despite the warm water surrounding her entire body, goosebumps covered her skin. With the hair on the back of her neck raised and an errant chill come over her, Kayla decided to call it quits for the night.

She had never felt unsafe before at the “Y”. Never. It was the safest place she knew. Tonight, however, something changed. Shaking off the notion someone was watching her as being silly, Kayla headed towards the locker room to shower and change. With the creepy feeling though, she already decided to just change back into her street clothes and get out of there. Fast. However, as soon as she walked into the locker room she stopped in her tracks just inside the door. The room was completely empty with a flickering light bulb towards the showers in the back. Everything appeared to be in place except for one thing...her locker.

The combination lock she used for years lay on the ground, just to the side of the locker. Kayla clearly remembered the device clicking shut before she left for the pool. She certainly would never leave it on the floor like that. In addition, the door to her locker was wide open. She tiptoed to the far side of the locker to attempt a peek inside to see if anything had been taken. Her purse was turned upside down and all its contents lay on the metal bottom of the locker. Deciding not to risk contaminating any evidence if someone happen to leave fingerprints, Kayla tried a few deep breaths to calm her nerves.

Pulling the wet towel around her body tighter, she nearly sprinted out to the front desk of the YMCA to call the police and question the clerk on duty if someone else had been in the building. There had been a couple in the weight room earlier, but considering the late hour the building was mostly empty. She instinctively started to speed dial Billy, but thought better of it. She also knew calling 9-1-1 would bring him running, too. Even now, Kayla knew she couldn't face him yet. Instead, she called her new pal in the police department, FBI agent Jill Henson.

The agent must have broken the sound barrier on the way over. Neither Kayla nor the front desk clerk could believe how quickly she arrived at the building. Leaving the clerk to guard the front area of the building, the two women went back to the pool area to investigate. Jill came prepared with a fingerprint kit and small evidence storage bags. Pulling every item out of the locker one by one with latex-gloved hands, Jill placed the items on a long wooden for Kayla to inventory. Within a few minutes, the locker was empty. On the bench were the contents of Kayla's purse, gym bag, shoes, and even her cell phone. Whoever had violated her locker space had not taken any items of monetary importance anyway. Even her wallet didn't have a dime missing. However, a notepad where she had jotted some notes down about the mystery woman that Coach Peterson had met with at the deli earlier that day was gone. In addition, her favorite picture of Alex with Brianna at last year's Christmas party. Alex had been wearing

dress pants and an ugly Christmas sweater, since it had been the Ugly Holiday Sweater Ball at the local yacht club. On the other hand, Brianna was stunning in a shiny gold skirt and equally shiny sleigh bell sweater. Kayla loved the picture because the two teenagers looked so happy and carefree, just as teenagers should appear. Brianna's gorgeous smile would be sorely missed. By the look of things, she didn't expect to see Alex's charming grin anytime soon either.

After some discussion, Kayla decided against filing a formal complaint with the police department. It seemed silly to waste the department's time over a pad of paper and a picture. However, the uneasiness would last. She doubted a report to the police would return her sense of well-being. However, Jill decided to still run the partial fingerprints from the locker door. Considering anyone who used that locker recently would have their prints still on it, so she wasn't very optimistic about finding out who violated Kayla's locker.

Upset that someone broke into her locker and took the picture – she really didn't care about the notepad – Kayla didn't want to stay there any longer. She couldn't wait to get home. Jill walked out with her to the parking lot, as they discussed why someone would rifle through her locker only to take a worthless pad of paper and someone else's picture. However, the real fright came when they reached Kayla's car. The driver's side window was smashed! Shards of glass littered the pavement for several feet. True fear gripped Kayla's heart. Not for herself, but the realization that Alex had walked home from the YMCA. Frantic, she called his phone while Jill phoned in the car break-in to police headquarters.

There was no answer from Alex's phone. Kayla must've dialed his number a dozen times. Each time, it went straight to voicemail. She was nearly beside herself by the time Billy's truck screeched to a halt a few feet from her. Without hesitation, he jumped out of the vehicle and enclosed Kayla in his arms. "We'll find him, Kay. I promise," he repeated over and over while she trembled in his embrace.

Jill vowed to catch up with them later, while she stayed to help the crime scene investigators process the damaged vehicle. An informal All Point Bulletin (APB) had already been issued for Alex, even though technically he wasn't considered missing for 24 hours. Everyone at the police station knew Alex and Kayla and liked them. If asked whether Alex could possibly be guilty of anything remotely close to murder, every single one of them would have replied the same thing – NO. Even if a formal APB wasn't issued, every officer was now out searching for him.

Billy helped Kayla into his truck to look around for the boy. Using the spotlight, they examined every inch of ground between the YMCA and Kayla's home. Jessie had already been notified. It was agreed that Candace would remain at the house and wait for Alex, while Jessie walked the projected path Alex would've taken to and from the pool. On her way out the door though, a piece of paper floated down when she opened the door to leave the house. It was addressed to Kayla. Jessie tried unsuccessfully to get Kayla to hand the phone to Billy so she could read the note to him because she didn't want to alarm Kayla further. It was a short message scrawled in barely readable script – "Stop looking into things you know nothing about, or that boy of yours will pay the price." Frightened more than she had ever been, Kayla held the phone to her chest and prayed.

