

HEARTS, DEAD AND ALIVE



Kate McLachlan

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by

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Acknowledgments

I pilfered a lot to write this book. I pilfered broken little bits and pieces of events that happened when I taught middle school and created a mosaic with them. Dumpster diving happened. TABFAK? Mostly true. The fake strike in the drenching rain was real, though we weren't as smart as Lucy and did not think to wrap our signs in plastic wrap. To my middle school friends, co-workers, and students, I thank you.

The pilfering of Loot is based on the true story of how I acquired my own sweet Neffie, aka My Nefarious Deed. The statute of limitations has run, so I don't mind admitting it now. Neffie lived with me for thirteen love-filled years after I stole her. We kept her supplied with constant kitty and doggy companions, and she never had another lonely or unloved day. Just ask Mackie and Zoey and Linus and Hector and Bruce. To everyone who's ever stolen an abused or neglected animal and given it a better life, I thank you.

I also pilfered bits and pieces of people I've known to create mosaics of characters, but I won't go into detail about what I stole from whom. I'll let you guess. If you're wondering if you might be part of one of these characters, you probably are. I'm a little bit of each one myself, and so is my creative and artistic wife, Tonie. To Tonie, and to all my friends who have inspired me to pilfer bits of you, I thank you.

Dedication

For Neffie, "My Nefarious Deed"

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Chapter One

THE HEART WOULD have been found anyway, I suppose. The odor was too overpowering to go unnoticed for long, and the putrid smell of a rotting heart is not normal. Not even in a middle school dumpster. It was just dumb luck that I'm the one who found it.

It was a freakish set of circumstances that landed me in the dumpster that day. I had to find Becca's ring. I *had* to. If she found out I'd lost it, that would be bad. But if she found out that I'd borrowed it and worn it all day long, pretending she had given it to me, pretending we were married even, that I went around flashing my hand like a lovesick schoolgirl, if she found *that* out, I'd die. I'd just die.

Becca was my best friend.

I'd taken her to the hospital that morning at six a.m. for her outpatient rotator cuff surgery because she asked me to and that's what best friends do. Just before they wheeled her away, she had removed her necklace, earrings, and ring, and she handed them to me.

"Hold on to these for me, okay? I don't want somebody stealing them off me when I'm unconscious."

I shot a quick look of apology at the nurse and cupped my hand to take the jewelry.

"Thanks for giving me a ride, Kim," she added. "You don't need to stay, you know. Mom's coming around nine. Okay?"

"Oh, sure. Of course. I knew that." I quashed my disappointment that I wasn't the one person she'd picked, above all others, to be with her when she went under the knife, like I'd assumed. Apparently I was her morning ride, nothing more. I quickly revised my day's plans. I still had time to cancel the substitute teacher and handle my own classes.

"Well then, I have to run now or I'll be late for school. I love you, Becca."

"I love you too, Kim." Her big gray-green eyes blinked rapidly as she was wheeled away. But I knew we'd each meant something different by those words.

So I'd popped her ring on my left ring finger and worn it all day. Just pretending. It was a very pretty ring, a dark blue sapphire with two tiny diamond chips on each side, but it was a little loose on my finger. During sixth period, while I was helping my fifth graders with their salt dough topographical maps of the state of Washington, I slipped the ring off and dropped it into a little paper cup that had previously held a measure of baking soda and set it on the counter. I didn't want to lose it in some kid's Mount St. Helens. When the warning bell rang and it was time to clean up, we hustled, kids helping kids, kids helping me, me helping kids, and the counter was swept clean and wiped down. By the time the final bell rang and the kids left the room, I dropped into my chair, exhausted, and completely forgot about the ring.

It wasn't until I was heading for my car an hour later, anticipating a visit with Becca, who was already dozing at home, that I glanced down at my hand and remembered the ring. I rushed back to my classroom, saw the empty counter, ran to the garbage can and found it empty as well. I darted through the halls looking for Marcus, the high school student who empties the trash. By the time I found him, he'd already thrown the classroom trash into the dumpster out back and was mopping the cafeteria.

That's why I was in the dumpster at five p.m., ripping open black plastic bag after black plastic bag, frantically searching for Becca's ring and ignoring the pulsating odor of rotting heart.

I was familiar with the odor. When I was in the eighth grade, our science teacher had an inside connection with the local stockyard. Mr. Welch was a pretty decent teacher. Whenever a student asked a question that stumped him, which happened a lot, he freely admitted that he didn't know the answer. He liked to give us hands-on experiences, so what better way to teach us about the inner workings of the mammalian heart than to have us dissect one?

One Friday afternoon, right after butchering was finished at the stockyard, a filthy diesel truck backed up to the door of our classroom and Mr. Welch and his stockyard buddy unloaded four plastic garbage cans filled with fresh, bloody cow hearts. They rolled the cans to the back of the classroom and set them up in a tidy row, where they waited patiently for our next science lesson.

Did I mention this was late on a Friday? The Friday before the long Memorial Day weekend, to be exact. It was hot that weekend. Record breaking temperatures. And our classroom wasn't air conditioned. The hearts simmered in those plastic cans in the back of our empty, steamy classroom all weekend. By the time we got to school on Tuesday morning, the entire building reeked, and the stench was traced directly to the back of our classroom. To those plastic garbage bins. And to dozens of oozing, rotting cow hearts.

Mr. Welch made us dissect them anyway, of course. The hearts were free and the science budget couldn't afford waste. But we got to do it outside on the blacktop, so it was worth it. In fact, we had all our classes outdoors for the rest of the week. The school smelled wretched.

Once you've smelled that pungent, sweetly putrid odor of rotting heart, you don't forget it. So when I encountered it again in the dumpster, I recognized it immediately.

It was mid-October, and unseasonably warm for Eastern Washington. Indian summer, we called it when we were kids. The temperature had reached the upper seventies that day, though it would drop to the forties by evening. The sun had nearly set and the air had already cooled significantly by the time I climbed into the dumpster, but the steel walls had collected heat all day and radiated it still, so inside the dumpster it was nice and toasty. A light from the parking lot shone down on the interior, casting a bright light in one corner while the rest remained in shadow.

The heart was in a white plastic bag, not black like all the others, but I was being thorough, so I ripped the bag open just to be sure the ring wasn't there. The stench struck me like a blow. I reared my head back and threw the bag from me, shaking my hands hard and quick as if there were spiders clinging to my fingertips, but I could not dislodge the feel of what they had touched. It was unmistakably a human heart, and the maggots crawling over it made it look as if it still pulsed with life. I knew it was not, could not, be alive, but I turned and clawed my way up the side of the dumpster anyway to try to escape it.

But as I balanced at the top of the dumpster wall, I hesitated. It wasn't alive. Of course it wasn't. My head knew it, even though the heebie jeebies crawling up my spine were not so sure. It was a heart, certainly, but was I sure it was human? I'd never seen an actual *human* heart, only cow. I've seen human hearts in books, of course, and on the medical channel, but it's different when you find one in a white plastic bag in the dumpster behind your school. It is, believe me. It didn't look like the cow heart I had dissected in eighth grade, but that was twenty years ago, and I wasn't very good at science even then. Did I really remember what a cow heart looked like?

Very likely what I'd seen in the bag was nothing more than some modern eighth grade student's failed science experiment. It was a cow heart, or pig, or horse or something. No reason to think it was human.

And I still needed to find Becca's ring. Slowly, I let myself slide back down into the reeking dumpster. I avoided the corner where I'd tossed the white bag as I continued to search for the ring. I breathed heavily through my mouth and pretended I was doing something any reasonable person would do.

I found a retainer in one bag and carefully placed it on the lip of the dumpster, in case a tearful child came looking for it. But I could not find the bag of trash from my classroom, a bag that should have been easily identifiable by the multi-colored salt dough inside it.

Finally, I turned to the corner of the dumpster where I had thrown the heart. I had not yet searched the bags beneath it, and there was now nowhere else to look. Gingerly, I lifted a corner of the bag between my finger and thumb and slid it off to the side, cringing at the unmistakable, now that I knew, heart-heft of it. I grabbed the plastic bag beneath and tore into it.

Pastel pinks and greens and yellows and blues greeted me. Colored salt dough! I rummaged through the messy muck and finally, there it was, the tiny paper cup. I un-crumpled it, tipped it

over, and Becca's pretty ring dropped into my hand. I heaved a huge sigh of relief and slid it into my pocket. I would not tempt fate by wearing it again.

I clambered out of the dumpster and slipped back into the school building to wash up. I could do nothing about the odor of rotting heart that wafted with me, but I could at least wash my hands of sticky crud. I made my way home, hopped in a scalding shower, and drove to Becca's apartment, where she lay wan but smiling on the couch. There was a pouch full of pain medication attached directly to her shoulder. She accepted her jewelry and slipped the ring onto her finger. I didn't bat an eye when she asked me if I'd worn it.

"Of course not." I said. "I wouldn't do that."

She shrugged with her un-operated shoulder. "I would have, if I were you," she said, and a tiny little part of me wanted to slug her.

Becca and I met online at a local lesbian blog that I skim now and then, just to keep my eye on who's out there, and whether there were any new faces, even though I never dated much. I had a semi-serious girlfriend in college and we'd intended to remain friends forever, but we lost touch. Last I heard she had moved back East to work as an engineer. I became an elementary school teacher and slinked back into the closet for the next ten years.

I was only seasonally closeted, though. In the summertime, when school was out, so was I.

It was summertime when I met Becca. She was just coming out, after a five-year marriage to a man, and I thought I was the luckiest lesbian in town to be the first to find her. She was a luscious armful, little and curvy and sexy, with glossy red curls, a smattering of freckles, dimples in her cheeks, and of course those gorgeous gray-green eyes. She wore teenage clothes that looked great on her, even though she's a year older than I am. She has a splashy tattoo on her lower back, her belly button is pierced and, I kid you not, so are her nipples. She showed me. I thought I would die.

After she came out, Becca slept with nearly every lesbian she met except me. She liked me too much to sleep with me, she said. She's dated more women than I have, made love to more women, and she hasn't even been out three years. She's fallen in love with two women, broke her heart both times, and I was there to help her pick up the pieces. She wonders why I don't date more.

"Why would I want to wear your ring?" I asked, somewhat scathingly.

She looked puzzled. "It's pretty," she said. "And it matches your eyes."

I flushed. I wanted to take back what I had said, confess that I had worn the ring, just as any normal girl with sapphire blue eyes would do. But it was too late. I was stuck with my lie.

The door to the apartment opened and Becca's mom came in with four re-usable cloth grocery bags threaded through her fingers. I was shooed away so Becca could sleep. I went home and

crawled in bed and dreamed about plastic buckets filled with rotting, maggoty, human hearts that all had laughing faces with sapphire blue eyes.

Chapter Two

I CARPOOLED THE next day with Annie, our middle school counselor. Annie is my other best friend. She's straight. We've been friends and carpoolers for years, but she only learned this fall that I'm a lesbian, the same time everyone else did. I was worried at first that it would damage our friendship, but the opposite happened. It was as if a wall had come down, a wall I hadn't realized was between us in the first place.

"I always knew there was something," she said when she found out. "You held so much of yourself back, and I never knew why. But now it all makes sense." She had clapped her hands and bounced, as if she'd just given the correct answer to a Jeopardy question.

She's delighted that I've been outed. That makes one of us.

She was ready and waiting and hopped right in when I pulled in front of her house.

"How's the dog?" I asked.

"The same." She paused a moment to buckle her seatbelt. "I'm fine, myself. Thanks for asking."

"Oh, sorry." I pulled a U-turn and headed back toward the highway. "What I *meant* was, how are you and Ken and the house *and* the dog?"

"We're all fine," she said, then repeated, "the dog's the same."

I sighed. I was going to have to do something about that dog.

"How was Becca's surgery? I was surprised to see you at school yesterday. I thought you were going to stay with her all day."

"Yeah, well, turned out I didn't have to. Her mom stepped up."

Annie gave me a look. She wasn't fooled. She'd heard a lot about Becca during the past two years' worth of carpooling. She never approved of the way Becca treated me, thought I let her use me too much, but when she found out I was a lesbian, everything tumbled into place for her. "Oh, I get it. You're in love with her. Shame on her for taking advantage of your feelings like that."

"Becca doesn't know," I'd protested, horrified. But Annie just decided she liked Becca less than ever, even though they'd never met.

"She just needed a ride?" Annie asked now, knowingly, and I didn't answer.

I changed the subject. "What are we going to do about the dog?"

"*We* aren't going to do anything," Annie said. "What are *you* going to do?"

"Why is it just my problem? Don't you even care?"

"You know I can't do anything about it. I'm right next door. I have to live next to them."

Annie's next-door neighbor was one of our school board members, Donald Stern. He and his wife were robbed a few months ago, and they'd been skittish ever since. They installed an alarm system and, in a thoughtful gesture, their grown son had bought them a guard dog. Except the guard dog was really just a black lab puppy who was expected to grow up to become their protector. The problem is they never wanted a dog in the first place and had no desire to live with and train an excitable three-month old lab. They never bothered to tell their son that. They accepted the puppy, waited until the son returned to Seattle, and then put her out into the back yard, tied to a stake next to an igloo dog house. They gave her food and they gave her water, but they didn't give her any love or attention.

We had tried to help. I'd called the county animal shelter, but they said as long as she has food, water, shelter, a six foot chain, and wasn't being abused, there was nothing they could do. Withholding love from a puppy is abusive, if you ask me, but apparently the law disagrees. We had asked Stern and his wife if we could take the puppy for walks now and then, or bring her into Annie's back yard to play. Unfortunately, they took our concern as a suggestion that they were somehow sub-par pet owners and became defensive.

"Oh, she just had a walk," Stern said once, when we knew for a fact that the dog had been tied to that stake all day long. Another time his wife said that the puppy sleeps with them every night, but Annie can see the dog house from her bathroom window. When she gets up to pee in the middle of the night, she checks. The puppy is always lying there, next to that stake.

Two months had passed since they put that baby out in their back yard. I sneaked over now and then to give her some pats and let her lick my face. She'd get so excited she'd pee all over my shoes. But she was growing up tied to a stake, and she was losing her spirit. I could see it in her eyes. We knew what we had to do. We had to rescue that dog.

But Annie was right, she lived next door. We couldn't let them suspect her of having anything to do with the rescue.

"All you have to do," I told Annie, "is watch for a time when they're both gone. Then sneak over and unhook her and put her in your garage. Then call me and I'll come over and pick her up."

"I can't do that," Annie protested. "Ken would find out."

"So?"

"So, it's stealing, Kim. He's a *minister*."

"So?" I asked again. "C'mon, Annie, there's right and there's wrong, and leaving that puppy out back to grow up without love or exercise or play is just plain *wrong*. And rescuing her from it is right. You don't need a Bible to tell you that."

"Ken's a very traditional minister."

I did know that and was puzzled, as always, by their relationship. Annie's acceptance of her husband's conservative Christian beliefs was always somewhat fluid. She attended church with him every Sunday, sat right in the first row, and beamed with pride whenever he gave a particularly good sermon. She never argued with him about religion or discounted what he preached, but at the same time she believes in reincarnation, has a secret deck of tarot cards, has her fortune told three or four times a year, and frequently tells me, when I'm being particularly flighty, "Kim, you are *such* a Gemini."

"Even a traditional minister," I said, "can't think it's wrong to rescue a neglected puppy."

Annie sighed. "They're members of his church. What if they ask him about it? He won't lie."

I was prepared to argue further, but we had reached the school and I started to pull into the middle school parking lot. A police car with flashing blue and red lights blocked our way.

"What's going on?" Annie asked.

My heart thumped, and I didn't answer.

A police officer walked over to the car, and I put the window down. He leaned in. "You teachers?"

We nodded. "You'll need to park at the high school and walk over. The middle school lot's been blocked off."

It was only natural, I suppose, to ask why, but I was afraid I already knew. I just nodded and began running the window up again, and it was Annie who leaned across me and spoke through the narrowing window gap. "What happened?"

I took my finger off the window button and let the officer speak through the two-inch opening that remained. "Crime scene. No details being released yet."

I ran the window the rest of the way up, backed out, and headed toward the high school parking lot.

The chill that ran up my spine and into my veins made me feel sluggish and slow. I hardly heard Annie's speculative questions about what may have happened. I parked and we walked the well-worn path between the high school and the middle school. We could see the activity in the middle school parking lot. The entire lot was wrapped with yellow crime-scene tape, just like on TV. There were more police cars and several officers, in uniform and out, milling about, and most of the activity was centered on the dumpster in the corner. A ladder was propped against the side. One officer stood on a rung and, in a gloved hand, carefully took a black plastic bag from another gloved officer who stood inside the dumpster. The bag had been ripped open, and the officers handled it carefully so that the contents didn't spill out.

So it must have been a human heart after all.

When we reached the middle school, a small cluster of excited teachers greeted us.

"Annie, Kim, did you hear?" Tami asked. "You'll never guess."

"There's a body in the dumpster!" Blaire shouted. Blaire teaches PE and shouting is her normal tone of voice.

"Not a whole body," Eva corrected. Eva is the other fifth grade teacher, but she started her career teaching kindergarten, and she still speaks with a soft, gentle voice, nearly a whisper, that made her words sound especially gruesome. "Only parts."

"Criminy," Annie said.

I looked around nervously. "Is it--human?"

They looked at me like I was crazy. "Of course it's human!" Blaire blared. "Why would the police be here if it wasn't human?"

"How--? When--?" I wasn't sure how to ask what it was I wanted to know.

"Kellian Nance came this morning with his parents, looking for his retainer," Tami said. "They're the ones who reported it."

"The retainer was on the edge of the dumpster," Eva said, her feathery voice taking on a sinister aspect, "as if placed there by the killer."

"K-killer?" I squeaked.

"Well, yeah," Tami said reasonably. "Who else could have done it?"

"Bodies don't dismember themselves," Blaire boomed.

"He'll probably never get the retainer back now," Tami said. "It's evidence."

"Evidence of --?"

"Murder, of course," Eva whispered sweetly.

"Today's going to be a nightmare," Annie said. "I need to go round up some extra counselors." She abandoned us and headed down the hall toward her office.

Tami wandered toward the double doors where she could peek out at the parking lot. "The CSIs are all over that dumpster."

"CSIs?" I asked.

"Yeah. Don't you ever watch TV? Crime scene investigators. You know, fingerprints, clothing fibers, hair, things like that."

"The retainer suggests that the killer didn't just toss the body parts into the dumpster," Eva explained. "He must have actually been inside it."

"Or she," Blaire added.

"Of course," I said faintly. I backed slowly away from the group. They barely noticed my absence, as another teacher walked in at that moment and they pounced on him with their news.

Chapter Three

I WALKED TO my classroom in a daze, shut the door behind me, and leaned against it. Fingerprints, fibers, and hair. Oh my. Mine were all over that dumpster. Even, I recalled, on the bag that contained the heart.