Neither said much to each other as they drove around for hours searching for Alex. Several times, they got out of the vehicle to explore areas on foot. Still no sign of the young man. Reports from other officers were all the same. Nothing. It was as if the boy up and vanished into thin air. Jessie had returned home to wait with Candace after a failed search of every known walking path to and from the YMCA from Kayla's house. By this point, Kayla was beyond terrified for Alex. Even Billy's strong presence and comforting grasp of her hand had little soothing effect on her nerves.

Just as the sun peeked above the Atlantic Ocean, a call came into police headquarters from an early morning jogger. An unconscious boy fitting Alex's description was found lying in the woods behind the high school. An ambulance had already been dispatched to take the boy to the hospital. Kayla and Billy headed straight to the hospital after a positive identification is radioed in. It's Alex and he's badly hurt.

Seeing the bruised and battered young man in the tiny hospital bed nearly shattered Kayla's already bursting heart. Jessie had already arrived to be with her brother. He had gained consciousness for a short time. Long enough to reveal that he didn't remember what happened to him. He had just left the YMCA when someone ambushed him from behind. Considering the YMCA was not close to the school, Billy concluded that whoever attacked him had transported his body there.

As Alex rested with heart rate and oxygen monitors beeping, the doctor filled them in on the extent of the boy's injuries. Along with a probable concussion and multiple contusions, his shoulder was dislocated but they had already moved it back into place. It would hurt for a while and swelling would need to be controlled with ibuprofen, but recovery would be quick. The bruising around his neck was the most startling injury. Whoever attacked him had incredible strength. No doubt, if the person(s) meant to kill him, they could have done so easily.

Hearing the doctor recount Alex's injuries ignited a rage inside Kayla. It was reasonable for her to be upset, angry even. This surpassed simple anger. She finally understood the term "seeing red". All else was blocked from her vision except the vision of Alex lying helpless on the hospital bed. Without a word, she turned and ran out the door.





Chapter 19

Kayla didn't even know where she was going until she got there. Thankfully she was in fantastic physical and cardio because the distance from the hospital to the school was well over two miles. Instinct had driven her back to the high school. That's where this whole debacle started and she intended to end it once and for all...for Brianna and for Alex. Commonsense dictated that Brianna's dual investigations of the school's athletic program was the motive behind her murder. It certainly wasn't a jealous rage on the part of her prom date. Of that, she was 100% certain.

It was still early yet for students to be filing into the building for classes, but there were some teachers' cars in the parking lot. Not wanting to alert anyone to her presence, Kayla opted to sneak in through the back entrance instead of parading through the front door. A pinch of fear made her hesitate a few moments before reaching for the door handle. "You can do, Kay," she inwardly bolstered her resolve. Just as she made the mental decision to go forward, a strong, large hand came down on her arm.

"What do you think you're doing, Kayla?" Billy asked in a hushed voice. His forehead was creased with worried frown lines. His eyes shone with concern. Kayla knew he wanted to keep her safe and here she was making his job worse, but she wasn't to be deterred.

Whispering so as not to alert anyone inside to their presence, she tried explaining the situation to him, but Billy didn't need to hear the reasons. He knew why she was hiding just outside the school building. He knew exactly what she planned, probably before she figured it out herself. At this point, Kayla was winging her way through. No real plan, other than somehow uncovering the truth before someone came after Alex again. After nearly two years together, despite her incredibly vocal break-up with him earlier, he

knew her better than she knew herself sometimes. Because of that, Billy had no hope of talking Kayla out of whatever she was going to do. The best he could do to help was to go along for the ride. “I’m not going to argue with you right now, but when this is done we ARE going to talk. But I have one demand – you stay behind me,” he tried sounding as stern as if talking to a juvenile delinquent just caught breaking and entering.

Nodding agreement, Kayla stepped back to allow Billy to take the lead. The back hallways of the school were still mostly darkened and eerily quiet. Kayla recalled the feeling she experienced last night at the YMCA where she thought she was alone, but still felt creeped out. With her heart thumping in her chest, she followed Billy’s lead down the corridor towards the coaches’ offices. A faint fluorescent glow emitted from the direction they were heading. Someone was there. Kayla just hoped that person or persons had the information she needed.

As they snuck down the hallway, voices could be heard coming from the direction of the locker rooms. The voices were raised in anger – one brusque male voice and one deep, but clearly female voice. Now just outside the locker room, Billy peeked into one of the narrow windows in the door while motioning for Kayla to stay back. When he looked back at her, his eyes were wide with surprise. Unable to resist, she glanced in as well. Just inside the locker room was a small office, mostly used for storage of miscellaneous equipment. Standing just inside that office were Coach Montgomery, Principal Rickles, and Tommy Brennan’s father. Apparently, he was doing the majority of the yelling while his son sat on a small metal chair outside the office holding an ice pack to his swollen and bloody bottom lip.

Billy pulled Kayla away from the door and put his finger to his lips to indicate for her to remain quiet. He pushed and held the door open just a smidge so they could better hear the conversation. It was VERY enlightening.

Mr. Brennan's voice reverberated in the enclosed space of the locker room. Although she could no longer see his face, Kayla imagined his face was covered in blazing red splotches. She had seen that particular face several times over the years as the older man blustered at every coach Tommy ever had, blaming them for every missed football or other mistake. Even when he had been on the swim team at the YMCA years ago, Mr. Brennan screamed at swim officials and the coaches when Tommy somehow didn't touch the wall of the pool first to win.