My fingerprints are on file, of course. All teachers are fingerprinted these days. Even parent volunteers have to give up their fingerprints before they're allowed into a classroom to assist. I remember joking with the other student teachers, as we stood in line to get our fingers inked, that we'd never get away with murder now. It was only a matter of time before they matched my fingerprints with those in the dumpster.

Maybe I ought to talk to a lawyer.

I only knew one lawyer. Well, sort of. I didn't exactly *know* her, but I had spoken with her, and it was possible she would even remember me, since it was only a couple of days before. She was

the lawyer who represented our teachers union, and she spoke to us at our last union meeting. It was mid-October, and we were still working without a contract for the school year.

The Basalt Falls School Board and its superintendent had been on a slash and burn campaign the last couple of years. They'd eliminated extracurricular activities, increased class sizes, cut the book budget, slashed about everything except teachers' salaries, which they would slash if they could, but they're set by the legislature. But by increasing class sizes and cutting extracurricular activities, they'd made it so they didn't need as many teachers, so they had, in effect, cut what they paid in teachers' salaries after all. Meanwhile, the superintendent and the entire school board, including Annie's puppy-hating neighbor, went to a week-long conference in Las Vegas in August. We'd cast a vote of no-confidence against the superintendent the month before, and now there was talk of a strike.

I have to confess, striking sounded kind of fun to me. Marching in protest, chanting for change, I'd have to force myself not to wear flowers in my hair and hippie beads. I was born too late. I wasn't really worried about losing my job or losing pay, because I couldn't envision it lasting more than a day or two, if our union got up the nerve to strike at all, which I doubted. Too many of our teachers worried about the negative effect on the students if they missed one or two days of school. Ha! It would probably become one of their favorite school memories, and they'd learn a lot too. What they missed in two days of science or math or history would be more than made up for by what they learned about labor unions and the value of good schools. Maybe one of the little darlings would grow up to become a superintendent of a school district of her own someday, and she'd remember to spend money on students, not trips to Vegas.

So on Monday evening, the day before Becca's shoulder surgery, we'd had a union meeting to review the effect our vote of no confidence had had (none) and to discuss our options. The union's lawyer, Lucy Deveroux, came to speak to us. Annie and I went together and sat in the back and listened while the lawyer spoke about the laws governing teacher strikes in Washington.

Lucy Deveroux looked more like a teacher than a lawyer. She was of medium height and weight, and had short hair cut in an expensive windswept style, decorated with gold and silver highlights that glinted in the fluorescent lights of the community center. She wore loose brown corduroy pants and a vibrant, multicolored sweater that looked incredibly soft even from the back of the room. She had a wide generous mouth with a slight overbite that I found oddly alluring, calling forth my childhood crush on Meredith Baxter.

When she spoke, though, peering out at us over little half glasses, it was clear she was a lawyer. I didn't understand half of what she said, but the union representatives nodded and took notes and looked wise. We finally voted to conduct a one-day walkout. So that no child would be left behind for even one day, it was decided that the walkout would occur on the next scheduled curriculum day, a day when no children attended school anyway. Of course, that meant that the strike would have little effect on anyone except the teachers, who would lose a day of pay and end up having to make up a day of curriculum development on their own time. It was a *symbolic* walkout, it was explained, designed to grab the attention of the community to our plight, so that perhaps they would vote for a new superintendent next election. We would spend the day

walking around the school, carrying signs that said, "Kids first!" and "Support schools!" and, for the daring ones, an edgy "Don't roll the dice with education!" It was a wimpy excuse for a strike, but it was as close as I was likely to get to one, so I voted for it.

After the vote, Lucy Deveroux opened the floor for more general, non-strike related, questions. Most of the teachers filed out to the parking lot, where they stood around rehashing the whole symbolic walkout argument, while a half-dozen of the union reps settled into the folding chairs in the front row and began peppering Lucy with questions about grievances and arbitration and things no one but the union reps understood or cared about. Normally I would have filed out along with the rest of the teachers and let the blowhards have the floor, but I did have a particular question, and something I sensed in Lucy Deveroux's demeanor made me feel brave enough to ask it.

I told Annie I'd be along in a minute and walked up to the end of the front row, reluctant to move closer to the union reps since I wasn't one, and I was kind of mad at them anyway. I watched as Lucy patiently answered their questions, which all sounded the same to me, and pretty soon I realized that her answers were pretty much the same every time too, and were nearly always prefaced with a cautionary, "Without more information, I really can't say." Or, "I would need more facts to give you a real answer."

I began to sense that she might not be feeling quite as patient as she sounded. In any case, when she finally looked over and saw me standing there, apart from the reps and clearly not one of them, I thought I saw a fleeting expression of relief cross her face.

"Do you have a question?"

"I do." I glanced uneasily at the union reps. They eyed me with some disgruntlement. They knew what my question was going to be, since I'd already brought it up to them two weeks before. My own rep, Stan, eyed me a bit sorrowfully, as if I were letting down the team by speaking directly to the lawyer about my issue. But I'd given them a chance to help me, and they'd let me down.

"I was wondering if, you know, since it's illegal now in Washington to discriminate against gays and lesbians--" I paused, trying to gauge her reaction. She nodded encouragingly. She had soft brown eyes, but nothing in them gave an indication whether my hunch about her was right. "Is it okay for them to take kids out of somebody's class if the parents find out the teacher is gay, or something? Like, if parents don't want their kids taught by a lesbian?"

I don't know why I was trying to couch the question so speculatively. Everyone except Lucy knew I was talking about myself, and even she must have suspected it. She took off her little half glasses to look at me more closely, her expression suddenly intent.

"Is that happening?"

"Well, yeah." I glanced again at the reps, who now looked at Lucy somewhat uneasily. "It's happened already."

Her expression grew thoughtful. "That's interesting. I'd like to talk to you a little bit more about that. What's your name?"

"Kimberly Wayland," I said, somewhat reluctantly. I didn't really want to talk 'a little bit more' about it. I just wanted an answer to my question.

"Would you mind waiting just a bit, Kimberly? We're nearly finished here." She gestured with her glasses toward the row of union reps. "Then we can talk about it."

A couple of the reps took the hint, rose, and reached out to shake her hand. But after they left, three of the more determined reps remained and they continued with questions. I knew these guys. As long as she continued to listen, they would go on all night. I glanced at the clock. It had been a long day, Annie was waiting, and I had to get up early in the morning to take Becca to the hospital. While Lucy's attention was captured by another repetitive arbitration question, I slipped out. I hadn't gotten my answer, but it looked like I wasn't going to get the simple yes or no I'd been looking for anyway.

I could call her now, I thought, as I pushed myself away from my classroom door. I could tell her I'm ready to discuss my 'interesting question' now, and then I could slip my *what should I do if I'm a suspect in a murder investigation* question in sideways. Maybe she wouldn't even notice. Besides, she was the union's lawyer. Didn't that mean, in a roundabout way, she was my lawyer too? Anyway, I didn't know who else to call.

I dropped into the chair behind my desk, quickly looked up her number, and glanced at the clock. It was eight twenty. Fifteen minutes before the earliest students were due to show up. Without giving myself a chance to change my mind, I punched in the numbers. She probably wasn't in yet anyway. But she picked up on the second ring.

"Lucy Deveroux."

"Oh, hi. Um, this is Kimberly Wayland. I'm a teacher at Basalt Falls Middle--"

"I know who you are, Kimberly Wayland. You skipped out on me the other night."

"Oh." I was surprised she remembered me so quickly. "Yeah, that was me."

"I know."

"Yeah. So, um.--" I trailed off, uncertain how to begin, but she took care of that.

"I'm glad you called, Kimberly. I really would like to talk to you about that situation at your school. You know, you're not the only teacher this has happened to. At least, I'm assuming you were talking about yourself?"

I was momentarily confused. I wasn't the only teacher likely to be suspected of murder? Then I recalled my ostensible reason for calling. Lucy didn't know about the heart in the dumpster yet.

"Yes," I said, "I was talking about myself. They've, um, they've pulled some kids out of my class, because they found out I'm a lesbian." It still felt strange to say it so openly, but there was no point in hiding it any longer. "Can they do that?"

"I'd like to just tell you no, but the question's not that simple. The anti-discrimination laws regarding sexual orientation are still fairly new in this state, and the question about students is a very sensitive one. So far, no one has challenged it in court."

I thought about that. "So you don't know?"

She gave a little laugh. "Nobody knows, really. What I'd like to do is gather some information, put your facts together, and pull in some facts from similar situations at other schools, and see if we can't challenge it."

Before I could figure out what she was asking, the intercom blared into my classroom and made me jump.

"Teachers and staff, there will be an emergency meeting in the library in one minute. All teachers and staff must report immediately to the library."

I shouldn't have been surprised. Of course there would be a meeting before the kids got there to discuss how to handle their questions about the investigation in their parking lot.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Deveroux. I'm going to have to go."

"Yeah, I heard." There was a smile in her voice. "Just give me ten more seconds. I can't talk to you about this discrimination issue on school time. Can you meet me after school? We can grab a bite and talk about it."

I thought quickly. How long would it take the police to match my fingerprints with the ones in the dumpster? Probably longer than a school day. I still had time to meet with Lucy after school and give her my *Oh by the way, I may be a murder suspect* question. "Yeah, sure," I said.

"Okay, great. Meet me at Anthony's at six o'clock. Better get to your meeting now." She hung up.

My heart raced as I scurried down the hall to the library and scooted in the door just as Principal James started the meeting. I glanced around for Annie, but didn't see her. She was probably still trying to scrounge up extra counselors for the day's certain tribulation. I was dying to discuss my conversation with Lucy. Anthony's was a pretty fancy restaurant.

Did I have a date?

Chapter Four

"YOU HAD SOME excitement out your way, I hear?" Lucy Deveroux said as we waited to be seated at Anthony's.

"You heard?"

"Something about a body part found in a dumpster?"

"How did you hear? Was it on the news?"

"I haven't seen the news. One of the reps called me. They like to keep me informed about what happens at the school, since I'm the union's lawyer. Did you hear what type of body part was found?"

"They haven't said."

Now would be a good time to tell her that the body part was a heart, that I knew because I'd found it first, that my fingerprints were all over it, and ask for her legal advice, but I chickened out. She was a total stranger, I remembered as I stood next to her in the restaurant foyer. I wore flats and she wore two inch heels that brought us to about the same height. At five foot eight, I generally felt like a giant when I stood next to Becca. My last girlfriend, Dale, was six feet tall and weighed more than two hundred pounds. I'd felt tiny next to her. I liked feeling somewhat on par with Lucy, but the uniqueness of the feeling reminded me she was a stranger. Maybe I'd tell her during dessert when I knew her a little better.

"Walk this way, please," the host said, and led us to a table. Lucy let me go first, and I forced myself not to imitate his walk, like I always did with Becca when a waiter used that line with us.

He pulled out our chairs, poured ice water in the glasses, and left to get the wine list.

"Well, I hope they resolve it soon," Lucy said, scooting herself closer to the table. "That can't be comfortable, having something so gruesome found near your school."

"Um. No."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Lucy said. "I shouldn't have brought it up at dinner. Especially since you've probably had to deal with it all day. Let's change the subject. That's not what I wanted to talk to you about, anyway. Tell me about your situation at school. Have you always been out there?"

"Oh, gosh, no. I kept it secret from them for ten years. I was outed last month. An ex-girlfriend wrote a letter to my principal."

"Oh, my God. How juvenile."

"Yeah. And wacko. She was kind of stalking me."

"Stalking you?"

"Yeah. Oh, not any more," I assured her when I saw her glance quickly around. "I think she's done."

"You *think*?"

"Well, I haven't heard anything from her for weeks, not since she wrote that letter to Ms. James."

The waiter came with the wine list and entered into a brief discussion with Lucy. I watched her as she talked. She was a bit older than I was, probably around forty. She had lines around her eyes, and I watched her thick dark lashes sweep up and down as she glanced from the wine list to the waiter and back again. She must have thought I was listening to the conversation, because she suddenly turned to me and said, "Is that all right with you, Kimberly?"

"Oh, sure. Sounds great."

She handed the wine list back to the waiter and picked up our conversation where it had left off.

"And Ms. James is your principal?"

"Yes. Bonnie James. She's a pretty good principal. She didn't do anything when she got the letter, except show it to me. She was surprised to find out about me being a lesbian, but she didn't care, really. She just wanted me to handle Dale, so she wouldn't bother the school about it."

"Dale?"

I nodded. "The stalker."

The waiter returned with the bottle of wine, opened it, and poured us each a glass. As we waited, I gazed out at the view of the Spokane Falls. Anthony's is a seafood restaurant on the edge of the Spokane River, built so that nearly every table has a view of the waterfalls that tumble through the center of town. I'd only been to Anthony's once before, to share with Becca a serving of their famous melting chocolate cake, with chocolate sauce baked right inside, and ice cream drizzled with raspberry sauce on the side. I'd never been able to afford dinner there.

I glanced at Lucy, who sipped the wine and nodded approval again to the waiter. She must have come straight from the office. She wore a beige mock-turtle rayon shirt with plain brown slacks, but her jacket rescued the outfit from being bland. It was a soft, dark brown wool, shot through with threads of red and orange and gold. I had an urge to reach out and stroke the material, but I refrained. Maybe after the wine.

So far the conversation could have been a prelude to either business or pleasure. The ambience was very date-like, but the conversation was already directed at the issue we'd met to discuss. It could have been a date, a business meeting, or some sort of hybrid. Most of all, after glancing at

the prices in the menu, I wondered if Lucy intended to pay. I had enough money in my checking account to cover most of the items on the menu, but if I did so, how would I buy gas and kitty litter for the rest of the month?

I lifted my glass to take a sip of wine, and Lucy reached out with her own and tapped the edge gently against mine, making it *ping*. I looked up and met her dark, velvety brown eyes that smiled at me over the rim of her glass. A smile that was very date-like.

"What exactly did the letter say?" Lucy asked, business-like again, and I repressed a sigh of frustration.

"I don't remember the exact words. She said I was a liar and a fraud. And I'm *not*."

Lucy smiled.

"I never told people at school I *wasn't* a lesbian, I just never said I was. That's not lying."

"Of course not."

"It was a short letter. The only other thing it said was something like, 'You have a right to know Kim Wayland is a lesbian and sleeps with women all summer long.' And there was something like, 'If you don't do something about it, I will.' And it was signed 'A concerned citizen.'"

"How do you know it was from Dale?"

"Because she told me she was going to do it," I said. Seeing Lucy's frown, I continued. "I think I'd better tell you the whole story."

"Please. And is it Kim, or Kimberly?"

That was a good question. If this was a business dinner, I would remain Kimberly. But if this was a date, I would be Kim. I took a guess. "Kim."

Lucy's mouth quirked. What did that mean?

"Are you ready to order?" The waiter suddenly appeared beside the table.

"Yes," I said eagerly. "I'd like the shrimp scampi, with asparagus please."

"Scallops, with rice, and a salad with honey mustard," Lucy said, and handed both our menus to the waiter, who dipped his head and walked away. "You seem pretty excited about your dinner."

"Are you kidding? It's shrimp scampi." I said. "I *never* get shrimp scampi. And where do they get fresh asparagus this time of year?"

Lucy laughed. "I hope you live alone."

I stared at her. Where had that come from? "Why?"

Lucy laughed again. Her mouth was large, and she used it fully when she laughed, a happy laugh that embraced me and made me laugh too, even though I didn't know the joke. "The garlic, Kim. I'm just thinking of the garlic."

"Oh."

"But since it came up, do you live alone?"

A date-like question if there ever was one. "I have a cat. Pepper."

Lucy nodded once. "Okay, back to the letter." Returning to business. She was making my head spin.

I nodded, took a deep breath, and picked up my fork to draw lines in the tablecloth so I'd have something to look at while I told my story. I wasn't exactly proud of the way I'd handled Dale. "Dale's letter, the part that said I date women in the summer, that part was pretty much right. I'm sort of out in the summer, but I don't date during the school year, or at least I haven't before." I frowned, hoping I hadn't just suggested that I thought *this* was a date. "But in the summer, I sort of let my hair down."

A thought occurred to me. "What I tell you here, is this confidential? It's kind of private."

"It's a privileged conversation," Lucy said. "I can't tell anyone what you tell me here, not unless you tell first."

Reassured, I continued. "Well, in the summer, I hang out a lot at the lake. I go to the far side of town, away from Basalt Falls, where I know I won't run into students or staff. There's a gay bar there where I hang out. Every summer, just about, I, well, I get into a relationship with a woman. Kind of a--a summer fling. But I always make sure the women I date know that it's only for the summer. Once school starts, I'm outta there."

Lucy raised her eyebrows. "That's pretty harsh."

"I'm just making sure they know the rules up front." I felt a bit defensive. "I don't lead anyone on or anything. I tell them flat out, before we even, you know, start seeing each other. If they can't handle it, they don't have to play."

"What if they fall in love with you?" Lucy tilted her head to the side as if genuinely curious.

It had happened more than once. I've made compelling arguments to convince myself that it wasn't my fault, but I felt guilty about it all the same. I shrugged. "That's not my fault."

"And what if you fall in love?"

That question cut far too close to Becca, and I wasn't about to share *that* story. "Then I deal with it."

I sat up straight and pointed my fork at Lucy. "But the thing is," I said, "my instincts told me not to let Basalt Falls find out I was a lesbian, and it turns out my instincts were right. Because," I emphasized with a shake of the fork, "look what happened when they did."

Lucy stared at the fork for a long moment, then slowly turned her gaze pointedly back to me. I laid the fork gently on the table. "Sorry."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Lucy said. "Tell me about Dale."

"Dale and I dated last summer," I said, "and we had a lot of fun together. Neither one of us was working. She used to be a police officer, but she was on disability leave. There wasn't anything wrong with her that I could see, but there must have been something. We spent a lot of time together. And she--well, she's one of those women you just mentioned. I guess she fell in love with me."

Lucy nodded, as if she'd anticipated that part of the story.

"I'd told her over and over. She *knew* it had to end in September. But when the time came, she just refused to believe it. She kept calling and coming by. I eventually stopped answering her calls, and she started calling from strange numbers so I'd answer. Finally I stopped answering any calls at all, but she'd still leave messages. And I'd catch her following me sometimes. Once she followed me all the way to school. I was terrified she was going to confront me right there, but she didn't. She just drove away."

Lucy was listening to me with a tiny frown between her eyebrows. "Did it ever occur to you that Dale's disability might have been mental, not physical?"

"I didn't think about that this summer. She seemed so normal and happy. I have wondered since though. She's just not rational." I lifted the fork again, encountered a look, and quickly dropped it. "I told her that I couldn't be out while I'm teaching, that it would hurt my career. And she said I didn't need a career, that she'd take care of me. As if! She barely has enough money to take care of herself, and I like my career. When I told her the people of Basalt Falls aren't ready for a lesbian teacher, she said she'd take care of that too. And I don't think she meant it in a nice way. One of the last messages she left me said that if I wouldn't come out to Basalt Falls, she'd do it for me. That's when Ms. James got the letter."