"I can't believe that I've thrown so much money down the drain, and for what? NOTHING! How long have I supported this school? This athletic program? For what? One of you please tell me because for the life of me I can't think of anything," he bellowed. "For all my money and all my efforts, you imbeciles couldn't manage a little housecleaning. All you had to do was make this mess with the little amateur reporter school girl go away! Simple! I have mail clerks in my office who can handle this easier than you incompetents!"

Thoughts flashed through Kayla's mind. Mostly angry ones, but she easily realized that this particular tiff had something to do with Brianna's death. She held onto her anger, but stayed silent. They both squatted just outside the door and continued to listen. At least Billy had the foresight to click the record app on his phone because the rest of the story was getting truly interesting.

Between angry words from Mr. Brennan and cross-arguments from Coach Montgomery, while Principal Rickles was uncharacteristically quiet, Kayla heard Tommy whimpering. With his lip swollen, he had difficulty getting the words out, but his message was clear. "I didn't mean for any of this. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry." He repeated that he was sorry over and over while the others seemed to completely ignore him.

Mr. Brennan took on a calmer, but more menacing tone as he instructed the coach and principal to clean up this mess. Finally

hearing his son's cries in the corner, he turned his fury on Tommy. "Shut up, son! Stop your sniveling. None of this would've happened if you had been more of a man. All the money in the world couldn't get you noticed by college coaches. This whole high school experience has been a waste of my time and money! All because you couldn't get some brat in a skirt to shut up! Now I'm having to clean up your mess yet again, Junior!" This only caused the poor boy to sob more loudly. It didn't matter though. Mr. Brennan had no intention of lowering his voice.

Kayla's hand flew to her mouth to stifle a gasp of astonishment. Principal Rickles finally found his voice. "Mr. Brennan, this has gone way too far. We can't, we can't..." he stuttered before he was interrupted.

"You can and you will, Rickles," Tommy's father threatened. "Both of you imbeciles will make this all go away. I've provided every resource you need. Now just do your jobs or I swear you will go down in flames, along with this school." Letting his warning sink in a moment, he continued, "Make the so-called evidence vanish. Frame the weakling swim coach for the drugs, if you must. But you both will make sure the Ward boy goes down for the pesky girl's death. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"

Unable to stop herself, Kayla gasped aloud in utter horror. Before they can get out of sight, the door swings open and a thick arm reaches out to grab Kayla. The door hit Billy in the head, knocking him out for a few seconds. Kayla looked up to see Coach Montgomery's face just before the woman threw her into the locker room. Unable to react in time, the coach slammed Kayla's head into the corner of a bench. It wasn't stars that flashed before her eyes though. It was blood that ran down her face from the gash in her forehead. Without the blood, she still would've seen red though. Adrenaline and fury propelled Kayla back onto her feet.

Before Billy even had a chance to dash in and save the damsel, Kayla flew at the coach while the others in the room were still too dumbfounded to do anything but watch. She vaguely recalled the feeling of the coach's fist smashing into face, although it would end up leaving a nasty bruise. Undeterred, Kayla fought back. First, she stomped down on the woman's foot, causing her to bend over. Then, Kayla swung her own head up so fast that it collided with the coach's chin and she stumbled backwards. Not letting up, Kayla swept her leg under the unstable Coach Montgomery who, as a result, fell to the ground. It wasn't until Kayla straddled the coach, pinning her arms to her sides, with her own elbow pressed against her opponent's throat that she stopped her assault.

Being a florist, no one would ever have suspected she had such deft fighting moves. However, being left alone to defend herself and her daughter for years, Kayla had seen it fitting to take more than a few self-defense classes. It paid off. Her attacker was down on the ground, wounded, and in full submission. Glancing up, she saw the impressed look in Billy's eyes as he trained his weapon on the others in the room. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Kayla couldn't help but flash him a self-satisfied grin.



Chapter 20

To say that the police station hadn't seen that much action in a long time was an overstatement. While paramedics tended to Kayla's injuries, Billy and several other officers worked at questioning Mr. Brennan, Principal Rickles, and a somewhat bruised Coach Montgomery. Even Tommy Brennan, still with an ice pack to his lip, sat chained to an officer's desk waiting his turn to be interviewed.

Hours passed, but Kayla stayed at the police station. She refused to leave until somebody gave her some answers. She watched Billy escort Mr. Brennan downstairs to be booked, for what precisely she didn't know. Luckily, her new friend and FBI agent, Jill eventually brought Kayla into her temporary office to fill her in. "Hey, there, Rocky!" she teased. Kayla realized she probably looked like the famous movie boxer after a match with Mr. T or that Russian dude. With the passage of time, the adrenaline started to wear off and the pain set in.

"Care to fill me in, or do I have to wait for the newspaper in the morning?" she asked.

Jill laughed. "I think you of all people deserve a bit of a preview." She then told an almost unbelievable tale that a few days ago Kayla never would've believed. Unfortunately, the story was all too true and she knew it. Mr. Brennan had been paying Coach Montgomery, as well as the football head coach, for more play time on the field for his son. Supposedly, in the hope that the boy would be "seen" by some college football coach to get recruited. A squad car had already been dispatched to pick up Coach Cashion for questioning. But the story delved much further. As a board member for the booster club, Brennan funneled money from the general fund and less "significant" sports to the football program. After Coach Peterson caught on to the

scheme, Brennan kept him quiet by diverting funds to the swim program as well.