"Have you heard from Dale since then?"

"Yes, I called her."

"You called *her*?"

"I had to. When the letter came, Ms. James called me down to her office and showed it to me. I knew right away it was from Dale. Ms. James asked me if it was true, and I said yes. Well, except for the part about being a liar and a fraud."

"Of course."

The waiter stopped at our table with a basket of hot bread, and two little pots of creamed butter, one with garlic and one without. What the heck, I was having garlic anyway, and Pepper loves garlic breath. In fact, she'd probably sleep tonight with her little nose as close to my mouth as she could get without climbing in. I dug into the garlic butter, slathered it on hot sourdough, and took a bite. Heaven. I assuaged the worst of my hunger with bread, then continued my story.

Chapter Five

"MS. JAMES SAID she didn't care that I was a lesbian, because I'm a good teacher, and besides, it's illegal now to discriminate against people because of their sexual orientation. Right?"

Lucy nodded and swallowed her own bite. "Right."

"But Ms. James thought it would be best to keep it quiet, and I agreed. So she asked me to take care of it. I called Dale and I basically told her that she'd done all the damage she could do, she'd outed me to the principal, and I still wasn't going to date her, I would *never* date her, there was nothing more she could do to me, so just leave me alone. And I haven't heard from her since."

"How long ago was that?"

I thought back. "It was just a couple of weeks after school started. Ryan wasn't pulled out of my class until the nineteenth, and the letter came before that. So it's been about three weeks."

"Ryan's your student?"

"He was. Until his parents found out I was a lesbian."

"How did they find out? I thought Ms. James wanted it kept quiet."

"I didn't tell, and I don't think she did either. But word got out anyway. Maybe the secretary who opened the letter? I don't know. But all of a sudden there were rumors, and then one day Ryan's parents came to my classroom and took him right out of class."

I kept my eyes on my plate as I spoke, unwilling to let Lucy see how the incident still hurt. A man's home might be his castle, but a teacher's classroom is sacrosanct. No one crosses the threshold of an elementary school classroom without warning and clearance and permission, which is not easily granted. Parents can't even pick up a child for a simple dentist appointment without checking in at the office first and having their credentials checked. So when Candy and Calvin Bunch burst into my classroom unannounced and ordered Ryan to come with them, it was shocking.

I had recognized Candy right away. She'd been the single parent of the three Richardson boys when her oldest son, Ricky, had been in my class a few years before, and we'd met several times throughout the year at parent-teacher conferences. I liked her. But instead of the cheerful smile I was used to seeing from her, this time she'd averted her face and wouldn't look at me. I could tell she'd been crying. She'd remarried since I'd taught Ricky, but this was the first time I'd seen the new husband. He was a big man, tall and broad shouldered, but with a diffident manner that didn't match his commanding size. When I introduced myself and held out my hand, he wouldn't meet my eyes, and he put his hands behind his back as if he were no older than Ryan. His cheeks flushed pink. His mortification at being addressed by a lesbian made me feel ashamed.

"They went to the school board and demanded that I be fired." I risked a glance at Lucy. Her brown eyes were soft with sympathy. "The school board wouldn't do it, thank goodness. But they didn't even try to talk them out of pulling Ryan from my class. And here's what really irks me." I pointed with my bread. Lucy blinked, and I quickly set the bread down. If I was going to be having meals with Lucy, I could see I would have to learn a whole new set of table manners. "Basalt Falls is a pretty white bread community. We have one black teacher in our district, Mr. Talbot. He teaches science at the high school. There was this family once who didn't want their kid in his class because he's black. The whole school district was outraged. The superintendent, the school board, teachers, students, everyone. Even the little kindergarteners had spontaneous lessons on diversity and tolerance. They still talk about it today in their lessons, and it happened years ago. The family that objected to him ended up moving out of the district because *they* felt persecuted. But when Ryan got pulled out of my class because I'm a lesbian, nobody said a word. Nothing. And the very next week two other parents pulled their kids from my classroom for the same reason, and the school just let them do it, and everyone acts like it's a perfectly reasonable request. And they *know* me. They know--"

I was surprised to feel myself getting all choked up again at the betrayal from people who had known me for years. I put my fingers to my eyes and tried to push back the tears. If I stopped talking about it, maybe I wouldn't cry, but I needed to finish the story. I dropped my fingers and saw Lucy watching me sympathetically, her overbite gnawing anxiously on her lower lip.

"I'm sorry." I raised the heavy linen napkin to my eyes. I dabbed as carefully as I could but still got mascara on the cloth. I lowered it to my lap and picked up the bread again. I took a bite while I calmed down and then spoke again. "The thing is, I taught the older son, Ricky, when he was in the fifth grade, and everything was just fine. His mom liked me and thought I was a great teacher. She said Ricky had his best year ever with me. Then she got married, and the new stepdad's something else, I guess. But still, she knows I was a good teacher for Ricky, so why am I suddenly not good enough to teach Ryan?"

Lucy reached across the table and put her hand on mine. "I'm sorry, Kim. It's not you, you know. It's them."

"I know. But the school district's letting them get away with it. And that's wrong." I turned my hand over and gripped hers. "Isn't it?"

She squeezed my hand. "It's wrong, certainly. And it's illegal now in Washington. But it hasn't been challenged yet."

"Well, I'm challenging it," I said.

Our dinners arrived. Lucy let go of my hand, and I gave another swipe at my eyes and nose with the napkin, mentally apologizing to the people who would have to wash it. Then I dug into the shrimp scampi, and suddenly I felt a whole lot better. We both ate in silence for a moment and I felt myself beginning to smile with pleasure because I was enjoying really good food.

"Did you talk to your union rep about this?" Lucy asked suddenly.

I rolled my eyes. "Yes."

"Oh my." Lucy chuckled. "What happened?"

"*It's not the right time to bring this issue up,*" I mimicked. "I'm like, hey! I'm not 'bringing this issue up' right now, the issue is *here* right now. Right now is when it's happening. When else am I supposed to bring it up? But they don't want to do anything to distract the community from the contract issues."

"Sorry to say it, but they're probably right about that." Lucy's expression was apologetic.

"Great." I scowled. "So they just get away with it?"

"Well, you should still file a grievance, preserve the issue." Lucy hitched forward in her seat and fixed her gaze on me. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. You're not the only teacher this has happened to. It's happened in several other districts, and their unions aren't ready to take this issue on either."

She rested her fingers on her chest. "I represent the union. It's my employer. I can't take on a case if they don't want me to. But I do think you have a winning case, you and those other teachers. I'd like to see a lawsuit filed challenging the school districts that are allowing this sort of discrimination to occur."

I chewed thoughtfully on a buttery, garlicky shrimp. "So, what should I do? Hire my own lawyer?"

"You could." Lucy speared a scallion with her fork. "But I don't think you should. Not yet. Rushing this thing could be a big mistake. All I'd like you to do right now is file your grievance,

keep good records, and gather up any documents related to this issue that already exist. Did any of those parents put anything in writing asking that their kids be removed from your class?"

"Some did, I think. Ryan's mom and stepdad just came in and took him. I don't think they wrote anything down. But I think some of the others did."

"How about the school district? Did they send you any letters or e-mails, anything that says *why* the kids were being removed from your class?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. "They were pretty open about it. Nobody tried to hide anything from anyone. They don't think they did anything wrong."

Lucy gnawed on her lip a moment. "Get me copies of those documents. I want copies of any records that tell your side of the story. I want a copy of your class roster at the beginning of the year, before Ryan was taken out of your class, and copies of the rosters after he and the other students were removed. How about other types of records? Did you get any voicemails about it?"

I thought back. "I don't remember."

"Check. If there are any, keep them, make copies."

I suddenly wished we were at a less classy restaurant, one with paper napkins, so I could make myself a list. I tried to memorize everything she told me.

"Then what?" I asked.

"Then we wait for the right time. I know, Kim," she said when I slumped back in my chair. "But this is a serious issue, and it's going to be controversial, like it or not. It's important to do it right. And until I can get the union to support me on this, I can't even take the case forward at all. What I can do, and what you can help me do, is gather all the facts that will make our case strong. Okay?"

Did I have a choice? I would gather the records and make copies for her, but it sounded to me like nothing much would be done in time to help me. Not this year, anyway.

"Sure," I said. Suddenly my pocket buzzed. I pulled out my phone. It was Becca. "Oh." I shot an apologetic glance at Lucy. "I have to take this."

She said nothing, just inclined her head in a do-what-you-haveto-do gesture.

I put one hand on my left ear to block out the restaurant noise, though it was not a loud restaurant, and turned sideways with my phone ear away from Lucy.

"Hello?" I said softly.

"Kim! I just saw the news. A body part in your dumpster? Why didn't you call me?" Becca's voice was unusually strident, and I shot a glance at Lucy. She watched me expressionlessly, and I wondered how much she could hear of Becca's words.

"Um, sorry. It's been a busy day. Is everything okay?"

"Everything's boring as hell around here. I can't even leave the house yet. You're my lifeline, Kim. When something exciting happens to you, you're supposed to *tell* me."

"Sorry," I said again. "But, listen Becca, I can't really talk right now. I'm at dinner."

Becca was silent a moment. "Dinner? Where are you?"

"Anthony's."

"Anthony's?" I could sense the wheels turning in her head. "Kim, are you on a date?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that. It's--it's a school thing." I glanced again at Lucy, who still watched stoically, and I felt myself blush.

"Right," Becca said slowly. "A school thing at Anthony's. Yeah, I buy that."

"Becca--"

"Okay, fine, I'll let you go. But you call me as soon as you can. I want the whole scoop, about the body part *and* about your school thing at Anthony's."

"Sure, okay, I'll call--" But she had already hung up.

I clapped the phone shut and turned slowly back to Lucy. "Sorry about that." I felt sheepish. "She just had shoulder surgery. It could have been an emergency."

Lucy nodded and gave a tight little smile.

"Ladies, did you save room for dessert today?"

"No," Lucy said quickly to the waiter, dashing my hopes for melting chocolate cake. "We're finished here. May I have the bill please?"

"Yes, right away." But he took the time to stack our plates and gather the used silverware and slip our wineglasses through his fingers, and I watched his every move so that I could avoid looking at Lucy.

Now that I'd spoiled it, it was all too apparent to me that this had been a dinner date. I was so dumb. Lucy was a perfectly nice woman. She was smart and sexy, she had great eyes and great

clothes, and I loved her overbite. But I'd gone and ruined it all just because I didn't want Becca to think I was on a date with someone else. As if Becca would care.

When the waiter finally left, I attempted an apology. "I'm sorry about that."

"About what?" Lucy smiled blandly.

"You know, the phone call and all that."

She waved it away with her hand. "You said it yourself, it could have been an emergency. You had to take it."

"Yeah." Okay, if she wanted to pretend it was all about my rudeness in taking a phone call during dinner, so be it. We'd all save face, and it's not like we were ever going to see each other again anyway. It was pretty clear to me that Lucy didn't have any immediate intention of filing any lawsuit about discrimination. She'd used that as an excuse to invite me to dinner. Fine, I'd been invited to dinner under worse pretexts, no hard feelings. Maybe if Becca hadn't called, we'd have gone ahead and had dessert, maybe things would have ended differently. But Becca did call, and I did answer, and that was that.

The waiter brought the bill and Lucy handed it back to him with her credit card so fast I didn't have time to offer to pay my share. Just as well. Pepper loves fresh kitty litter.

We politely parted ways in the parking lot, neither of us expecting to ever see each other again, I'm sure. It wasn't until the next day, when the police showed up, that I realized I'd forgotten to ask Lucy what I should do if they came to question me about the heart.

Chapter Six

THEY ARRIVED AT my classroom door the next morning. Two plainclothes detectives, one male and one female, along with Ms. James. My students looked up, saw Ms. James and two boring adults, and went right back to their scavenger hunt, searching the room for equivalent fractions. When Ms. James said she'd cover my class so that I could go speak with the detectives, the students didn't even blink. Heartless little tots.

My heart was in my throat. What was I going to do? Surely they'd have found my fingerprints by now. Would they actually arrest me? I'd play it cool, I decided. Maybe they didn't have anything on me. They had to prove it, didn't they, beyond a reasonable doubt or something? Or maybe that was only later, *after* I was arrested. Still, I knew how it worked. They'd try to trick me into

admitting all sorts of things they didn't know. My best course of action, I decided, was not to admit a thing.

They walked me down the hall, one on each side of me, as if I were a prisoner already, being marched to the gallows. They'd have to let me make a call first, right? I'd dearly love to hear Becca's voice right then. As if she could help me.

"Ms. James is letting us use her office today," the man said pleasantly as we walked. "I'm Detective Springer. Ron Springer. You can call me Ron." He held his hand out toward me. I shook it and examined him. He was in his late fifties, probably just around the corner from retirement, about my height, but with the body of a former athlete gone to seed. His belly hung far over the waist band of his droopy brown pants, and the buttons of his limp beige jacket had long ago given up hope of ever meeting the buttonholes again. He had heavy dark pouches beneath his eyes, and his cheeks were ruddy red. Still, he had a pleasant expression on his face and a relaxed demeanor. I got it. I watch TV. He was the good cop.

"Detective Hunt," the woman said from my other side. She held out a hand as well. "Mary Hunt." She didn't say I could call her Mary. She was about five five, slender and immaculately dressed in a sharp, navy blue suit. Her nails were beautifully manicured and polished translucent pink. She couldn't have been more than thirty-five, with glossy brown hair pulled back in a conservative clip at her neck, very faint but effective make up, and cool gray eyes. A tiny gold chain around her neck dangled with two little birthstone children, a boy and a girl. Her son was born in August and her daughter in March. I had an inkling that Detective Hunt was not likely to be open-minded about alternative lifestyles like mine. Bad cop. Definitely bad cop.

We reached the office, and I tried to ignore the eyes of the staff on me. Detective Springer--Ron--opened the door to Ms. James' office and held it for me. I entered first, followed by Detective Hunt and my new good friend, Ron.

Our school was built in the seventies, which means the rooms are very small, designed to conserve energy. Even the principal's office was cramped, with room only for Ms. James' desk and two spindly guest chairs. Detective Hunt sat in Ms. James' chair, leaving Ron and me to sit, knees nearly touching, to face her like naughty parents. Ron shuffled his chair to a different angle so that he was directly facing me.

"First," he said gently, "I want you to know we're recording this, okay?"

I shrugged. How did I know if it was okay?

Ron smiled. "So, Kimberly--is it all right if I call you Kimberly?"

Well, ol' buddy, ol' pal of mine, Ronnie boy, why would I mind, since we go so far back? What would he do if I said no? It didn't matter. The important thing was not to let them get under my skin. Stay cool, admit nothing. I nodded.

He smiled. "Great. So, Kimberly, why don't you tell us why you were in the dumpster?"

I burst into tears. "I'm innocent! I didn't do anything wrong, I didn't know it was human. I need to talk to a lawyer." At least that's what I thought I said, but apparently I wasn't very clear.

"Kimberly, you need to slow down," Ron said. "I didn't understand anything you just said."

"Something about a lawyer, I think," Detective Hunt said helpfully.

Ron was shocked. "*Lawyer*. Kimberly, you're not under arrest. You don't need a lawyer."

"Unless," Detective Hunt said obligingly yet ominously, "you're more involved in this than we thought."

Oh yeah, right, like I'd fall for that. Act like you think I'm all innocent. My fingerprints were all *over* that dumpster. *And* the heart sack. We all knew it. I forced myself to take a deep breath, then another, took the tissue Ron was holding out to me, blew my nose, and said slowly, shakily, "I want a lawyer."

They both leaned back and sighed heavily, Detective Hunt with impatience, Ron as if he were deeply disappointed in me. I felt bad. Part of me really just wanted to please Ron. But I held my ground. Ron reached out one finger and nudged Ms. James' phone toward me.

"Fine," he said sadly. "Call your lawyer."

I hesitantly picked up the receiver, then stopped. "Aren't you supposed to give me a lawyer?"

Detective Hunt gave another short, but eloquent, sigh. She obviously thought I was stupid.

"You're not under arrest," Ron said again, patiently. "No lawyer's going to be appointed unless you're arrested. If you want a lawyer just for questioning, call your own."

Of course I only knew one lawyer. "I need a phone book."

We looked around the office. Detective Hunt casually opened and closed drawers in Ms. James' desk, heedless of educational privacy laws. Finally she found a phone book in a bottom drawer. She drew it out and dropped it on the desk in front of me. I quickly looked up Lucy's number and dialed it. I suspect it was the first time the principal's phone had been used to call the union office.

"Lucy Deveroux."

"Lucy, this is Kim Wayland, I--"

"--not available right now. Please leave your name, number, and the purpose of your call. Thanks."

Damn. I was intensely aware of Ron and Detective Hunt listening to every word I said. "Hi, Lucy, this is Kim Wayland, and I, uh--" I lowered my voice, which was absurd. Not only were they still able to hear every word I said in the tiny room, but I wasn't telling her anything they didn't already know. "I'm at the middle school, and, uh, I'm being questioned by the police. About the, you know, the thing that was found in the dumpster here. And I, uh, I was hoping you could come and help me?" What else was there to say? "Thanks." I hung up. Now what?

"All right, Kimberly." Ron slowly stood up, as if despondent about my decision. "We have some other people to talk to, while we wait for your lawyer to show up. Will you refrain from talking to anyone about what you know until she arrives?"

"Uh, sure," I said, surprised. I stood. Ron opened the door and stood waiting. They were letting me go? Just like that?

"Will you tell Ms. James we're ready for the next person now?"

"Sure." The next person? How many people were they interviewing? I walked slowly back to my classroom. Ms. James was startled to see me back so soon.

"That was fast," she said, rising from the stool at the front of the room. "Most of the interviews are taking much longer."

Most of the interviews? "I think they're going to have more questions later," I said. "They said to tell you they're ready for the next one."

She left my classroom, and I watched her walk farther down the hall and stop at the very next door, Eva's classroom. They wanted to interview Eva? What could Eva possibly know about the heart? Were they interviewing *everybody*? Was I really just one interview of many? Had I overreacted by calling Lucy? A humiliating thought struck me. What if she thought I'd simply used the police interview as an excuse to call her? A more humiliating thought--a *mortifying* thought--struck me. *Had* I used the interview as an excuse to call Lucy? Oh Lord. If even *I* suspected myself of playing that game, surely she would.

The students were finishing up their fraction scavenger hunt and were clamoring for my attention, but I had to call Lucy back. I could leave a second message taking back the first. I quickly pulled a box of glitter, normally reserved for holiday art, from a top shelf, slid it onto the craft table, and invented a new math twist. "Color all fractions that are equivalent with the same color glitter," I called out.

The students shrieked with glee and dove for the glitter and the Elmer's while I dove for the phone. I expected a recording again, but didn't get one.

"Lucy Deveroux." She sounded breathless.