However, apparently the football coaches had taken their jobs as Tommy's entourage a bit too far. Other, more skilled athletes were sidelined. Whenever the athletes asked the coaches what they could do to regain their starting positions or see more play time, they were retaliated against. Coach Montgomery refused to advise the players, and would then keep those players off the field completely for the next several games. Although the school promoted itself as academics before athletics, Coach Cashion punished players who missed one practice during a bye week in order to attend an event for extra credit in an honors course. Those young men sat on the bench for the remainder of the season. Despite complaints by their parents to the principal, the school backed the coach in his actions and the whole issue was swept under the rug.

Kayla was shocked at the extent of fraud and foul play in the athletic program, but that still didn't answer what happened to Brianna. How did any of this amount to a motive for murder? Jill stated that all of this was in Brianna's research. The young girl just needed the proverbial smoking gun in order to prove the story beyond a doubt. Her notes indicated Brianna even spoke with the principal about her findings. Jill affirmed that the young woman probably had no clue even the principal was in on the scheme. "I just completed the financial analysis and was about to take it to the chief when I got the call from you last night."

"This story just keeps getting better," Jill remarked as she paused to indicate officers had also just brought in the swim coach, Paul Peterson. "Officer Caine radioed in that the mystery bag contained several vials of assorted performance-enhancing steroids. We believe he somehow became the middle man for picking up the drugs and delivering them to the football coaches." She shook her head in disgust. "That bag we initially confiscated from the female coach... that had been utilized in transporting the vials. In addition to the rose

fragrance prevalent in the bag, the tissue I extracted from it had trace amounts of one of the steroids. Seems there was a vial that either leaked or broke at one point in that particular bag.”

Absorbing all the information had Kayla speechless. Still, she didn't understand. How did any of this amount to murder of a sweet, beautiful young woman with her whole life in front of her?

Hours passed. Still Kayla refused to leave. Both Billy and Jill tried to persuade her, but until someone gave her a satisfactory answer she planned to stay right where she was. Feeling the extent of her injury where Coach Montgomery punched her in the jaw, she was unable to eat a package of stale peanut butter and crackers. Billy walked in holding a bottle of water and some aspirin for her. Appreciative beyond words, she hoped her look of gratitude was evident because speaking was just too painful. He seemed to understand as he sat down next to her and took her hand in his own. They sat in silence, but so much more was said with their eyes.

Being he was the lead detective, Billy couldn't stay with her for long. However, as darkness started to fall outside more visitors arrived to check on her. Jessie and Candace escorted a badly bruised Alex into Jill's office. It didn't take long for her daughter to get caught up in the investigation by comparing notes with Jill. The relief of seeing Alex up and around flooded Kayla as he hugged her tightly. Not believing any tears could possibly be left, more still streamed down her face as she held her surrogate son.

The young man may be physically beaten, but emotionally his strength was easy to see. Immediately, he noted Tommy Brennan sitting alone in one of the interview rooms. Without a word, he marched over to the room. With a look of concern, Jill decided to go into the observation room. Kayla quickly followed.

Alex Ward was a good-natured young man. He was always polite and gave people the benefit of the doubt, but that was not the Alex Ward

that Kayla and Jill witnessed through the one-way mirrored glass. Fighting back his own tears of frustration, he faced Tommy with a hardened expression. This was an angry full grown man, no longer an innocent child. He simply uttered one word, “Why?”

Even Tommy wasn't cold-hearted enough to attempt to lie or talk his way out of the situation. When faced with the one person who had been wronged who was still alive, it was time for the truth. The floodgates opened and the oversized teenage bully told Alex everything. According to Tommy, it all started for him when Natalia asked Alex to dance at the prom. He knew she had a crush on Alex, but Tommy considered himself to be too great of a catch for his own date to desert him. However, seeing the two dancing set him off, much like it had sparked discord with Brianna. After she had stomped off from the dance, he quickly followed since Natalia had brushed off his own hurt feelings. He hadn't gone looking for Brianna specifically, but he found her in Coach Cashion's office snooping around. He was well aware of her investigation. However, after his dad threatened the principal to force her to stop her work (and he personally sent her threatening notes and texts), he knew they couldn't afford to have her actually finding information. Tommy thought it best to let the adults take care of it, so he called his dad. Shortly thereafter, he witnessed Coach Montgomery entering the athletic department area of the school. Thinking the situation was in hand, he went back to the prom. The next thing he heard, Brianna was floating face down in the pool. He broke down at this point as Alex glared at him. “I didn't mean for them to hurt her. I never thought they'd hurt her,” he cried. Disgusted, Alex pushed his chair back and stalked out of the room. Tommy slumped over the small table, sobbing.

It was well after midnight before Kayla finally agreed to go home. She had learned as much as she could about what led to Brianna's murder. Still, the motive in her estimation was frivolous. In order to protect their collective hides in a pay-for-play scheme with the football department, in addition to covering up the athletic

department's utilization of performance-enhancing drugs, Brianna had paid with her life.