"Hi Lucy, this is Kim. Kimberly. I--"

"Kim, what the hell is happening out there?"

"Oh, you must've listened to my message? The police are here." I spoke quietly into the mouthpiece to make sure the students didn't overhear me. "They're questioning, well, I guess they're questioning everybody."

"Have they questioned you yet?"

"They started to, but I told them I wanted a lawyer. They told me to call my lawyer and, well, you're the only lawyer I know. But it's okay," I assured her. "I think it'll be okay. It sounds like nobody else has asked for a lawyer, so maybe I don't really need one."

"Is there any reason to think you need a lawyer? I mean, you don't really know anything about the--the--you know. Do you?"

"Well, yeah, kind of. I mean, yeah. The thing is," I lowered my voice further. "They know I was in the dumpster."

Silence. Then, "Did you say you were in the dumpster?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"That night. I mean, the night before." I was conscious of inquiring little faces beginning to turn my way, wondering why I was talking on the phone while they made gooey glittery messes of their math assignments. "You know, before that thing was found there."

"*Why?*"

"I was looking for something."

"What were you looking for?"

"I wasn't doing anything wrong," I said quietly. "I swear."

There was a long moment of silence before Lucy asked hesitantly, "Was it something illegal?"

"No, no, it wasn't illegal. At least I don't think so." I hesitated. I'd borrowed Becca's ring without her permission, worn it all day. I suppose technically that might have been stealing. But I'd given it back. "No," I said again, more firmly. "No, I'm sure it wasn't illegal. It was just a ring. I threw away a ring. I took it off in class, and it accidentally got thrown away."

"Uh huh." Lucy didn't sound convinced.

"But it's okay," I assured her again. "I'm not under arrest, and I didn't do anything wrong. I can talk to them by myself."

"Kim, no! Do not, *do not* talk to the police until I get there. You told them you wanted your lawyer present, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, good girl." She sighed. "Then they can't talk to you until I get there. You hang tight. I'll get there as soon as I can."

Chapter Seven

IT WAS NO more than an hour later, when the gooey math art had been taped to the windows and glitter-laden puddles of glue had pooled on the sills, that I was called again to the principal's office. This time there were three people in the office before I even got there. Detective Hunt still sat in Ms. James' chair, Ron sat in his chair on the right, and Lucy sat in the chair I'd occupied earlier.

I met Lucy's eyes, and her right lid dropped quickly in either an angry twitch or a wink. Based on her otherwise stony expression, my guess was angry twitch. She wore charcoal gray slacks and a black and gray knit blazer with thick black threads sprouting out all over it, like short hairy spider legs. Underneath the blazer she wore a gray silk blouse with a pleated neckline secured with a black and gray cameo broach. Classy. Unapproachable as hell, but very classy.

"Kimberly!" Ron said, as pleased to see me as if we were long-lost cousins. In my multi-pocketed khaki pants and green hoodie sweater, I did feel some sartorial kinship with Ron, as if we were the poor relations. "Come in, sit down. We have your lawyer here now."

Lucy rose and gestured for me to take her chair. I sat, and she stood right next to me, slightly behind and to my left. She rested her hand on my shoulder.

Ron smiled. "All better now?"

"Sure," I said, feeling somewhat foolish for dragging Lucy all the way out here for this.

Detective Hunt turned the recorder on and set it on the desk between us. "Why don't we pick up where we left off? Tell us why you were in the dumpster."

I looked up at Lucy, who nodded grimly at me. I took a deep breath, looked down at my knees which, I suddenly noticed, sparkled with glitter, and began. "I was looking for a ring."

"A ring?"

"Yes. I took it off so I wouldn't lose it. We were making topographical maps, and I had my fingers in the dough. The ring was loose, so I took it off and put it in a paper cup, and when the kids cleaned the room up afterwards, someone threw the cup away. It wasn't anyone's fault. But it got thrown into the dumpster, so I had to go find it."

"Topographical maps?" Ron asked.

"Yes, with salt dough."

His brows scrunched.

"It's a mixture of salt and flour and water and food coloring," I explained. "It makes dough that's soft at first, but it hardens as it dries so you can manipulate it and make mountains and valleys and rivers. We're studying the geography of Washington."

"Did you find the ring?"

"Yes."

He glanced at my ringless fingers. "Where is it?"

"Oh, it--it's not my ring. That's why it was a little loose. I'm not the first to dumpster dive around here, you know," I added quickly. "Ask anyone. Sometimes a whole group of us searches the dumpster together. Last Christmas the math teacher threw away his own kids' presents by accident. They were in a big plastic mall bag."

"Whose ring is it?"

"Oh, it belongs to a friend of mine," I said, very conscious of Lucy standing behind me listening to every word.

"Why did you have it?"

Damn him. Why did he have to ask so many questions? I sighed, resigned to confessing all. "She asked me to hold it for her because she went in for a shoulder operation that morning."

Lucy's fingers, still on my shoulder, twitched.

"What's your friend's name?"

"Why do you need to know that?" If they went to talk to Becca, she'd surely find out that I'd worn her ring, after I'd insisted to her that I hadn't. I cringed. "You aren't going to bother her with this, are you? She's still recuperating."

"Probably not," Ron assured me. "We're just being thorough. It's for our records. What's her name?"

"Becca," I said reluctantly. "Baumgarten. Rebecca, really."

"Tell me about the dumpster."

"The dumpster? Well, it's green and rectangular and sits on the edge of the parking lot." A look from Ron and a squeeze on my shoulder from Lucy warned me to stop being a smart ass.

"Let's take it one step at a time," Ron said. "How did you get in?"

"I pulled a chair over and climbed up, then swung my leg over and dropped in. That's how we always do it. Ask anyone."

"And what time was that?"

"Not very late. Around five, maybe a little after."

"Did you tell anyone you were going to search the dumpster? Ask for any help?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Because I didn't want anyone to know I was wearing Becca's ring. But I couldn't admit that, not with Detective Hunt recording my every word, not with Lucy hovering over me. I shrugged. "No reason. There weren't many people around, and--" The silence that followed my answer suggested that nobody believed me.

"So then what?" Ron asked. "You climbed into the dumpster all by yourself, in the dark, didn't tell a soul, and then what?"

"I started opening trash bags. And it wasn't dark. There was light from the parking lot. I was looking for the trash from my classroom, because that's where the little paper cup would be."

"Did you notice anything unusual?"

I looked back down at my knees and rubbed at the glitter. It stuck. "It smelled bad," I confessed.

"Bad how?"

"You know, like a rotting heart."

I felt Lucy start. I looked up at her and found her staring at me, clearly surprised. I realized it was the first time she'd heard that the body part found in the dumpster was a heart.

"So when you smelled this odor," Ron said, "what did you do about it?"

I turned back to Ron. "Nothing."

He frowned. "Nothing? You smelled the odor of a rotting heart and you did nothing about it?"

"I didn't know it *was* a rotting heart, not at first. Sometimes dumpsters just smell bad," I explained, as if I were an expert. "It reminded me of a rotten heart though. We dissected them in the eighth grade. But I didn't know it was one until I opened that bag."

Ron sat back and waited.

"I thought it could be, you know, something else. A science experiment or something. So I just kept looking for the ring."

"Must be some ring," Detective Hunt murmured.

"Go on," Ron said.

"Well, I opened some of the bags, and I couldn't find the trash from my classroom. And then I grabbed that bag. It was different than the others. Our bags are all black, that thin kind, you know? Without ties? But this one bag was white, thicker plastic, and it had red ties knotted at the top. But I didn't think about it at the time. I just wanted to find the ring. So I ripped it open and there was the heart."

Lucy's grip on my shoulder pinched. I glanced up. She looked a bit pale, and her grim look had been replaced by one of nausea.

"Are you all right, Lucy?" I asked. She nodded and waved at me to continue.

I turned back to Ron. "Okay, so I saw the heart and it had--" I glanced again at Lucy, who watched me warily. I leaned forward, lowered my voice, and said quietly to Ron, "It had things crawling on it. Maggots. It looked like it was alive."

A sound from Lucy drew our attention. Her lips were clenched and her eyes were slightly glazed, but she just waved weakly at us to ignore her.

I took a deep breath and resolved to continue quickly, without description, to ease Lucy's discomfort. "So I tossed that bag aside and looked in the other bags until I found the bag with the salt dough on it, and I found the cup, and there was the ring. So I climbed out of the dumpster and went in the school and washed my hands and then went home and took a shower." I sat back,

cleansed of all sin from having confessed. I looked at Lucy and was relieved to see she looked a little better.

But Ron wasn't quite as sensitive as I was. "So you opened the white bag, saw a human heart inside it, tossed it aside, and just continued looking for the ring? And then just went home? Didn't it occur to you to call someone?"

"I didn't know it was a *human* heart," I pointed out. "It could have been a rotting cow heart or a pig heart or a horse heart for all I knew. You can't tell the difference by the smell."

I was interrupted by Lucy, who had had enough. She bolted out the door, her hand to her mouth, and slammed into the women's bathroom next door. I jumped up to follow her.

By the time I reached her, she was on her knees retching into the toilet. I felt bad. I got some paper towels and wetted them at the sink, then waited for her to emerge from the stall. When she finally did rise to her feet and turn around, I was waiting for her. She took the paper towels and wiped her face and mouth. I handed her some more dry ones, and she patted her face.

"I'm sorry," we both said simultaneously.

"I'm sorry I have such a weak stomach," Lucy said. She wiped at her eyes where her mascara had run. "I'm such a baby."

"You're not a baby. I'm sorry I bothered you with this at all. It turns out I didn't really need a lawyer after all, did I?"

"Are you kidding?" She gaped at me, wide-eyed. She didn't need mascara. Her eyelashes were amazing. "Kim, you were *in that dumpster*. With the--" She broke off and swallowed. "You held the bag that contained that, that *thing*. Of course you needed to have a lawyer present. Just not *me*."

She tugged another paper towel from the dispenser and rubbed again at her eyes, which still looked damp. "I'm not a criminal lawyer. I haven't touched criminal law since I took the bar exam, twelve years ago. I'm no good with this stuff."

"So you think I need a lawyer?" I asked uncertainly.

Lucy sighed and shrugged. "I don't know. Your story is strange, but it's oddly believable. I don't think they have anything to arrest you on. At least--" She stopped and fixed me with a hard stare. "You're not hiding anything else, are you? I'm asking you as your attorney--temporarily. Privileged information. Do you know anything about that heart? Or who died. Or anything?"

I raised my right hand. "I swear to you, Lucy, I don't know anything about the heart or anything else. I just happened to be in the dumpster at the wrong time, that's all."

Lucy shook her head, drying her hands one last time while checking out our reflections in the mirror. "How you could have stayed in that dumpster, I don't know."

I shrugged. There was no point belaboring how badly I'd wanted to find Becca's ring.

Just like the night before, Lucy wore heels, so we were the same height. Her thick hair shimmered, strands of gold highlights mixing with blond and silver threads. It waved back above her ears and was cut short at the nape of her neck. I had an urge to run my fingers through it. Her shoulders and hips were broader than mine, and her figure much more curvaceous, though you wouldn't notice that right away, given the concealing clothes she wore.

I shifted my gaze to my own reflection. I looked like a skinny kid next to her. My chocolate milk hair hung to my shoulders, limp as always by the afternoon. I pulled a rubber band from my wrist and yanked my hair back into a quick ponytail.

Lucy smiled at my reflection and rubbed her thumb on her own nose. "You have some glitter."

I leaned in and saw gold sparkles on my nose. I wiped at it.

"And here." She rubbed at her bottom lip, and I wiped at mine too. She turned toward me and laughed. "My God, Kim, it's even in your hair. What have you been doing?"

"Teaching math."

"I wish you'd been my math teacher." She tugged her jacket down and straightened her shoulders. "Okay, let's get back out there. I'm sure Ron's got a few more questions for you." She stopped at the door and turned back to me. "You're doing fine. Just keep telling him the truth. You okay?"

"I'm okay."

She reached out with her finger, tapped me once on the nose, and walked out.

Chapter Eight

"SO HOW DID you know she was a--lesbian?" Annie automatically hushed her voice on the last word, as if it were dirty. She glanced at Ken to make sure he hadn't heard.

I wished she'd just tell him I was lesbian and get it over with, but she insisted the time wasn't right. Apparently Ken was too religiously fragile to be recklessly exposed to the L word.

We were in Annie's dining room, sitting on the floor and sipping red wine in front of the gas fireplace. Speaking of Ls, the dining room and living room made a large L-shape. Annie had been hunting for weeks for the perfect dining room table and had already disposed of the old one, so the dining room was virtually empty. Ken was in the living room, in the other leg of the L, watching TV. We were several yards away but could see the back of his easy chair and the top of his head from where we sat. The TV blared.

I'd been recounting for Annie my interview with Ron and Detective Hunt, which meant I'd had to fess up about finding the heart in the dumpster. Annie was suitably shocked and horrified about the heart, and she rolled her eyes when I told her the part about Becca's ring, but she was most intrigued by Lucy Deveroux.

"I mean, I was there at that union meeting, same as you. I sure couldn't tell she was. How could you?"

"I don't know. Gaydar, I guess. Sometimes you can just tell."

"But *how*?"

I thought back. What had tipped me off? "Her mannerisms. Her way of standing, her way of talking."

"What specifically?"

"It's the little things," I said. "Like, she wore those wide-wale cords. She put her hands in her pockets. She doesn't wear much make-up, and she has her hair done in that wash-and-go style. She wore comfortable shoes, and she doesn't wear a lot of accessories."

Annie frowned. "But Kim, lots of people do those things. *I* have low maintenance hair, and I don't wear *any* make-up, and I have lots of cords."

I studied her, considering, and said, "Well, you could pass."

"I could?" She seemed pleased.

"Yeah. But it's not really any of those things. I guess it's more of a feeling than anything else. Sometimes you meet someone and you just know. And sometimes I'm wrong. *That* can be embarrassing."

"But you weren't wrong this time."

"No. At least," I thought back. "I'm pretty sure. We never actually talked about *her* being a lesbian, only me."

Annie shot another glance at Ken's back. "He's snoring. I'm going to try again." She got on her hands and knees and crawled slowly across the room toward Ken's chair.

Annie's house is always immaculate. Her pale beige carpet still looks as soft and pristine as when it was brand new, and there was a long bare expanse of it between the dining room fireplace and Ken's chair. It's the sort of carpet that makes you want to crawl on it, or roll on it like a kid rolling down a grassy hill, or make love on it. I tried to imagine Annie and Ken rolling around on the carpet making love, but the *ish* factor got in the way.

I watched Annie creep up behind Ken and reach around for the remote control perched on the arm of the chair beside his elbow. It drives Annie crazy that Ken sits in front of the TV, the volume up high, and then falls asleep. But if she tries to turn it off or even just lower the volume, he complains and says he was watching that. It's become a nightly challenge for her to try to sneak the volume down without him noticing. This time, as usual, he must have sensed her presence. Just as her finger was about to press the volume button, Ken snorted, jerked, woke up, and reached for the remote. He began flipping channels, while Annie sank back on her heels behind his chair and rolled her eyes at me. I noticed her jeans were pressed, with a crease ironed down the front. Weird.

I didn't mind the high volume because it allowed Annie and me a little privacy while we talked. It also provided Annie noise cover as she crawled back to me at the fireplace.

"Mission failed." She took a sip of wine. "So tell me more about Lucy. Do you like her?"

"Sure. Lucy's great."

"You know what I mean," Annie said. "Do you *like* her?"

I thought about the way Lucy touched my nose with her finger. "Yeah," I said. "I like her. But it doesn't matter. I'll probably never see her again."

"Why?"

I shrugged. I was not about to explain the complexities of lesbian relationships to Annie in a whisper, while her homophobic husband snored only a few feet away. Even if I could. "I don't think she's interested, and besides, I--"

Annie shook her head and gave me a look of despair. "It's Becca, isn't it?" She made an exasperated sound. "I wish you'd stop wasting yourself on her. Here's this attractive, successful, intelligent woman interested in you, and you blow her off for Becca, who's never going to do anything but take advantage of you."

"Lucy is not interested in me," I said firmly. "She gave me the name of a criminal defense attorney, in case I get questioned again. She doesn't want me to call her."

"I'm not surprised, after the way you blew her off."

"I didn't blow her off," I protested, somewhat weakly. "Your turn. How did your interview go?"

"Interviews. Plural," she said. "I spoke with them several times."

"Why? What do you know about it?"

"Nothing. Unlike some people, I didn't actually find and ignore a whole human heart."

I made a face at her.

"But I've been talking to a lot of the kids about what happened," she continued, "and I've learned stuff you don't want to know."

"Like what?" I asked, proving her a liar.

"Have you heard of Hitlerwrath?"

"No. Wait, isn't that a band or something?"

"Yeah, one of those nasty underground bands the kids like. Adults can't stand to listen to it, and the words are incomprehensible, so the kids get away with it."

"Like that damned ol' rock and roll?"

Annie frowned. "Nothing like that damned ol' rock and roll. I know kids always try to shock their parents with their music. Always have. And maybe for some of the kids, that's all this is. But it's really bad stuff, once you know what the words say. And a lot of these kids do know the words. It's Hitlerwrath like, 'Hitler's wrath.' That's wrath *of* Hitler, not wrath *at* Hitler. It's all about the wrath Hitler feels from the grave because his plan for a perfect Aryan world failed. It encourages kids to fulfill his destiny."

"Ick," I said, disgusted. "But, Annie, Aryans have been around a long time. It's not like it's anything new."

"Wait 'til you hear the words."

"Like what?" I was still not terribly concerned. Kids *do* always listen to music that will shock the older generation, but they also tend to grow up all right. Some of the parents of our own students grew up listening to some pretty foul stuff, and yet they seemed to have turned into fine citizens and parents.

"Like kill all the Jews, kill all the cripples, kill all the--I can't say it. N word. You know. And kill all the fags. Sorry." She sent me an apologetic look. "And one of their songs has a line that says, 'Cut out their hearts and throw them away. Haul them out on garbage day.'"

I started, and wine splashed out of my glass. I jerked my leg just in time to catch the drip with my knee before it landed on Annie's carpet. I'd take a bullet for that carpet.

"Well, that's just gross," I said. "But it's only a line in a song. It can't, you know--you can't think it has anything to do with *my* heart. I mean, the heart I found."

"I don't know if it does, but I know the kids think it does. That's how I found out about it. They're scared, and they're talking about it. There are rumors that there's a group of kids, Hitlerwrath kids, who've been experimenting with killing animals and removing their hearts."

Now I was shocked. "At *our* school?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, my God." We sat in silence for a moment and thought about kids cutting hearts out of animals. I couldn't believe it. Even though I'd actually seen the heart in the dumpster, I couldn't believe kids had anything to do with that. And animals--

"How's the dog?" I asked, now that she'd reminded me of it.

"*Shh.*" Annie shot another glance at Ken's head. She set her wine glass down on the hearth, stood up, and jerked her head for me to follow.