Coach Louise Montgomery was charged with murder, as well as other charges related to the illegal activities at the school. According to Billy's account, she confessed outright. She had not intended to kill the girl, but the situation quickly escalated when she confronted Brianna in the swim team's locker rooms. When the teenager refused to keep her mouth shut and hand over any evidence she found, the coach lost her temper. Unknown to most persons involved with athletics at the school, Billy discovered the coach was actually being treated in an anger management program. Kayla wryly thought that Louise Montgomery must not have been doing well with her therapy. She admitted, after the rage died down, she tried to clean up the scene as best she could. It was pure coincidence that the towel the police discovered had been used to clean up had also been Alex's towel that she grabbed out of the used linens bin. When that came to light, the group of conspirators had decided it was enough to deflect the cops' attention away from her and to Alex. That was when he was chosen to be their scapegoat.

Coach Montgomery also copped to being responsible for threatening calls to Brianna before that night. Jill confirmed that before the bag she confiscated from the coach was returned to the suspect, she had noticed a throw-away phone. She believed review of the phone would confirm her statement.

As if Kayla couldn't be shocked and surprised enough, the last admission from Coach Montgomery was backed up by statements from Tommy Brennan. On orders from Mr. Brennan to scare Kayla into stopping poking around their business, she schemed with Tommy to frighten Kayla at the YMCA. They also worked together to steal Alex's shoes in order to leave imprints at the Swindall house when Tommy broke in so they could point the police in Alex's direction even more. However, the beating of Alex had been Tommy's idea. The boy was upset after seeing Natalia offering comfort to Alex. His

rage, probably fueled by the steroids coursing through his veins, led to the attack. Coach Montgomery had been called again to clean up his mess. She had been the one to move his unconscious body behind the school. At this point, there was more than enough to convict the woman of multiple charges. Kayla hoped she received the maximum penalty for all of them.

Billy intended to charge Tommy's father with a plethora of crimes, including conspiracy to cover up a murder and conspiracy to commit murder. The district attorney was confident that the man would go away for quite a long time, along with his co-conspirators. Coach Aldon Cashion would be charged with conspiracy, in addition to charges related to the illegal drugs and the financial scheme with the booster club. Regardless to say, the man was definitely out of a job and would never coach again. Principal Rickles, on the other hand, would face conspiracy to commit fraud and covering up a murder. Kayla smiled. She wouldn't miss him in charge of the school.

The shock came when the district attorney informed Billy, and others in the vicinity that Coach Paul Peterson would not be charged with anything. Several protested, but apparently the coach made a deal – testimony against the others in exchange for immunity. He even pledged to testify against the steroid supplier. He had no part in threatening Brianna, according to all sources, but he had been made aware of what the others were doing. He claimed to be too scared to speak up, instead he chose to use the situation to his son's advantage by pushing forward his son on the swim team while Alex was being railroaded for Brianna's murder. Somehow, to Kayla, it didn't seem enough to let him off the hook so easily. However, his quick dismissal from his job helped ease the angst she felt toward the man.

The last few days had been horrendous, especially for Alex. Her motherly instincts wanted the book thrown at all of them, but for moment she was content the truth was uncovered. Not only was Alex exonerated, but Brianna's killer was behind bars. In addition, everyone involved would pay in some way for their nefarious actions.

Not only that, but Brianna's hard investigative work was brought to light. Her research and determination unveiled the illegals goings-on in the Folly Beach High School athletic department.

Despite feeling amped up after all the events of the last 48 hours, everyone in the Ballantyne household fell asleep almost immediately after returning from the police station. Kayla wouldn't open her eyes again until the following afternoon when a soft knock on her bedroom door woke her. Billy peeked around the corner of the door. With a smile she hadn't shown in days, Kayla motioned him in. Seems like they needed to talk .



Chapter 21

Three days later, it was time to say final good-byes to Brianna Swindall. The weather matched the somber mood of the town. On any given day in Folly Beach the sun shone brightly and a soft breeze came off the Atlantic Ocean. It was the reason it was so popular as a vacation spot. Today, was not any other day. Residents had woken up to a steady, pouring rain. Now, a soft drizzle had settled over the town as folks filed into the small First Baptist Church for the funeral services.

Brianna's mother, still medicated, sat at in the front row barely able to acknowledge the masses of people filing by to offer their condolences. Her father, with eyes rimmed in red stood stoically beside her, slowly nodding his head as he shook hands and exchanged timid hugs with mourners.

It had been difficult to coax Alex from his room this morning. Ever since the date and time of the funeral had been announced, he'd sunk into a depressed state. He knew this moment would come, but tried to forestall as best he could. Kayla believed the added task he accepted only compounded his troubles. Trish had stopped by yesterday to ask for one last favor for Brianna – give a eulogy for his best friend. Kayla wasn't sure he was up to the job. Not that he wouldn't want to do anything he could for Brianna, but this may have been too much to request. However, in true Alex Ward style, he accepted and had been working on his speech throughout the day and into the night. No one in the house even knew if he'd slept.

Kayla and Jessie escorted Alex into the church. He was so handsome in his dark grey suit, starched white button-down shirt, and red silk tie. He had insisted on bringing a bouquet of the creamy white roses with red trim to offer Mrs. Swindall. The expression on her face changed momentarily as the roses were placed in her hands. Her eyes brimmed with fresh tears as she whispered "Thank you" to the young man that had been by her daughter's side through all the ups and downs of her young life.

The pastor cleared his throat loudly to indicate for everyone to take their seats as the pianist played softly the haunting melody "Til I See You Again". Since Alex will be speaking, one of the ushers escorted the group

to the second row, where Billy was waiting for them. As the service begins, Kayla reached over to take his strong warm hand. Glancing down the row she noticed Jill Henson, looking striking in a tailored navy suit. Seeing the two holding hands, she smiled back at Kayla.

The service was incredibly moving with several speaking of the beautiful life of Brianna Swindall. The pastor offered comforting words and reassured the congregation of the young woman's commitment to her Lord, her family, and her friends. He went on and on how Brianna was safe and happy in the arms of her Savior. Although these words were consoling, they were bittersweet. All loss of life is heart-wrenching. However, the loss of someone so vibrant, so young, so full of promise, left deep emotional wounds – some that may never heal.

Gazing around at the standing-room only crowd in the small church, Kayla grew nervous as it came closer to time for Alex to give his speech. The school choir stood up in the choir loft as the pianists' fingers floated over the keys for the hymn, "Amazing Grace", followed by a solo of "I Can Only Imagine". Kayla had never been able to hold back tears during either song, but today was especially poignant. Just as the soloist finished, with tears streaking down her own face, Alex stood up to walk to the podium.

For a moment, Kayla feared the grief and stress were just too much for the boy. He silently stood in front of the congregation for quite a while before he miraculously found his voice. Clearing his throat, Kayla witnessed true courage intermixed with love as Alex transformed before her very eyes from a sad boy that she helped raise for many years into a strong, mature young man. Although his voice shook and he was forced to stop a few times to wipe away tears of his own, Alex stood tall and proud for his best friend, Brianna. His speech interrupted by sobs from the congregation, he continued. Even Brianna's mother, medicated to keep her calm during the ceremony, openly cried – all the while smiling as Alex relayed to everyone there what a powerhouse of a young woman Brianna had been. If anyone understood the specialness of this unique, incredible woman, it was Alex. He had been with her through all the trials and tribulations of childhood, as well as the angst of the pre-teen and teenage years. He intended for

everyone to know just how wonderful Brianna was and just how dearly missed she would be for the rest of his life.

Although her eyesight was blurred with salty tears, Kayla noticed that Alex did not note cards or a sheet of paper with notes. Every word he uttered was completely from his heart and soul. “There is no possible way to describe the great loss that we each feel at this moment, but knowing Brianna as I did I know she wouldn’t want tears of sadness for her. She was a happy person, who made those around her happy as well, even if you were having the absolute worst day of your life. All she had to do was flash that smile, squeeze my hand, or simply sit silently beside me. Her sheer presence made everything better. I mourn today for the lack of her physical presence continuing by my side. However, I realized that she’s still here. She’ll always be here,” he stated as he pointed to his heart. “In my heart, Brianna lives forever. I just hope I can live my life up to its full potential because I know that would be what she’d want. If I can strive to live up to Brianna’s expectation of me, and she was quite the optimistic so that’s asking a lot, I know that I’ve made her happy as much as she always made me happy.”

With that, he stepped away from the podium and towards Brianna’s casket that was covered in the special roses. He had one more rose for his friend, along with a note he pulled out of his suit jacket. He tucked the items into the other flowers, while leaning down to kiss the casket. It was several moments before the rest of the congregation was able to continue. Even the pastor stood stoically a few moments before advancing to the podium again himself. He could add nothing more to what the young man had already said, so he led the congregation in a final prayer. As the choir sang “In Heavenly Love Abiding” everyone began to exit the church. With the rain subsided, the family intended a small gravesite service for just family. Alex had been asked to attend with them. The ceremony was short and sweet, but equally as difficult for everyone in attendance.

Afterwards, a special reception was held at the local marina and yacht club. There were so many there, the large venue was soon overwhelmed. Looking around, Kayla lost sight of Alex. Worried about him, she asked around. Jessie had not seen her brother for over half an hour, but assumed he was

with friends. Kayla knew though – the last thing Alex wanted at the moment was to be around anyone, especially not any of his high school friends. Realizing he most likely wanted to escape this scene altogether to be alone, she went in search of him on the beach.

It didn't take her too long to find him after leaving the yacht club. He hadn't gone far, just knew exactly where to hide to not be bothered by well-meaning friends. When she walked up, just on the other side of a fishing pier he used to take Brianna to, she couldn't tell if he looked relieved or annoyed at his solitude being broken. She didn't have to wait long to find out, he flashed his typical sweet smile that invited her to stay.

Sitting beside him, Kayla waited a moment before handing him a small box she kept hidden in her oversized purse she brought along for the occasion. She had hesitated bringing the box, not knowing if he was ready for its contents. However, after hearing his eulogy and seeing the strong man he had become, she knew he was ready. "What's this?" he asked. Kayla explained that when the police searched Brianna's home they found this box with a lot of notes and photographs in it. They kept the ones related to the case, but released the personal items. Trish had given the box to her last night. She had asked that Kayla pass the items along to Alex when she thought he was ready.

Nervously, he ran his hands over the surface of the box. There was nothing special about the box. Just something a young girl would keep mementos and pictures. Being Brianna's, she had opted for the simple, less ornate memory box. No lace trimming or pictures of puppies on the exterior. Just an ivory box with her name written in her own handwriting on the side. Alex's hands shook holding the item. Kayla reassured him, "You don't have to open it now. Whenever you're ready. Brianna would've wanted you to have these."