I followed her into their bedroom and then into the master bathroom, where we both climbed into the tub and peeked through the mini-blinds into the back yard next door. It was dark, but the moon was nearly full, and there was enough light to see the outline of the puppy, sleeping curled up into a solitary little ball on the ground at the far end of her tether, as far away as she could get from the doghouse. As if she hated it.

My eyes stung. "I have to rescue her," I whispered. "Maybe I should just do it right now."

"They're home," Annie whispered back. "They'll see you."

"Only if they look outside. It's worth the risk."

"He's a school board member," Annie reminded me. "It's *not* worth the risk."

I chewed my lip. I wouldn't be much help to the dog if I couldn't even afford to buy her kibble after stealing her because I'd lost my job. I sighed deeply. "Don't they ever leave?"

"I'm keeping watch," Annie assured me. "I'll let you know."

We climbed back out of the tub, sad and subdued, and returned to our wine.

Chapter Nine

THE NEXT DAY was Saturday. I worked in my shop much of the day, playing with my new Craftsman Deluxe Oxy-Acetylene Welder that I bought with my economic stimulus check. Doing my part for the economy and all.

I am an artist. I'm not ready to quit my day job or anything, but I figure it's only a matter of time. When I first started my teaching career, I was praised and valued for my 'creative contributions' to the learning environment. They loved it that I taught math with art, social studies through drama, language arts via music. My classroom was always active and noisy and messy, and that was seen as a Good Thing. Then No-Child-Left-Behind entered the picture, and I found myself left behind, in the dust of standardized testing. Every year I receive more complaints, from the administration and from parents, that I don't spend enough time preparing kids for the Washington Assessment of Student Learning or, as it is more commonly known, the WASL.

I try. I really do. Several times a year I get reminded by Ms. James, another teacher or even a parent that the WASL is looming and I'm not doing my part. So I knuckle down and press those little ten-year-old noses down onto the grindstone and *make them learn*. And it works. They learn. But *what* do they learn, and why is it so important that they learn it that it's worth depriving them of their childhoods? That's the question I want asked.

I could answer it. They learn to write a five-paragraph essay. They learn that the first paragraph is *always* the introduction and that the last paragraph is *always* the conclusion and that the three paragraphs in between will practically write themselves if they correctly follow the formula for writing a good introduction. And they will learn to hate writing. They will learn that there is no such thing as a clean, straightforward math word problem, that there is *always* a trick and that they will usually miss it and get the wrong answer, but that it's okay because they'll get *some* points. And they will learn to fear math. And they'll learn to hate school and they'll learn to hate learning and they'll escape into the safety of computer games where nobody scolds them for missing a trick and they get an unblemished life to start over any time they like.

Whatever happened to being a kid? Kids learn from playing and doing and moving. They learn from asking and experimenting and trying things out. Kids learn best when they aren't afraid of being wrong, and the WASL does nothing *but* make kids afraid of being wrong. I hate it.

So after a couple weeks of force-feeding standardized test material, when I notice that the good kids are learning but their eyes are dull, that the bad kids are turning into unlikeable hellions rather than funny, mischievous, active *kids*, I relapse. I pull out the salt dough and the glitter, the CD player and the costume box, and we all start having some fun.

I'm bracing myself for the day when I'm left so far behind that I disappear. The day they tell me to put the glitter and salt dough away for good is the day I hand in my letter of resignation.

Being an artist is my back-up plan. I always wanted to be an artist, but when it was time to go to college, I listened to my brothers and sisters who advised me to select a career more likely to result in a steady income. I picked teaching because at least I'd have my summers to myself to create. It wasn't a bad choice. I like teaching and, at least before No-Child, I was good at it. The summers-off plan turned out to be a joke, at least for the first few years, but now that I have a master's degree and a few years of teaching under my belt, I really do have time to explore my artistic options.

I used to paint, but I'm really not very good at it. I prefer working with multi-dimensional substances. I gravitated toward pottery for a while, then moved to glasswork, tried creating my own beads, then made sculptures with recycled materials. It's all been fun, but last summer I took a welding class at Spokane Community College, and I think I've found my calling. I love welding. I love the heavy weight of the goggles and the way I can stare into the searing flame without hurting my eyes. I love that I have to wear old long sleeved shirts of non-flammable material and heavy leather gloves with wide wrist protectors. I love the sparks that flash around me like sparklers but don't hurt me because I'm protected, and the hot sound they make, like popcorn, and the smell. I love the way I can make anything. After I finished the class, I converted my tiny one-car garage into a shop, started parking in the driveway, bought the welder and two tanks of gas, and started creating.

This time I was experimenting with glass, trying to see if I could use the welder to fuse glass to the metal. It sort of worked, but the flame from the welder was too hot for the glass, and the glass itself turned a dull metallic color from the metal.

Welding is a very physical and emotional experience. When I'm finished I feel as though I've had a good workout and a therapy session all in one. That day, as I burned and cut and melted the metal and glass, I purged myself of all, or nearly all, the fury I felt toward my brother Wade.

Wade had called that morning to scold me for my poor judgment regarding finding the heart in the dumpster. Actually, it wasn't my finding the heart that troubled him, it was the fact that it was reported in the morning paper. I could have found a hundred body parts in a hundred different dumpsters, for all he cared, as long as I didn't have the bad taste to have the discoveries reported in the local paper where Mom and Dad could read about it. He'd had to steal the newspaper from their paper box before they had a chance to see it, to try to keep what happened a secret from them. My brother Wade is a jerk.

But after welding for a bit, I no longer cared about Wade. I went into my welding place, where I'm always happy. Just for fun I melted some glass and made a dull little red heart, and I was just about to melt a goofy 'K' on one side and a 'B' on the other when I heard a honking right outside the garage. I pushed the goggles up, pulled off my gloves, opened the side door, and poked my head out.

Becca stood there. When she saw me, she turned and waved to her mother's car in the drive. The car horn honked one more time, pulled out, and drove away.

"Thank God you're home. I've been calling and calling, but you didn't answer. I was hoping you just didn't answer because you were welding, so I made Mom bring me over to check it out."

I stepped back from the doorway so she could enter the garage. She wore old white sweatpants, the ones with PINK arced across her butt, draped low on her hips so that the top of her French cut black thong showed. On top she wore a short sweater over a snug fitting black camisole that promised a whole lot of cleavage, but the crucial part was covered up by the strap of the utilitarian navy blue sling that held her left arm still. Even with the sling, she looked hot.

"I thought you were still recuperating," I said.

"I am, but it's not like I'm sick or anything. I can't drive and I can't work, but I can *visit*, for God's sake. As long as you'll help me pull my pants up if I have to pee. I told Mom you'd take me home later, okay?"

My face burned at the thought of tugging on Becca's thong. "Sure."

"So, were you ever going to tell me it was you who found the heart?"

"You were an invalid." I moved toward the back of the garage so she couldn't see my lying face. "I didn't want to upset you."

"Good thinking. Much better to let me read it in the paper with no warning." She looked around the garage curiously. She hadn't been there since I'd converted it into a shop. "You've done a lot here. What are you working on?"

Thank God, *thank God*, I hadn't yet made the K and B on the heart. I would have died. It was bad enough when she walked over and saw the crooked little heart on the work surface. She turned and gave me a curious little smile. "A heart, Kim? Are you in love?"

"It's just an experiment." I went over, pried the dried heart up from the steel, and tossed it into the used glass box for re-melting.

"Don't throw it away!" Becca snatched it out of the discard box. "I think it's sweet." She rubbed the smooth surface of the heart and said, "Show me what else you can do."

So I handed her some dark safety glasses, pulled my goggles into place, grabbed a thin metal dowel and some thin pieces of pre-cut steel, and ignited the flame. A few minutes later, I turned off the gas, bowed deeply before her, and presented her with a single elaborate steel rose, including leaves and thorns.

She was delighted. "My God, Kim, you're really good at this. Can you teach me how to do it?"

"I could, but you can't learn welding in a day." I had an idea. "You want to schedule a regular time, like every Saturday, for lessons?"

"Okay."

I felt a ripple of delight at the thought of spending that kind of time with Becca, me telling her what to do, maybe putting my arms around her to show her how to hold the flame. "We'll have to make some adjustments for a while, 'til you get your arm back," I said, to get her used to the idea. "I'll have to be one of your arms."

"Okay," she said again. "Let's start next week, though. I don't feel like it today."

"Sure." I cleaned up a bit and we went to the house. It was a wee little house, a one bedroom one bathroom bungalow but I could afford the mortgage. I'd decorated with splashes of vibrant colors, most of it my own artwork, so it was a cozy, happy place. The cat eyed us from her scarlet perch at the window as we entered.

"Pepper!" Becca sang out. "I'm a pepper, Pepper. You want to be a Pepper too?" She grabbed Pepper's paw and tried to make her dance to her song, but Pepper would have nothing to do with it. She jumped from her perch and escaped out the kitty door to the back yard. Becca gave a one-shoulder shrug. "Have you got any beer?"

I got us each a beer, opened them both, and handed her one. We plopped down on the overstuffed sofa, each curled at an end facing the other, feet entwined, and raised our beers in a toast.

"To us."

"To us."

"There's none like us."

"Here, here." Becca took a long guzzling swallow, then wiped her mouth on her good shoulder and gave a deep, satisfied sigh.

"Are you supposed to be drinking while you're on pain meds?"

"Shut up," she said mildly. "I already have a mother. Besides, I haven't been on the good stuff since the second day. What they have me on now is barely more than aspirin." She took another swallow. "So, why did you lie to me about wearing my ring that day?"

"Huh?"

"I had a visit from a fuzzy policeman this morning. He said you wore my ring all day. Why'd you lie about it?"

"I didn't lie," I protested weakly.

"*Kim.*" She pointed the neck of her beer bottle at me. "I asked you if you wore it, and you said you didn't. And then the police came and they said you wore it all day long. You lied to one of us."

"I didn't *lie*," I lied. "You were on drugs. The *heavy* ones. You don't even remember what I said."

"I do too. I asked if you wore it, and you said, *Of course not, I'd never wear your ring.*"

"I never said that." As if I'd say *never* about wearing Becca's ring. "Anyway, I didn't wear it all day, obviously, or it wouldn't have been thrown away. I may have told you that I didn't wear it *all day.*"

"No, that's not what you said. My drugs weren't *that* good. I remember."

I needed a diversion. "Did I tell you I saw Lucy again?"

"Really?" She raised her eyebrows. When I'd talked to Becca during my dinner with Lucy, I'd told her it was not a date, but when I called her on the way home that night, I'd perversely emphasized only the date-like attributes of the dinner--the wine, Lucy picking up the tab, asking me if I lived with anyone. "Did she call you?"

"I called her. When the police started questioning me about being in the dumpster that day, I sort of panicked, so I called Lucy."

"Wow. After just one date, she's the one you call to rescue you."

"It's because she's a lawyer," I said. "I had to call her. I didn't know who else to call."

"Right. You just *had* to call the woman who dazzled you with wine and romance the night before because she's a *lawyer.*"

Perhaps I'd emphasized the date-like aspects of the evening a little too much. "She didn't dazzle me."

"Uh huh." She finished her beer and handed me the empty. "Please, mum, may I have some more?"

I looked her over. Aside from guzzling her beer too quickly, she seemed to be all right. I got her another beer.

"So what happened?" she asked, after taking a more moderate sip from this bottle.

"When I called Lucy? She drove out and stayed with me while the police questioned me."

"Oh ho. So she's got it bad for you, too."

"I don't think so," I said. "She just wanted to help."

"Yeah, right. She drove all the way out to Basalt Falls just because she's a helpful soul? Come on. She's not your lawyer. You're not paying her, right?"

"No." I tried to imagine Lucy's face if I'd tried to offer her money. "No, I don't think she'd like that."

"No," Becca agreed, "I don't suppose she would." She took another sip and squirmed her backside deeper into the couch as if settling in for a long stay. "Tell me what she looks like. What do you like about her?"

So I squirmed my backside in as well and told Becca all about Lucy's sexy overbite, her very cool jackets and sweaters, her thick eyelashes, and I sort of implied that she was crazy about me. I may have suggested that a bit more went on in the bathroom than a little tap on the nose, and I accidentally left out the fact that she had given me the number of another attorney to call if I ran into any more trouble.

"So, are you going to see her again?"

"Oh sure," I said, thinking that with the curriculum day walkout looming, we'd surely run into each other. Becca didn't need to know that's all it was.

"So why are you spending Saturday night with me?" Becca asked. "Why aren't you going out with Lucy?"

"Oh, you know," I said vaguely. "Taking it slow. You hungry?"

I fixed broiled tilapia fillets and savory brown rice and green beans. Becca ate like a starving orphan. "Oh my God, this is so good," she said. "How can you make something so healthy taste so good? No wonder you're so skinny."

"I'm not skinny."

"Pardon me. Svelte, I meant."

I considered it. "Better."

Chapter Ten

I WAS RINSING the dishes when Annie called.

"They're gone," she whispered.

"What's gone?" I asked. "Why are you whispering?"

"I'm in the bathroom, and I just saw them leave, both of them. In separate cars. I don't want Ken to hear. Now's your chance."

"Oh, the dog people." I glanced at Becca, who was absorbed in trying to tiddly-wink a bent beer cap onto a saucer. "I have to drop Becca off at her mom's first. Then I'll be right there." I hung up.

Becca looked up, suspicious. "Why are you taking me to my mom's? Where are you going? Was that Lucy?"

"No, it was Annie. I have to go get the dog." I ran to the bedroom and stripped off my welding clothes. I was self-conscious about being nearly naked in front of Becca, who had followed me into the bedroom, but I was in too big a hurry to do anything about it. I slipped into a pair of dark blue jeans and a black hooded sweatshirt.

Becca's eyes lit up. "Dog burglar attire. Take me with you."

"What? No way."

"Why not? I can help. I'll be your lookout."

"I don't need a lookout. Annie's my lookout."

"I'll be your dog whisperer. Dogs love me. Please, Kim? It's Saturday night. You *can't* leave me home alone at my mom's on a Saturday night. Please?"

She looked up at me with those big green eyes, pleading with me, begging me, and it was like a dream come true, sort of. It would be crazy to take her with me, with her broken wing and her stark white droopy pants, half tipsy with hydrocodone and beer. But she'd never begged me for something before, and I was powerless.

I turned back to my bureau. At least I could do something about the pants.

"Put these on." I tossed her a pair of black sweatpants and blatantly watched as she dropped her white sweats and pulled on the black ones all with one hand. The hint about needing help pulling up her pants was apparently just a tease. Just as well. The sight of her in her black thong made me weak, and I wouldn't have been much help pulling her pants up anyhow. When she had my black ones on, she was transformed from heart-stopping vamp to adorable waif. My sweats fit her around the waist, but they puddled around her ankles like a little kid in too-big hand-me-downs. Fortunately the bottom of the legs had elastic, so she wouldn't trip.

"How do I look?" she asked, sliding a hand down inside the front of the sweats to tuck in her camisole.

I swallowed. "You'll do."

We each took potty breaks, and I grabbed a baggie of hot dog slices that I'd prepared in advance, along with the brand new leather dog leash I'd bought at the pet store in preparation for this moment. We drove to Annie's neighborhood.

We didn't go to Annie's house. She wasn't to be any part of this, other than as lookout from her bathroom window. I drove to the block behind her, parked my red Rav, opened the door and slowly, gently, pushed it closed until I heard it latch. Becca, who had no problem opening the passenger door with her right arm, hopped out, slammed her door, and said loudly, "Oops."

"Becca!" I peered left and right at the quiet street, but no one seemed to have noticed us. I rounded to Becca's side and whispered into her ear, "Remember, we're about to commit a *crime*. We have to be super quiet, or we could be *arrested*."

She giggled, but nodded her understanding, and we slinked through the mini-grove of pine trees that grew in the center of Annie's block. It was still nearly a full moon, and I felt exposed as we slinked from tree to tree, but there was little risk anyone could see us. Most of the houses in the area had six-foot privacy fences so no one could peek in, which meant they couldn't peek out very well either. Neither Annie's yard nor the Stern's was fenced in.

Annie's picnic table was in the shadows of the trees, so we slipped over to it, sat a moment, and scoped out the scene. I could see the silhouette of the dog, sleeping at the end of her chain. She hadn't noticed us arrive. The house was dark. It would be a simple matter to walk up, unhook the dog from her chain, attach her to the leash, and walk her back to my car. Simple.

"Wait here," I whispered. I stood up, took a step, and headlights danced into the Stern's driveway.

Damn it. They were home already. I crept back to the bench and scrunched down beside Becca. I couldn't believe my timing. If I hadn't waited for Becca, I'd have had the dog in my car already. I wasn't about to give up yet, though.

We watched Donald Stern get out of the car. He was alone, and I remembered that Annie had said they'd left in separate cars. The dog perked her ears up when the car door slammed, sat up and wagged her tail, still hopeful, despite her months of neglect, that he would come back and pay her some attention. He didn't, of course. He had a white plastic bag and carried it into the house. He turned on a light as soon as he entered, and I saw the interior of the house clearly through the uncovered sliding glass doors that led to the deck. We were looking into a modern great room, with high ceilings and what looked like a sunken living room.

"He'll have to close his drapes eventually," I whispered to Becca. "Want to wait?"

"I haven't had any better offers."

We leaned back against the table and waited. But he didn't close the drapes and he didn't go upstairs. Instead, he moved to the large screen television in the corner of the room, fiddled with something, returned to the couch, and sat down. I couldn't see what was on the screen, but I could see from the flickering lights in the room that something was. A moment later, Stern got up and turned off the overhead light, so that the only light in the room came from the TV. But it was enough to see that he was still in the room, sitting on the couch.

Damn, damn, damn. He must be watching a movie. That's what was in the plastic bag. He could sit there for a couple more hours, maybe even longer if he got more than one movie. I looked again at the dog. She'd fallen asleep already. But she was directly in Stern's view from where he sat on the couch, and she was not in the shadows. I wouldn't be able to rescue her tonight.

I was about ready to give up when Becca spoke.

"Since when do you date during the school year?" she whispered.

"Huh?"

"You've never dated during the school year. You told me you never would. What's so special about Lucy?"

"Um, I, uh--"

A movement from the couch drew my attention. Holy crap. I grabbed Becca's hand and gestured in the direction of Stern. He had opened the front of his pants and was giving himself a hand job, right there in front of us. He was watching porn! I put a hand to my mouth to cover my laugh. Donald Stern, the most outspoken of the five conservative school board members, the one who nearly singlehandedly forced abstinence-only sex education at the high school, jerking himself off while watching porn. Becca and I stared at each other and then convulsed in silent laughter. She let go of my hand, pulled her cell phone out of her pocket, and tried to take a picture of him, but it was too dark to capture the scene.

"Damn," Becca said.