After a moment's consideration, Alex tenderly lifted the lid of the box. Inside were numerous letters on Brianna's special stationary, along with several photographs of her and Alex over the years. Alex sorted through the pictures first. Some were as far back as kindergarten. One from the middle school Sadie Hawkins dance when she asked Alex to the dance. Even then, they made a gorgeous couple. They were both gawky pre-teens at the time,

but together they looked like a super-couple to Kayla with Brianna in a dark emerald green velvet dress and Alex looking debonair in a suit and tie.

Kayla sat silently beside Alex as he read the letters. Some professed her romantic feelings for him. Others expressed her gratitude for his friendship through the years and her dreams that their friendship would continue forever. A recent letter talked about her excitement of the upcoming prom and how she hoped he would think she was beautiful. Alex wiped fresh tears from his eyes as he continued. The letter also detailed her certainty he would get the scholarship to Duke University to compete on the collegiate swim team. “Even if we’re miles apart, know that I am there cheering you on for every swim meet, every competition.”

The last item was a photograph. Kayla remembered taking the picture. She remembered the exact moment. Brianna had insisted on being with Alex when he competed in a national swim competition last year. She had somehow convinced her parents to let her travel with them to Dallas, Texas for the event. They had driven there with Brianna and Alex singing show tunes almost the entire trip. In the picture, Alex had an oversized medal around his neck. Even though he was still wet from the pool, Brianna had her arms around his waist with the biggest smile. Alex flipped over the photograph. On the back, in Brianna’s beautiful cursive, was written the following:

“A single rose can be my garden...a single friend, my world.” – Leo Buscaglia.



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Sample Chapter from Book 3 of the Folly Beach Florist Murder Mystery Series

Orchids of Murder

Chapter 1

Admiring her sparkling sapphire and diamond ring as it glinted in the waning sunlight of a late afternoon in February, Ballantyne could help but reflect on how she came to this point in her life. She had taken the afternoon off for a much needed run on the beach. Despite being winter, it was unseasonably warm even by coastal Carolina standards. Being cooped up in the floral shop with the pungent fragrance of roses for the upcoming Valentine's Day onslaught had not seemed as inviting as the sun-drenched beach with a constant, gentle breeze. With her assistant Javier manning the store front, Kayla let the salty air and the feel of soft sand under her feet carry her away. She wasn't the type of woman to need Calgon to relax away her stress, she needed exercise and exertion. Now as she cooled down by slowing to a high-paced walk, the petite blonde took the opportunity to admire her beautiful engagement ring.

It had taken some time to adjust to "being engaged". At 45 years old, she wasn't feeling the part of the blushing bride. It had taken years after her ex-husband ran out on her and her daughter before Kayla dared to even go on one single date. Honestly, she never imagined she could trust another man enough to allow herself to fall in love. Actually, Kayla thought, she didn't see it as "falling in love". It had been more of a case of "growing in love".

Billy Randall had left the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) as a Special Agent a few short years ago in favor of the simpler life as a police detective in Folly Beach, South Carolina. Kayla giggled to herself. Simple, it had not been. For such a small, quaint seaside town, Folly Beach had seen its share of trouble the last three years. She guessed Billy had never imagined he'd be so busy. However their relationship was due in large part to a murder investigation almost three years ago. Technically, there was no

relationship until after the investigation into the death of Brandi Carroll was over since Kayla's assistant and good friend Jessie had been a suspect. It wasn't until the truth was uncovered and Kayla literally ran into Billy at a mud run that a romance had been kindled. Somehow they survived the trials and tribulations along the way, including another murder investigation where her surrogate son, Alex had been a suspect. The hardest obstacle for the couple had been Kayla herself though. Somehow the man persevered over her doubts and fears and now they were headed down the aisle at the end of summer.

Kayla's reverie was cut short by the buzzing of her phone from her jacket pocket. She had recently changed her ring tone to Maroon 5's "Sugar" so it took a moment for her to recognize the tune. She'd come a long way, as evidenced by her progression of ring tones over the last three years. When she first met Billy, it had been a heavy metal tune. Last summer it had been a peppy pseudo-country song. Now, she grinned, it was an upbeat romantic song. Not a love song ballad by any means, but certainly more light-hearted than Motley Crue's "Kickstart My Heart". Perhaps, she thought, it reflects my change in mood over time. Once a steely divorcee with her heart closed off, now she was eager to share her life with another. She shook her head of these thoughts as she answered the phone on the last ring before it went to voicemail.

A panicked Javier was on the line. He had completely forgotten a special order for a unique orchid. Actually, Javier was sloppy when it came to paperwork and often forgot to input orders correctly into the new computer system at the store so Kayla wasn't surprised or upset with the oversight. One of her fiancé's good friends ordered orchids whenever he received a decent payday from the sale of a classic car he renovated. He had been doing so for the last couple of years. Since George Phillips wasn't married, everyone knew the flowers weren't for his wife. No one was aware of a girlfriend either. However, Kayla had her suspicions who was the lucky recipient of the gorgeous and rather pricey flowers. George always insisted on picking up the arrangements himself. He never had them delivered so Kayla had not been able to verify her suspicions.