We were so engrossed in what Donald Stern was doing that neither of us noticed another car had pulled into the driveway. It wasn't until his wife opened the front door and turned on the living room light that we realized she had returned home. Stern jerked up from the couch as if a firecracker had gone off in his trousers. He simultaneously tried to turn off the movie and tuck his dick back into his pants, but he was successful at neither. He was truly and completely busted.

Mrs. Stern took it all in at a glance. She put her hands on her hips and started yelling. Becca and I sat as still as the trees, mesmerized. I couldn't hear what she said, but I could see Stern cringe. It couldn't have been pretty. She reached for the white plastic bag and dumped its contents out on

the counter. Stern had apparently been preparing for a little one-man party. There were more DVDs and a stack of magazines--more porn, apparently, from Mrs. Stern's reaction. She tried to rip one in two, like a strongman with a telephone book, but she couldn't do it. Instead she rolled it into a club and swung it at Stern's head. He ducked and grabbed it away from her, so she grabbed another one, crumpled it into a ball as best she could, and threw it at him. Then she burst into tears and ran from the room. A moment later I saw a light come on upstairs, at the side of the house.

I mentally urged Stern to follow her and try to make up. If they were both upstairs, I could still snatch the dog and we could be out of there in a minute. But he didn't go upstairs. Slowly he picked up the magazines and returned them to the sack, ejected the DVD and put it in as well. He went to a cupboard and got another sack, doubled bagged it, and tied a knot in the top. Then, to my surprise, he slipped out of the side of the house, not twenty feet from where we sat. He walked to the rubber trash bin, lifted the lid, and dropped in his double-bagged porn. It hit with a heavy thunk.

The dog yelped, and Stern looked our way. I closed my eyes and sat like a garden gnome, not breathing.

"Shut up," he said harshly to the dog and went back into the house.

I breathed again and watched as he returned to the couch. This time he just sat in the dark, no TV, no magazines, no jacking off, just sitting, staring into nothing. He wasn't going anywhere.

I sighed. "Sorry, dog," I whispered. We stood up. I took a step toward the trees, but Becca took a step in the opposite direction. "Where are you going?"

"I want to see what he threw away."

"Ick. Why?"

"Aren't you curious? Come on, help me."

I would have refused, but she was already moving silently forward. I couldn't call out after her, and I couldn't let her try to wrestle with the garbage can alone, not with just one arm. She'd be bound to make a racket. So I followed. We went the long way around, through Annie's yard, and sneaked up on the garbage can from the side, where the garage blocked Donald Stern's view of us. Becca lifted the lid. I tried to block from my mind what had happened the last time I'd dumpster dived as I leaned in and pulled up the white knotted bag. I handed it to Becca.

We turned and quickly made our way back across the yard toward the trees. At the last minute, on impulse, I turned and waved at Annie's bathroom window, in case she was watching us. Then I followed Becca back to the Rav. "You're not opening that bag at my house," I said, as soon as we were seated, the bag on Becca's lap. "Why? Don't you want to know what he was looking at?" "Gross. Becca, he *touch*ed those. After he whanked on his dick." "Oh, that's right," she said, as if she'd just solved a puzzle.

"You've never touched one before. Dicks aren't so bad. They're kind of silly little things, really."

"He's a school board member." I couldn't keep a slight shriek out of my voice. "I don't *ever* want to know what he was looking at while he whanked on his dick." I shuddered.

"Okay, I won't tell you." "And wash your hands when you're done." "Yes, mum."

Chapter Eleven

WHEN THE BELL rang out its top-secret blare of two short blasts followed by one long, Jack responded in typical smart-ass fifth grade fashion. He was the first person in his row, so he happened to already be standing beside me, ready to hand in the spelling papers the students behind him had passed forward. The bell gave its staccato blasts and he threw his hands up in the air, papers flew, and he ducked behind me and buried his head in my backside.

"TABFAK for me, Ms. Wayland! TABFAK for me!"

The students were startled by the alarm--and by Jack's joke-- but they were not nearly as startled as I was at having Jack's nose suddenly pressed in my back crack. I wasn't amused.

"It's okay, it's just a drill," I called out, reaching behind me to yank out a handful of squirming boy. I thrust him toward his desk. "Remember what we talked about? What's the first step?"

"Duck behind our desks!"

The students followed the words with action and dumped their desks sideways so that they could crouch behind them, as if the thin wood could stop a bullet. Books, papers, pens, pencils, crayons, toys, and more flew as the contents of the desks fell everywhere, and I cursed the PTA for ever coming up with the TABFAK drill in the first place. Of the four middle school grades, only the fifth graders still stored their books and supplies inside their desks. The sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students had lockers for storage, and their desks were made only of a single Formica-covered slab of pressed wood. This was our first actual TABFAK drill, and we had practiced it only once *without* tipping the desks over. I made a mental note to have the students empty their desks *before* the next TABFAK drill, while I quickly performed the tasks assigned to teachers.

TABFAK has got to rank right up there with the duck-and-cover nuclear fallout drills of the 1950's as an absurd and time-wasting protection strategy. It's great for scaring a generation of kids, but not so effective at protecting them from danger. TABFAK stands for Take A Bullet For A Kid, an idea hatched at a PTA meeting somewhere, most likely in revenge for the fact that

teachers rarely, if ever, attend PTA meetings. TABFAK is the PTA's response to the school shootings that have cropped up around the country in recent years.

The basic idea is that any time a suspicious looking stranger enters the school, particularly if he's carrying an arsenal of weapons with him, an alarm will sound, students will take cover, teachers will secure the classrooms, after first gathering up any stray students who happen to be in the hall at the time, and, if necessary, they will Take A Bullet For A Kid. A major flaw in the plan is that most teachers--or me, anyway--don't really *want* to Take A Bullet For A Kid. We're not the secret service, after all. A second major flaw is that, as everyone except the PTA knows, the most likely perpetrator of a middle school shooting is a student of the school. Unless the child enters the building brandishing an assault rifle, no alarm will sound until after the shooting has begun. A final flaw, at least as far as we teachers are concerned, is that the only way to secure our classrooms is to step out into the hallway, where we can lock our classroom doors from the *outside*, thus exposing us to any random shooter who happened to be lurking there. When we objected, we were simply met with puzzled looks from the parents.

"But that's what TABFAK means," one mother explained patiently at our weekly teacher's meeting where the plan was announced. "You are the first line of defense for the students. The risk *must* lie with you."

I jotted a note to Annie. "Who's going to TABFAK?"

Annie wrote back. "Maybe we should start going to a few PTA meetings."

But it was too late by then. The PTA had approved the plan and proposed it to the administration, who adopted it immediately, without consulting the 'first line of defense.' My purchase order for a bullet-proof vest was not a joke, but it was treated as one.

So when the alarm sounded, I compliantly stepped out into the hall and, as directed by the TABFAK policy, scanned the hall for any kids I could take a bullet for.

Ryan Richardson stood just outside my door, a wooden bathroom pass from Eva's class clutched in his hand. Crap. I hesitated. Ryan, of all kids. If I brought him into my classroom for the drill, I'd no doubt hear about it from Candy and Calvin Bunch, who would be furious that I'd sullied their son with my lesbian cooties. If I didn't pull him in, though, I'd be violating the new TABFAK drill procedures. But did I really care about the stupid TABFAK rules or, for that matter, what Candy and her husband thought of me? Not really. It was the expression on Ryan's face that finally prompted me to act.

TABFAK drills are scary, though kids like Jack pretend they aren't. Nuclear fallout and fire drills are impersonal and fun, a break in the day, a little mini-recess. TABFAK drills, on the other hand, are a terrifying reminder that evil strangers lurk about intent on shooting holes into innocent little fifth graders. I'd be willing to bet that there are quite a few nightmares and wet beds the night after a TABFAK drill.

Ryan looked as if he was about to wet his pants right then, though I could tell from the direction he was headed that he'd already been to the bathroom. He stood frozen, frightened and paralyzed by the blaring alarm, his face screwed up in a grimace I recognized as a fifth-grade-boy attempt to mask his terror.

"Come in here, Ryan," I said quickly as I turned the key in the lock. "It's just a drill. You can share a desk."

He scampered in, and I pulled the locked door closed behind him. I yanked the heavy dark vinyl curtain over the window, flipped the lights off, moved to the back door--which was already locked-- and closed those shades too. Thus hidden safely from sharpshooters, I turned and faced the dark and noisy classroom foxhole. Enough light seeped in from around the edges of the windows to allow me to see the students. None was crying, thank God, but plenty were upset.

The TABFAK plan was for each student to tip his or her desk over, then use it as a shield for cover and protection. But the plan failed to account for the fact that desks take up a lot more room when tipped over on their sides than they do standing up, and when all thirty desks were tipped over, there was not enough room for thirty kids to crouch behind them. That wasn't even counting all the floor space consumed by the fallen books and supplies.

"Stupidest drill ever," I sang softly to myself as I climbed through the bodies and ruins to my desk, picked up the phone, and called Eva and let her know I had Ryan, as required by the rules. Then I turned my attention to the turf wars erupting over the limited desk cover.

Fifteen minutes after the drill began, the all-clear alarm brayed--one long followed by three shorts. I turned on the lights, opened the door and stepped out into the hall. Other teachers were emerging as well, all of us blinking and smiling in relief, like miners who'd just been rescued from a week-long cave-in. Down the hall, Eva waved and called, "Send Ryan back any time." I nodded.

"Ryan," I called. He appeared at my side. "Time to go back to your own class, buddy."

He didn't move, just looked at me solemnly with his dark brown eyes. He looked amazingly like Ricky had at his age, the same curly brown hair, turned up nose, pouty bottom lip. The Richardsons were good-looking boys. Finally, he lowered his head and walked slowly through the door, as if heading off for a firing squad. Before he had gone more than three steps, though, he turned.

"Ms. Wayland, why can't I stay in your class?"

Because your parents are dickwads, I thought, but merely said, "Ryan, you know why. Your parents don't want you to be in my class any more."

He gave a heavy sigh. "I know. But I like your class better." Before I could take that as a compliment, he continued. "Mrs. Collier makes us read the whole chapter and answer the questions at the end. *All* of them. In complete sentences."

"Wow." I was impressed. I never could steel myself to make them answer *all* the questions at the end of a chapter. "Sounds like you're getting a good education in there."

"Yeah," he agreed sadly. He turned to walk away but again stopped after only three steps. "Did you hear Ricky's gone?"

"No. What do you mean, gone?"

"He ran away. On my birthday."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, Ryan. I'm sure it wasn't about your birthday, though."

I'd taught Ricky about five or six years earlier. He would be around sixteen by now, far too young to be out on his own. I hoped he wasn't in any real trouble. But when I thought about his new stepfather and his mother's newfound intolerance for, well, for *me*, I couldn't help but feel a little bit proud of Ricky. I'd like to think that if my parents had been so intolerably narrow-minded when I was sixteen, I'd have had the nerve to leave home too. "Do you know where he went?"

"No. Randy knows, but he won't tell."

Randy was the middle Richardson brother, an eighth grader. He'd never been in my class, so I didn't know him very well. He couldn't be more than fourteen, but it made me feel a little better that at least someone knew where Ricky was, even if it was just his kid brother. "Well, I hope he comes home soon."

Ryan nodded. "Me too."

I watched the lonely little figure trudge sadly back to Eva's classroom, where the soft-spoken little ex-kindergarten teacher apparently taught with a very heavy hand. *All* the questions, and in complete sentences too. Whew. I turned back to my classroom, where we spent nearly the entire rest of the day trying to restore order after the fifteen minute drill.

Chapter Twelve

THE RUMOR MILL that had informed every person who worked at Basalt Falls Middle School that I was a lesbian worked just as effectively at spreading the word that I had found the heart in the dumpster. To some kindly but befuddled souls, the two facts seemed to be related. *Did you really find the heart in the dumpster? How horrible. Well, it's okay with me that you're gay.*

Some people, those who still hadn't figured out how to talk to me now that I was a lesbian, found the heart discovery an added reason to avoid me. But most people just assumed that, because I'd found the heart, I somehow had an inside track on the investigation.

"Kim, have they ID'd the victim yet?" Blaire asked loudly.

I shrugged. "I don't know. They haven't told me anything."

"Have they done DNA tests?" Tami asked. "It's the only way to identify where a single body part came from."

"Oh, I don't know," Annie said dryly. "A body with a heart cut out of it would be a pretty good clue."

"A heartless body," Eva whispered with a delighted shiver. "How gruesome."

"Sounds like my ex-husband," Tami said, and snorted at her own joke.

We were waiting the requisite thirty minutes after the departure of the last of the students. The union was having an after-school meeting to discuss the upcoming curriculum day walkout, but we weren't allowed to discuss it on school grounds or during school time. At four o'clock on the dot, we planned to caravan to the same nearby community building where we'd met when we took the initial vote.

"How'd the TABFAK drill go?" Annie asked the group.

Our groaning and eye rolling gave the general response, but I didn't think Blaire's complaints about having to herd her PE class underneath the gym bleachers or Tami's grumbling about her sixth graders being in the middle of a test could compare to the chaos I had had to clean up after all my students' desks were emptied onto the floor.

"Don't you think we got the worst of it?" I asked Eva.

She smiled and answered softly, "I had the students put their books on the counter ahead of time. It was time for them to clean out their desks anyway."

Of course. And she probably had them memorize the periodic table while they hunched behind their desks.

"How did you know there would be a drill today?" I asked.

"They announced it at the teachers' meeting," Annie said. "You were late. It was Becca's surgery day."

"It's four o'clock," Blaire shouted. "Let's go."

I rode with Annie. "Has Becca told you what she intends to do with the bag-o-porn?" Annie asked.

"I haven't asked her. I don't even want to know."

"I can't get that picture out of my mind, of Donald Stern sitting there masturbating right in front of his window. You could really see it from my picnic table?"

"Fraid so."

"I'm going to have to move it. I'll never enjoy a picnic there again."

"Especially wieners," I said, and giggled.

"I can't believe you took her with you," Annie scolded. "It was so dangerous."

"She was bored," I said weakly, but I knew I'd been sucked in by a pair of pretty eyes. Annie knew it too.

"Promise me you won't bring her next time, okay? I mean it, Kim. I won't call you at all if you won't promise."

"And when's next time going to be? It's taking forever. They can't be home all the time."

"I can't just run to the phone and tell you every time they leave. Even Ken would notice that. Be patient, Kim."

"Tell that to the puppy."

"Promise me, Kim, no Becca next time."

"Sure, whatever."

She waited.

"Okay, I promise, all right?"

Finally she was satisfied.

Annie parked and we walked into the crowded community center. The elementary teachers, who get out earlier than we do, were already there.

"There she is," Annie hissed.

"Who?" I automatically scanned the room for Becca, though she couldn't possibly be there.

"Lucy Deveroux." Annie clutched my wrist and nudged my attention toward the side of the room. "Over there."

As if she'd heard us, Lucy looked directly our way and saw us both staring at her. She gave a friendly smile and wave. She was wearing one of her provocative jackets. Not provocative in the traditional sense, since she wore her clothing loose and all-concealing, but provocative to an artist like me who works in different mediums. Today she wore a light creamy yellow jacket with little cotton nubs all over it, like tiny puffs of popcorn. Not microwave popcorn or movie popcorn, but the kind your grandma used to make for you on the stove in an old pan, dribbled with real butter and sprinkled liberally with salt. Normally, what Lucy wore made me want to reach out and stroke her. Today I wanted to nibble. I licked my lips.

"She's coming this way," Annie said, her voice high with excitement, and she clutched my wrist even harder. I looked at her, surprised, and was about to say something, when she released my hand and relaxed. "No, no, she stopped to talk to someone."

"Why do you care?"

It was hard to tell with Annie's dark skin, but I think she blushed. "I don't care, not really, except--well, ever since you told me she's a lesbian, I've been curious about her. She looks so normal, you know?"

I turned to face her directly and waved my hands in her face. "Hello-o-o. Remember me? Kimberly Wayland, lesbian?"

She knocked my hands away. "Oh, that's not what I meant. Besides, you've never been normal. I'm just curious because *you* knew about Lucy right away, and I didn't. I'm trying to figure what it is about her that tipped you off."

"Hello, Kim."

All right, I was a little startled when Lucy suddenly appeared right there next to us, but Annie gasped, her eyes got big and she put her hand to her mouth, and giggled. What was *up* with her?

"Hi, Lucy," I said. Giving in to temptation, I put my hand on Lucy's arm, surreptitiously fondling the popcorn-yellow balls. "Have you met Annie Gold, our middle school counselor?"

"Hello, Annie." Lucy held her hand toward Annie and smiled right into her eyes, lesbian style.

Annie giggled again, smiled, and shook Lucy's hand.

"I'll bet you've had your hands full lately," Lucy said. "I wouldn't want your job these days."

"Oh, I wouldn't want *your* job," Annie said. No, she *gushed* it, and it didn't even make sense.

Lucy raised a puzzled eyebrow, but just turned to me. "I wanted to ask you, Kim, have you had a chance to gather any of that information I asked you about?"

I was momentarily blank.

"About kids being pulled from your classroom?"

"Oh, that." I shook my head. "I'm sorry, I forgot."

She looked disappointed, and I suddenly felt defensive.

"There's been a lot going on around here, you know," I pointed out. "Besides, what difference does it make? It's not like anything's going to change soon enough to help me."

A small frown appeared between Lucy's eyebrows and she compressed her lips together tightly for a moment, as if she were biting back words. When she spoke, her voice had that forced patient edge to it that I recognized from using it myself on recalcitrant students. "You know, you're not the only gay person in this district, or even in your own school. People are watching you. They want to know what you're going to do. Are you just going to sit back and do nothing?"

Now, that was just plain unfair. Hadn't I gone to the union, and hadn't I brought it to Lucy herself, asking for help? But wait. I gave myself a mental shake. I'd gone to Lucy for help, and she had asked me to do this one thing so she *could* help, and I hadn't done it. I bit my lip, slightly uncomfortable, but only said, "I didn't know anyone else was gay. Who is it?"

Lucy shook her head. "I can't tell you that. Maybe someday they'll tell you themselves. But meanwhile, I really would like you to gather as much information as you can for me. Will you do that?"

"Yes, okay, I will." I glanced quickly around the room, wondering which of the other teachers might be gay. Lucy patted my hand, and I realized my fingers still rested on her arm, absently rolling one of the little balls with my fingertips like it was a nipple or something. I flushed and pulled my hand away.

"Looks like they're about to start," Lucy said. "See you later. It was nice to meet you, Annie."

As she walked away, Annie leaned over and whispered, "Do you think she likes me?"

"What?"

"Did you see how she was flirting?"

"No. I didn't. Why do you care anyway? Annie, you're *straight*, remember?"

"I know. But you said I could pass. I think *she* thinks I'm a lesbian."

"I think you're crazy."

Annie giggled--her third giggle of the last ten minutes--and said, "You're just jealous."

I decided ignoring her was the wise thing to do.