Apparently George was in the shop now and being uncharacteristically ornery about the orchids not being ready. Javier was ill equipped to deal with irate customers. Kayla's assistant was ornery enough himself. He could easily dish it out, but wasn't so well at having it dished back to him. Perhaps, he needed a course in small town southern etiquette so he could learn to deal with any situation a customer threw at him. It could certainly help business. The last time Javier dealt with an incredibly vocal unsatisfied customer, the little old lady pulled all her corporate business from Kayla's floral shop for two months. After she realized the only other floral shop in Folly Beach couldn't keep up with her bi-weekly orders of floral arrangements for her social soirees, she had come back to Kayla. Now, she made sure to have Javier in the back room whenever she expected Mrs. Bryan to pick up an order.

But this was George. Kayla had never witnessed the man acted out of sorts. He was the most happy-go-lucky guy she knew. For him to be raising a ruckus was highly unusual. Kayla quickly told Javier to put George on the phone. After calming him down, she promised to rush back to the store to fulfill the order herself.

When the bell rang announcing her entrance into her own business, she almost burst out laughing at the look of relief on Javier's face. George milled around the store looking at various designs, but cheerfully greeted Kayla as she entered the store. "Hi, George," she greeted him with a hug. Although he was dressed up today with all the telltale signs of a shower with his hair slicked back with gel and the faint fragrance of Old Spice wafting from his clothes. Typically the man smelled of grease and paint fumes from his mechanic business that specialized in renovating classic cars. George looked like he was going to the yacht club or Sunday school. Kayla guessed he was going to see a woman. Perhaps he'd tell her his big secret now, she thought.

Kayla invited George to join her in the back room while she completed his floral arrangement. Since Javier still had not found the order, she had to ask him to tell her specifically what he wanted. What he described was divine! This was no ordinary floral design. This was meant to be special. She just hoped she had what she needed to complete his order while he waited. It

would be so embarrassing if, after all this, she couldn't make his creation for him today. He was very adamant that it HAD to be today.

Over the last couple years, George had ordered just about every type of orchid readily available. There had been a few times Kayla had to special order the orchids from a wholesaler from Florida. Thankfully, George had the foresight to mention this particular orchid the last time he came into the shop. Kayla had known she'd need to order it, because this orchid was very rare. Even her usual wholesaler had to pull some strings to find this particular one. The incredibly exotic, beautiful, yet hard to find – Ghost Orchid. This particular species was found only in the deep marshes and swamps of southern Florida. Its name comes from the appearance of the flowers as they jet out of a tangled weave of roots to seemingly suspend themselves in the air. With their soft white petals and elongated lip petal, its beauty has been declared ethereal even though some have acquainted it with the appearance of the back legs of a white frog. Despite its delicate looks, the Ghost Orchid somehow managed to survive and thrive in the harsh swamp environment. It had even served as the inspiration for a book, and even a movie, entitled “The Orchid Thief” by Susan Orlean. Yes, Kayla remembered George mentioning the flower the last time he was here. Thankfully, she had taken the steps to procure the rare orchid.

Despite many attempts to get George to confess who the lovely flowers were intended for, he remained tight-lipped. The best response she received was that if the orchids did the trick, he hoped to be able to elaborate more when he placed his next order. For the first time since Kayla had known George, he seemed a bit nervous. “Yes,” she thought to herself, “these are definitely for a woman.” With her interest piqued, she quickly retrieved the orchids from the refrigerated store room and went to work on creating his masterpiece.

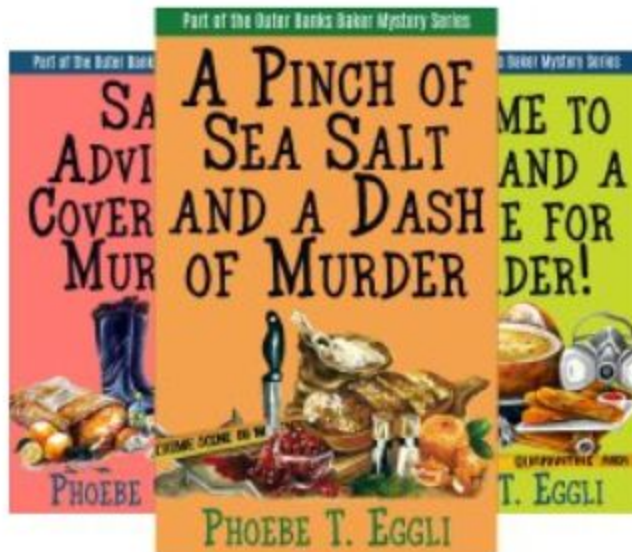
By the time she finished, George had worn a path between the counter and the back door. He really was anxious. Kayla hoped everything went his way tonight and the Ghost Orchid worked its magic on some lady's heart. Looking down at the luminous creation of white petals surrounded by baby's breath with a sprig of sweet-smelling lavender entwined around the delicate glass vase, even Kayla was amazed at how well the design turned

out. George must have some special inspiration to have dreamed this up on his own. As he smiled widely at the arrangement, he quickly shelled out a couple hundred dollar bills. Being a mechanic, he rarely had that kind of cash. The orchids were expensive to obtain, but seeing George's excitement she didn't even want to charge him for the arrangement.

Watching George leave in such a state of excitement and anticipation, Kayla wished him well. He obviously had big plans for tonight. She imagined the orchids were a prelude to something much bigger. Little did she know, she was correct, just not in the way George wanted; not in a good way at all.

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