The meeting opened with a rally cry from the union leaders, a lot of hip hip hoorays, and a plethora of time-wasting, repetitive questions from teachers who must have missed all the other union meetings. Finally they turned the microphone over to Lucy to say a few words. She reminded us sternly to refrain from discussing the walkout at school and to use no school resources for union business, including phone calls or e-mail. The union leaders were convinced that the school board was spying on us, out to get us before we could get them, and they were probably right. So they wanted all of us to remain squeaky clean, not violate even the tiniest rule, so we wouldn't give the school board any ammunition to use against us.

Then Lucy spoke about the discovery of the heart, and I felt eyes turn toward me. I bit my lip. I was getting tired of the constant speculation about me. If it wasn't my sexual orientation, it was murder, or "assumed murder", as Lucy put it. She explained a bit about the police interviews, criminal procedure, and Miranda rights. I wished she'd given us this talk *before* they came to interview me.

"And remember," Lucy said to the group. "I'm the union's lawyer, but I'm not your personal lawyer. If you feel you need representation, be sure to contact your own attorney. It's not that I don't want to help you, I just can't."

I flushed again. Enough reprimands already.

"But what I can help you with is preparation for the walkout," Lucy said. "You'll need signs, lots of them. We've arranged a sign-painting session at the union office for Saturday morning. We've got supplies. Poster board, paint, markers, stencils, things like that. We'll start at nine." She gave directions.

Annie quickly pulled her pen from the little sleeve in her purse where it was always kept and scratched down the address in the miniature notebook that lived next to the pen.

"Since when do you volunteer for union chores?" I asked. "You usually won't even come to the meetings."

"I think it'll be fun." Annie turned to me and her eyes glowed. "Lucy will be there, don't you think?"

"What difference does that make?" I snarled. "It's not like she's asking you for a date or anything."

Annie was impervious to my mood. "Come with me, Kim. It'll be fun."

"Get up early on Saturday when I don't have to? Are you nuts?"

"Well, *I'm* going to." Just then Annie caught Lucy's eye and smiled and waved her fingers hello at her. And giggled.

Annie had clearly lost her mind. I couldn't let her go to the union office alone. Someone had to watch out for poor Lucy.

Chapter Thirteen

THE NEXT DAY I ran into Randy, the middle Richardson brother, in the hall outside the gym. He was an office aide second period, and one of his jobs was to deliver mail to the teachers. He had a little pouch with rubber-banded bundles and had just delivered one to the PE office. I had a prep period that day and was headed toward the staff room.

"Hi, Randy."

He stopped and looked at me, startled, I think, that I knew his name. Like most kids, he assumed that, since he'd never been in my class, I wouldn't know who he was. Randy had the same dark brown eyes as Ricky and Ryan, the same curly brown hair and turned up nose. But unlike his brothers, who were athletic, Randy was a bit pudgy. His face was rounder and he wore pants that were too baggy. Not hip hop baggy, but old man baggy, like he had to buy pants too large so they would fit around his waist. He wore his roomy rust-colored jacket all day long, not so much to keep himself warm, I suspected, as to keep himself hidden. I knew Randy was bright, like his brothers, but he lacked their confidence.

"I'm Ms. Wayland," I said, though I was certain he already knew. "I wanted to ask you about Ricky."

His eyes grew wary and he looked more than ever like Ryan. "What about him?" His voice gave an unfortunate squeak.

"Ryan told me that you know where Ricky is. Don't be angry with Ryan," I said quickly, when I saw Randy's lips start to clench. "I promised him I wouldn't tell, and I haven't. But he's really too little to keep a secret like this completely to himself."

Randy lowered his eyes and stared at the floor, but said nothing.

"Anyway, I just wanted to know if Ricky is all right."

"Ricky's fine," Randy said gruffly.

"Good. I'm glad."

He turned to leave, but I stopped him.

"Have you considered telling your parents where he is?"

He looked at me like I was crazy and stupid. "No."

He turned and walked away.

"Tell Ricky hi for me," I called after him. "Next time you see him."

He waved a backward hand at me as if shooing away an annoying mosquito.

"Tell him yourself," he said.

Chapter Fourteen

"KIM, COME HERE and draw me a roulette wheel."

"No, I'm next. She's drawing me a couple of really fat kids. 'Cause they cut after-school sports. Get it?"

"And recess. Even the first graders only get one recess now. Draw me some fat first graders, Kim."

"Just a minute," I said. "I need to finish this one first."

I put a few more strokes on a cartoon of a crumbling jungle gym before turning to the next sign. From the moment Annie and I walked into the union office, my artistic skills had been in demand. I hadn't had a chance to start a sign of my own. I didn't mind decorating everyone else's signs with drawings, and it gave me a chance to sneak in my own little private joke now and then (see that school board member watching a Las Vegas girlie show--doesn't he look just a little bit like Donald Stern?) But it made it difficult to keep track of Annie.

She'd grabbed a piece of neon green poster board and laid it on the conference room table, but before she'd even dripped one drop of poster paint onto it, she'd spotted Lucy. I was already drawing a slot machine on someone's sign before I noticed, and by then it was too late. Sign

abandoned, Annie had cornered Lucy and was speaking animatedly to her, gesturing and touching Lucy's arm now and then with her fingers as she leaned forward and laughed. For once, Lucy wasn't wearing one of her textured jackets. She wore a soft blue brushed cotton shirt, the long sleeves rolled partway up her forearms and the collar open at the neck. It was tucked into a pair of genuinely faded and well-worn jeans, loose enough to be comfortable but not baggy, and a wide brown leather belt circled her hips.

Lucy seemed intrigued by Annie's antics and watched her with a bemused half smile, nodding now and again. I tried to work my way in their direction so I could hear a bit of what they were saying, but my progress was slow, and every time I got near, Lucy wandered in another direction, and Annie would follow. Shame on Annie. She was leading Lucy on.

I clenched my lips as I leaned over the table and put the final touches on a grinning caricature of Donald Stern tossing dice at the craps table. The slogan read, "Stop rolling the dice with our future!" I was drawing sad little kid faces on the sides of the dice when, from the corner of my eye, I saw soft blue.

"You're very talented," Lucy said.

I straightened up and made an aw-shucks gesture with my sponge. "What, this little thing?"

She tilted her head and frowned at the drawing. "Is that supposed to be a real person?"

"Why? Does it look like someone you know?"

"It looks a little bit like one of the school board members."

I tried not to smile, but failed. "Really?"

"Don't be obvious, Kim," she admonished, giving me a look. "I don't want to hear next that you've been sued for libel or something."

I laughed. "Nobody else has even noticed. I'm subtle. I'm the queen of subtle."

She gave a little smile. "I've been invited to join you for lunch."

Going to lunch, were we? First I'd heard about it. I glanced over at Annie, who had finally returned to her poster board. She was writing some spindly crooked letters across the top with a brown marker. She'd be asking for help with it soon.

"That is, if you don't mind," Lucy added.

"No, of course I don't mind. Please, join us." I looked around me at the teachers busy with their signs, then leaned in close to Lucy. "You know Annie's straight, right?" I whispered. "She's married."

Lucy slowly smiled her Meredith Baxter smile, lips stretching over her teeth as she leaned into me and whispered, "I know."

Her breath fanned my cheek, and that's when I felt it for the first time. Something in my stomach gave a tiny flip, just a twitch of a goldfish's tail, but I reared back and gaped at Lucy in surprise. I'd never felt such a thing before, certainly not with Dale or any of my other summer flings, and not with Becca. Becca made my stomach clench. But this fluid, flippy feeling was something new. It wasn't unpleasant, just perplexing.

Fortunately, since Lucy was starting to look puzzled at my reaction, Annie chose that moment to call me over.

"Kim, I need help!"

I flashed a cheesy smile at Lucy. "Gotta go," I said, and scampered across the room to shore up Annie's wobbly letters.

Chapter Fifteen

WE WENT TO The Onion for lunch and sat in the bar at one of those tall tables with chairs high off the ground, the kind that make you kick your heels against the rungs like a little kid. The table was designed for drinks and appetizers, rather than meals, so its round top was small. We nestled cozily in, Lucy on my right and Annie on my left. My knees grazed each of theirs.

I was glad I was between them, in a way, because I was feeling somewhat protective, though I couldn't say who needed my protection the most. Was I protecting Lucy from Annie? Or did Annie need protecting, since it seemed she was trying to edge her naïve way into the lesbian world? Considering that goldfish tail feeling I'd had in my tummy earlier, maybe the person who needed protecting most was me.

"What have you got against Donald Stern?" Lucy asked when we were settled.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"That was him you were drawing on all those signs. Why?"

"He's a school board member," I said. "He went to Vegas with school board money. Isn't that enough?"

"But why him and no one else?"

I shrugged. "He's easy to draw. He's got that bushy mustache. And he's a creep."

"That was Donald Stern you drew on my sign?" Annie asked, her jaw slack.

"See?" I said to Lucy. "She didn't even recognize him, and she's his neighbor."

"But I do *now*." Annie slumped back in her chair and sent me a scowl. "Great. Thanks a lot, Kim. Now I'll have to make a new sign."

"Oh come on, he'll never know it's him."

"Lucy recognized him, and she barely even knows him. He's bound to recognize himself."

"She's afraid of him," I explained to Lucy.

"I'm not afraid of him," Annie protested. "But I can't afford to make an enemy of him either. I have to live next door to him."

"Why is he a creep?" Lucy asked.

As I pondered how much to tell her, Annie said, "She saw him masturbating in his house, in front of an open window."

"Annie!"

Lucy grimaced. "Is he an exhibitionist or something?"

"Well, he didn't know I was watching," I said, trying to be fair.

"It was the middle of the night," Annie explained, "and normally our back yards are very private."

A slight frown appeared between Lucy's brows. "Why were you in his back yard in the middle of the night?"

"She was trying to steal his dog," Annie said.

I kicked her foot. Geez. She won't even tell her own husband about the dog, but she'll spill her guts to Lucy, who's practically a stranger and a lawyer to boot? Annie didn't even acknowledge my kick.

Lucy raised her eyebrows, but before she could say anything, the waiter arrived to take our order. Tomato basil soup and a salad for me. What I really wanted was some of their famous seasoned fries, but Lucy ordered the mushroom burger, which comes with never-ending fries, so I figured I could sneak a few of hers. Annie ordered a Cobb salad and probably wouldn't even be tempted

by Lucy's fries. That's the way she is. It was too early for beer, so we ordered a pitcher of iced tea.

"He doesn't love her," I said firmly to Lucy, as soon as the waiter was out of earshot. "She's just a puppy. Her spirit is breaking, and I have to get her out of there."

Lucy just looked at me, her eyebrows raised slightly.

"I'm not a thief," I said. "This is justified. Isn't there a law that says it's okay to take someone else's dog if they won't take care of it?"

"Have you called the humane society?"

"Yes," I said, scowling. "They won't do anything. As long as she has food and water and shelter, she's not being neglected," I said, letting sarcasm drip from my words. "Except, of course, she *is*."

"So," Annie said, "when the Sterns both leave, I call Kim, if I can do it without my husband finding out. And then she comes over and takes--"

"No, no, don't tell me." Lucy poked her fingers into her ears and scrunched her eyes closed. "I don't want to know."

"What?"

"La la la la la!" she sang. "It's not legal. I don't want to hear about it."

"Are you telling us you don't think--?" I reached over, pulled Lucy's finger out of her ear and started over. "Are you telling us you don't think we should rescue that poor puppy?"

"I'm not telling you anything," Lucy said, opening her eyes again. "I just don't want to know the details, all right? I'm an officer of the court. You're talking about--" She looked around and lowered her voice, "You're talking about committing a crime. I just don't want to know about it, that's all."

"Well, if that's a crime, there's something wrong with the law."

"Maybe there is, but then you change the law, you don't *break* it."

"Fine," I said. "No problem. You won't hear another word about it." "Anyway," Annie said, "that's how Kim and Becca saw Stern masturbating in front of his window in the middle of the night." "Becca?" Lucy asked, her eyebrows raised again. Before I could explain, I sensed someone approaching and looked up. Dale. My stalker.

Chapter Sixteen

DALE GLARED AT me as she strode straight to our table and stood right between Lucy and me, her face no more than six inches from mine. My chair was high enough that we were eye to eye.

"Hi Da--," I started, but her eyes blazed into mine with such blatant hatred and anger, as only small children and maniacs can do, that my words died a sudden death. She brought her hand up to her chest and began patting, softly, rhythmically, a heartbeat. Thump-*thump*, thump-*thump*, thump-*thump*.

"It's his heart," she whispered. "His heart." Thump-*thump*. "It's the beating of his hideous heart."

An icy chill prickled my scalp and ran down my body, stopping to make vicious pricks at my nipples before surging through my crotch to my toes. What did Dale know about the heart? I swallowed.

Before I could say anything, Lucy spoke up. "Stay away from Kimberly," she ordered, her voice filled with authority. "We're filing a protective order against you."

Dale transferred her blazing gaze to Lucy. "Who the hell are you?"

Lucy slipped from her chair to face Dale, which may have been a tactical error, since she was now a good six inches shorter than Dale. She had to tilt her head back to meet Dale's eyes, but she didn't seem aware of the disadvantage. "I'm her lawyer," she declared.

Dale looked Lucy up and down and sneered. "Her lawyer. Right. Isn't there a law against fucking your client?"

Lucy's neck flushed, but she just said, "This incident is being reported, and if you have any more contact with Kimberly, you will be arrested."

Dale's jaw clenched and her nostrils flared. She was wearing a tight black t-shirt that emphasized the breadth of her shoulders and the width of her biceps. She could knock Lucy over with one hand. I put my hand on Lucy's shoulder, as if to help, but she didn't need it. Dale sneered once more at Lucy, flicked her eyes across me, and thumped her hand to her heart twice more. She stormed out of the restaurant, followed by a bewildered looking woman with long brown hair and a flowered skirt who sent anxious looks back over her shoulder as she went.

Lucy watched her go, then turned slowly back around to face our table.

"My hero," I joked, somewhat shakily. But Lucy didn't look like a hero any more. She looked sick. She crawled back into her tall chair.

The waiter quickly brought over the pitcher of ice tea, as if he'd just been waiting for the all-clear before approaching. "Everything all right over here?"

"Everything's fine," I said.

But Lucy waved the tea away with trembling fingers. "Bring me a rum and coke."

"Lucy." I reached for her hand, but she quickly slipped from her chair again.

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"Lucy!" I slid from my own chair and followed her.

"I'm not staying here all alone," Annie called, and joined me in following Lucy to the bathroom.

By the time we reached the door of the ladies', Lucy was already on her knees in the nearest stall, retching.

"Oh, Lucy." There was no room in the stall for me to help her so, as before, I yanked a handful of paper towels and ran them under cold water. When Lucy flushed the toilet and emerged from the stall, I handed them to her.

"Thanks," she said, still shaky. She scrubbed at her face and neck with the cool towels. "I hate that kind of shit."

"I'm so sorry," I said.

Lucy waved her hand at me as she tossed the paper towels in the trash. "It's not your fault I'm such a weenie."

"Are you kidding? You're not a weenie. You were brave," I said. "But you don't have a very strong stomach, do you?"

Lucy gave a small chuckle and turned to wash her hands.

"Who *was* that woman?" Annie asked, leaning against the door with her arms crossed, as if to keep out intruders.

"That was Dale," I said. "She's the one who outed me at school."

Annie's eyes widened and she craned her head as if she could still spot Dale through the bathroom door. "That was Dale? Ugh, you *dated* her? Oh, Kim, your taste needs improvement."

Lucy gave a snort. She met Annie's eyes in the mirror and gave her a wry smile. Annie giggled.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"None of your business," Lucy said. She was looking a lot better, less pale and shaky.

We slipped out of the bathroom, keeping a wary eye out for Dale, but there was no sign of her. Lucy's rum and coke was waiting for her on a damp napkin. She climbed back up into her chair, took a large sip, and sat back with a grateful smile.

"Do you really think I should report her to the police?" I asked. "Or were you just saying that?"

"Of course you need to report her. And file a temporary restraining order against her. She's a psycho."

"What was all that about the heart?" Annie asked. "Do you think she had something to do with the heart in the dumpster?"

But I'd had time to think about it. "No. It was in all the newspapers, on TV. It's no secret that I found the heart. She was just playing with me."

"Huh. Like a cat with a mouse, maybe." Lucy pulled out her cell phone.

Annie nodded solemnly. "A game for the cat, but not so much for the mouse."

"Who are you calling?" I asked.

"Detective Springer," Lucy said. "You don't know for sure it was just a game. Let the police decide." Lucy reached Detective Springer's voice mail and left a message. I envisioned Ron Springer and Detective Hunt knocking on Dale's door to question her about the heart. She was going to be livid.

"How do I get a restraining order?" I asked, when Lucy closed her phone.

"There's a form you fill out and get signed by a judge. I can help you with it on Monday."

"Is it true, what Dale said?" Annie asked. "About it being illegal to sleep with your client?"

Lucy had just taken another large swallow from her rum and coke, but Annie's question made her choke. She picked up her damp napkin and wiped her lip, glaring at Annie. I was selfishly glad to see that tiny weed in the garden of their suddenly blossoming friendship.

"It doesn't matter," Lucy said slowly, "since it's not something I would ever do."

Annie shot me a speculative look. I glanced at Lucy. With pink cheeks she avoided my eyes and took a self-conscious sip of her drink, and the little goldfish in my tummy swished his tail.

I was pondering that when the waiter brought our food.

"What if it was Dale?" Annie asked, after we'd taken the edge off the worst of our hunger. "Where would she get a heart? It's not like you can just pick one up somewhere."

"It came from a body," I said, pointing out the obvious. "Someone must have been murdered."

"Not necessarily," Annie said. "There have been no reports of anyone missing, right? There are other places to get hearts. Maybe it was a donor heart. Maybe someone was transporting it to a hospital for a transplant but got stuck in traffic or something and too much time passed, so they couldn't transplant it, so they threw it away. Or maybe it was removed during an autopsy, or at a funeral home. A heart would never be missed from there, would it?"

I slid a few fries from Lucy's plate over to mine and squeezed a lake of ketchup beside them. "Your point is?"

"My point is," Annie said, "if Dale just wanted to torment you, she could have found a heart somewhere to plant in the dumpster for you to find."

I shook my head. "Why would she put it in the dumpster? She couldn't have known I'd be looking in the dumpster that day. Nobody knew I was going to do that, not even me."

"Oh, yeah." Annie slumped back in her chair, disappointed.

"It's still a good point," Lucy said. "The heart could have come from an autopsy or a funeral home or a hospital, like you suggest. Maybe somewhere else. There may not have been a murder at all."

"But again, why hide it in a dumpster?" I asked, slipping a few more fries onto my plate. "A middle school dumpster, at that. We're not exactly on the beaten path."

"True," Lucy said. "Whoever disposed of the heart must have some connection with the school. Kim, I don't know how you can stay so slender, the way you eat."

I shrugged. "I have lucky metabolism."

"But it's still not legal to just throw away a human heart," Lucy continued. "There are rules about things like that. Somebody has committed a crime, even if it wasn't murder."

Lucy's phone rang. Detective Springer wanted to talk to us.

It seemed kind of silly to bother Detective Springer with our story about Dale, now that we'd figured out she couldn't have had anything to do with the heart, but Lucy insisted on telling him about it anyway.

"It's a puzzle piece," she explained. "Detective Springer has a whole lot of puzzle pieces you don't even know about, and he might need this one to make sense of some of the others. Let him decide what's important."

So Lucy followed Annie and me to my house. I normally do my weekly housekeeping chores on Saturday morning, but I'd spent that morning, of course, drawing cartoons on walk-out signs, so I hadn't yet had a chance to tidy up. Annie had been to the house before, but I was a bit concerned about Lucy's first impression of it. I hopped out of the car as soon as Annie stopped it, ran into the house, and quickly grabbed the damp towels from the bathroom floor. I threw them into the bedroom, tossed Pepper in after them, and shut the door. I scooped up the overflowing bag of garbage from the middle of the kitchen, hauled it out the front door, and dumped it in the trash bin at the curb, just as Lucy stepped out of her car. It would have to do.

I ushered them into the living room and watched Lucy take in the brightly colored art on the walls, the silk drapery on the tables and chairs, the crystals and beaded baubles hanging from the light fixtures. "It looks like you," she said.

Before closing the door, I stepped back onto the porch, opened my mailbox, and reached in for the mail. My hand touched something cool and soft and wet. I jerked my hand back, then leaned in to see what I'd touched.

There, sitting on top of my *People* magazine, was a bloody, glistening, oozing red heart.

Chapter Seventeen

LUCY POKED AT it with a finger and made it quiver. "It's not even anatomically correct." She was surprisingly brave now that she knew the heart was nothing more than a heart-shaped Jell-O JIGGLER. "It's a valentine heart."

She hadn't looked so brave when I'd barreled into the house pointing at the mailbox, shrieking, "Heart, heart!" She'd looked terrified, her face white, her eyes wide and dark, but she and Annie had both rushed to me and each clutched one of my arms. We'd crept to the mailbox together and peeked inside, and I felt Lucy shudder next to me. Annie was the first to realize it wasn't real, and she was the one who had reached in and carefully lifted out the *People* magazine, without disturbing the heart and brought it into the house. It lay on the coffee table before us.

"It's got to be Dale," Annie said. "It's even got a double meaning. She's taunting you about finding the heart, and she's telling you she still loves you at the same time."

"It can't be Dale," I said. "There hasn't been enough time since we saw her at The Onion for her to even make a Jell-O JIGGLER."

"How long does it take to make Jell-O?" Annie asked.

"It could have been premeditated," Lucy said. "Maybe she already had the heart prepared, followed you to The Onion, and deliberately confronted you there. She *is* a stalker, after all. She may have wanted you to know it was from her."

I considered that a moment, but shook my head. "No, I think she just ran into us by accident. She's not really a stalker."

"How would you know? You're not objective," Lucy said. "You're the stalkee."

A knock on the door made us look up. Detective Ron Springer had arrived. It was the weekend, and he must have been off the clock, because he was wearing faded baggy jeans and a frayed red sweatshirt, clearly an old favorite, with WAZZU printed across the front.

"Is there a game today?" I asked.

"Yeah. I'm headed to my brother's house to watch it. Thought I'd stop here first and find out about this woman who threatened you."

"She didn't threaten me," I said.

Lucy scooted over and Ron sat beside her on the couch. I took the remaining chair.

"Yes, she did," Lucy said. "Based on the totality of the circumstances, I'd say it was a threat. Look at this." She poked at the heart and set it jiggling again. "It was in Kim's mailbox when we got home."

Ron poked at it himself. "Jell-O?"

"Yes," Annie said. "And Dale said something weird about the heart."

"It was from 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" Lucy said. "Edgar Allan Poe."

"Who is this Dale?" Ron asked.

"Kim's stalker," Lucy said. "Very menacing. We're getting a restraining order against her on Monday."

"It had to have been her," Annie said.

"Hm. Maybe. Could be kids," Ron said. "Could be anyone. It's public knowledge that Kimberly found the heart. This is probably just a prank." But he pulled his phone from his pocket and called a unit to come pick up the heart.

"Just a precaution," he said after he hung up. "Now tell me more about this woman."

I filled him in about Dale and about the letter she'd written to the school outing me. Annie shared her idea that Dale had put the heart into the dumpster in the first place, so that I would find it.

"How would she know that Kimberly would be looking through the dumpster?" Ron asked. He looked at me. "Could she have known that?"

"No. Nobody knew I was going to go through the dumpster that day, not even me. I didn't know the ring was going to get thrown away."

"Well, I'll go talk to her, maybe after the game." Ron glanced at the clock. "What time did you come home today?"

"It was around two," I said. "My mail is usually delivered between ten and noon. The heart had to have been placed there after the mail was delivered, right?"

"Looks that way," Ron said, "unless your mail carrier is a jokester."

"Or the murderer," Lucy said.

"Unless there wasn't a murder," Annie put in. "Have you considered that the heart may have come from another source? Like a hospital or a funeral home?"

Ron nodded. "We're looking into it. So far, no one's missing a heart."

"Well, someone is," Annie said.

The squad car arrived. Ron gathered up the heart, along with the magazine, and had the officer take it to the station. He quickly took his leave and hurried to his car, no doubt eager to catch the game by half time.

Annie suddenly realized the time as well. "I have to get home. It's pot roast day."

I shut the door behind Annie and sat in my chair across from Lucy. She spread her arms across the back and stretched her legs straight out, crossed at the ankles.

"How do you think Dale's going to take it, being questioned by a detective?"

"I think she'll be pissed," I said.

"I don't think you should stay here alone."

"I won't be alone." I walked to the bedroom door and opened it to let Pepper out. She charged into the living room to sniff out the stranger, like the dog she thinks she is, and was delighted to find Lucy still sitting on the couch. She leaped up beside her, placed her front paws on Lucy's leg, and sniffed her lips. Lucy brought a hand down and caressed Pepper's head.

"Who's this?"

"Pepper. She's my protector."

"She's huge. What's she weigh, twenty pounds?"

"Only fourteen," I said. "But she's a great guard cat."

"Uh huh. Like she's guarding me now?"

"You're a guest."

"I see. And Dale's never been your guest?" she asked, not really expecting an answer, so I didn't give her one. "Do you have a gun?"

"No. Lucy, I'm not going to shoot Dale."

"It was just a thought." She sighed and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. Pepper took the opportunity to slink onto Lucy's lap, and I took the opportunity to look down the top of her shirt. I don't normally leer, honest, but she had the top two buttons of her shirt undone, and the way she leaned forward gave me a clear view inside. She wore a cream colored bra, and the tops of her breasts plumped out over the lacy edge. She seemed oblivious. "Kim, I'm just concerned. If it was a joke, it wasn't a nice one. And if it wasn't a joke--"

"It was just a valentine heart, Lucy."

"It's two weeks until Halloween." Lucy sat up and destroyed my view of her cleavage. "It's creepy. It's vicious."

"Vicious? It's *Jell-O*."

She sighed deeply, crossed her arms, and sat back, clenching her lips and giving me a steady and determined look, as if she was preparing just how to deliver her next words to convince me of the errors in my thinking. It was really cute. I tried not to smile, but I couldn't help letting a little of it creep into my face. She saw it, and the expression in her eyes shifted. My chest suddenly grew tight and I couldn't take a full breath. Her own chest quickly rose and I knew something was going to happen.

Riiinnnggg!

I still have a landline at my house, and its intrusive ring jarred us out of our skins. Oh damn. What time was it? I glanced involuntarily at the clock. Becca was coming over at four for her first welding lesson, but it was barely three. I had no intention of repeating the mistake I had made during our dinner at Anthony's. I would ignore the phone. But it was too late, the damage was done. In the single second it took for me to look at the clock, Lucy had turned her attention to Pepper, as if nothing had almost happened. She gently lifted Pepper from her lap and scooted forward to stand up.

"You don't have to go," I said quickly, standing as well.

"Yes, I do, really," she said, with a polite, apologetic smile. The phone rang again. "Maybe you should answer that. What if it's Dale?"

I leaned over and checked the caller ID. It was Becca. "It's not Dale."

"Hm. Well, if you do hear from her, will you let me know?"

"Okay, but I'm sure nothing's going to happen."

"Please, Kim. Humor me." She stopped at the door, and looked at me, her brown eyes soft and serious. "I worry."

The goldfish in my tummy did a flip. I was going to have to name that little guy, if he kept making these regular appearances.

"Okay," I said in a little voice.

She stepped out onto the porch. The weather, which had been unseasonably warm for weeks, looked as if it was finally about to turn. A gust of wind hit us, ripping some of the vibrant red and orange leaves from the maple trees next door and tossing them into my yard. "You're going to have a bit of raking to do soon."

"Yeah. I don't mind it. They're so beautiful, and I love the way they smell when they're raked, especially after it rains."

Lucy laughed. "I'm going to invite you over to my folks' house in a few weeks. You'll be in heaven."

I stood in the doorway and watched her walk to her car. "I'll call you Monday about the restraining order," she called, and I nodded. She drove off, and I went to call Becca.

Chapter Eighteen

"FOR YOUR FIRST lesson," I said, "we need to talk about safety."

"Oh, *God*." Becca's voice was like that of an experienced sixteen-year-old forced to listen to sex education from her PE teacher.

"Do you want to weld, or don't you?" I asked sternly.

"I do, I *do*, Kim. I'm sorry." Becca assumed a penitent expression, then smiled winsomely.

"Okay, then, the first rule is to remember that we're dealing with explosive gases in here. So no smoking."

"Kim, you know I don't smoke."

I just looked at her.

"Well, only in bars, or when I'm drinking. Geez, do you give your students those bitch eyes too? I won't smoke, okay?"

"I do not give bitch eyes."

"You just did."

"Those weren't bitch eyes. Those were stop-lying-to-me-about-smoking eyes."

"Then you need to work on that. They look just like bitch eyes."

"This tank is acetylene and this one's oxygen. It's the combination of the two that makes the heat strong enough to melt metal. Here, put these on." I handed Becca the brand new pair of goggles I had bought just for her.

I made sure the regulators were closed, gave the acetylene cylinder valve a quarter turn, opened the oxygen cylinder, opened the acetylene torch valve, checked the pressure gauge, adjusted the regulator, and closed the acetylene torch valve. Then I opened the oxygen torch valve, adjusted the pressure, closed it, reopened the acetylene torch valve, picked up the spark lighter, held it in the flow of gas, and gave the flint a sharp strike.

A long dragon's tongue of flame shot out from the tip of the torch, and Becca clapped, her leather gloves making a soft *pom pom pom*. I ignored her, adjusted the acetylene, then added oxygen and adjusted it until the flame was a manageable inch long bullet.

"This is hot," I said to Becca, waving the flame back and forth to give her a good look at it. "Like twenty thousand degrees."

"Twenty *thousand*?"

"Or maybe two. I forget."

"And you teach math?"

"It's *hot*," I repeated, "hot enough to give severe burns, so respect the flame."

"Respect the flame. Got it. Number one, no smoking. Number two, respect the flame."

"Hold the torch like a pencil. Put it down right next to the metal, but don't let it touch. Watch. I'm going to weld these two pieces of scrap together."

I laid a rough four-inch by one-inch scrap of metal flat on the table, then set two one-by-one inch scraps of the same gauge on each side of it. I tacked the corners of the squares, then went along the seams with the torch, creating a line of beads as the metal melted. It was sloppy, but it worked. I lifted the torch, waited just a moment, then lifted the crude little object from the table and presented it to Becca.

"It's a cross. Cool."

"You can use a metal rod, too." I plucked a rod out of the jar where I stored various sizes. "You melt it to the pieces you're welding, and it creates a strong joint. Depends on what you're trying to do."

"Can I try?"

"Can you use your hand at all?"

"I can use my hand, but I can't move my upper arm." She wagged her lower arm out and back like a penguin.

"You're going to have to do it without a rod, then. I'll hold the metal for you."

I checked the flame, adjusted it again, and handed Becca the torch. She licked her lips, as if I'd handed her an ice cream sundae or a beer. I took two pieces of metal from the scrap bucket, larger pieces this time, since I didn't entirely trust Becca not to miss the joint and hit my fingers. I wore thick leather gloves, but I still didn't want them in the line of fire at twenty-thousand degrees. Or two. I held the pieces steady as Becca leaned forward and fused a rough joint.

I didn't have my arms around her, like I'd imagined, but we were standing very close. Even over the odor of acetylene and hot metal I could smell her perfume, and my lips were so close to her sparkly little gem-studded ear that I could have kissed it.

But a welding shop isn't really the best venue for romance. I couldn't look deeply into her eyes because we both wore goggles, I didn't dare take my eyes off the equipment anyway for fear of an accident, and we were covered from head to toe in unflattering protective clothing. I rapidly abandoned thoughts of love or lust and focused instead on teaching Becca how to weld.

An hour later Becca had created an awkward metal cube with dots on the side, a lopsided die that always landed six-up. I had turned off the equipment, we had stripped off our gloves and were washing our hands and faces at the sink.

"That was fun," Becca said, "but I'm tired."

"*You're* tired? I had to hold all the pieces for you. All you did was wield the torch."

"I designed that die all by myself."

"Seems to me I've seen that design somewhere before."

She stuck her tongue out at me. "Show me your work, then, smart ass. What's this?"

In addition to playing with glass, I'd also been experimenting with large sculptures. I'd started out with realism but quickly switched to impressionism when I realized I didn't have the skill or the tools to make anything that actually looked real. The piece she was looking at was one of my larger attempts. I liked it, but it wasn't quite right. It took up nearly four square feet of floor space. I kept it pushed beneath a shelf as far as I could, but half of it still stuck out, and now and then I just sat and looked at it and tried to figure out exactly what it was.

Long, thin, twisting shards of metal, rough-edged and sharp, protruded upward from a flat steel plate on the floor to a level about even with Becca's waist. There were roughly two dozen of them, all similar, but no two alike, placed randomly on the plate, all of them listing gently to one side as if being prodded by water.

"It's seaweed," I said. "Flowing with the tide."

"I like it. What do you call it?"

"I haven't decided yet."

Becca reached out a finger and rubbed it gently along the jagged edge of one frond. "How did you make this?"

"You can cut steel with the torch too," I said. "It's supposed to be a smooth cut, but I accidentally made the first cut rough, and I decided to do the same for all of them. I like it that way."

Becca shot me a flirtatious smile. "You like it rough, Kim?"

"Shut up." I nudged her, which made her finger slip on the blade of metal seaweed.

"Ouch." A drop of blood appeared on her finger tip. "It cut me."

"Oops. Sorry about that." I reached for the first aid kit on the shelf above the seaweed sculpture. "I told you welding can be dangerous."

"You forgot to tell me to respect the metal," she said, holding out her finger for a bandage.

I slapped the heel of my hand to my forehead. "Respect the teacher! That's the one I forgot. We'll have to start over."

"Too late."

I hadn't forgotten about Dale, but I'd let her slip to the back of my mind while I was giving Becca her lesson. I knew that some time that evening, Ron was going to try to talk to Dale about the Jell-O heart. I was uneasy about how she would react to being questioned, but I didn't really think I had to worry about her coming over to confront me afterward. I couldn't picture her leaving the Jell-O heart. She lacked the subtlety. Besides, I didn't think she was stupid enough to come over right after being questioned by the police.

But when I told Becca about the encounter with Dale at The Onion and the trauma of finding of the Jell-O heart, I elaborated just a bit. As I'd hoped, she immediately offered to spend the night with me. She called her mom and told her not to pick her up. I fed her dinner and let her drink beer and sleep in my bed.

Before we went to bed, though, she asked me again about Lucy.

"You never did answer my question," she said, cuddling under an afghan on her end of the couch. "Since when do you date during the school year?"

I was curled up on the other end of the couch under a different afghan. Our legs touched, but it was more a friendly feeling than sexual.

"I'm not actually dating Lucy," I said, but the memory of the goldfish in my belly robbed my words of conviction.

"Oh, please," Becca said. "You've never even *thought* about dating during the school year. What's different about Lucy?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing," I said. "Maybe I'm the one who's different."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm out now. That's why I never dated during the school year before. I couldn't risk being outed. But now that I'm out, I don't have to worry about that any more."

"Is that the only reason?"

I frowned and thought. What if I had met Lucy last year, or the year before, when I still wasn't out at school? Would I have taken a chance with her?

I shrugged. "I don't know."

Out of consideration for Becca's shoulder, I slept on the couch. It was a nice evening. Like having a sleepover with a buddy.

Chapter Nineteen

DALE NEVER DID show up, nor did she call. In fact, the next few days passed without incident, almost as if it were just a normal school week. There were no body parts discovered, no TABFAK drills, no police disrupting our days with interrogations. Lucy sent a temporary restraining order to my school e-mail address, with instructions for filling it out. I dropped it off at her office on my way home from school that day, but other than that I didn't hear from her at all. I did hear from Ron Springer on Tuesday, when he called to tell me that my Jell-O heart was--surprise, surprise--Jell-O, which unfortunately does not pick up fingerprints. Aside from that it was a normal school week, except for the walkout, looming at the end of it.

We weren't allowed to talk about the walkout in our classes, so most of the students weren't even aware it was happening. All they knew was they got Friday off, like any old curriculum day, and the teachers had to work. For us teachers, though, it was all we could think about. We were going to be defiant, and that was a Big Deal. The administration planned to hold grade-level curriculum meetings anyway, as if we were going to be there, though they had to have heard by now that we would not. The walkout was too big to be kept a secret from them.

Still, I think we all were a little nervous about it by Friday. It's not easy to thumb your nose at the administration. The walkout would draw the attention of the community to our grievances, possibly even the media, and the administration was not going to be happy about that.

Unfortunately, the weather, which was blustery all week, saved its real bluster for Friday. I woke to a morning so dark I had to turn on the TV to make sure my alarm was right. It was. Heavy dark clouds blocked the sun, and a steady drenching rain, driven sideways at times by strong winds, slammed the side of the house. Lovely. The walkout would not be cancelled, I knew that. The next curriculum day wouldn't be until May, and the union couldn't wait that long to make its point. Besides, if we didn't walk, we'd have to go to those scheduled grade-level curriculum meetings, and who wouldn't rather march all day in the pouring rain than sit through *those*?

Whenever I travel and tell people I'm from Spokane, Washington, they nearly always make a comment about our rain. They don't understand that Washington is a big state, and Spokane is on

the *desert* side of the mountains. Seattle gets forty inches of precipitation a year. We get sixteen, and a good portion of that falls as snow in the winter. We don't own umbrellas. Most of us don't have raincoats. When it rains, we stick a magazine over our heads and dodge the drops. Give us a good snowfall, and we'll pull out our fleece-lined, studded, waterproof boots, our goose-down insulated jackets, our bulky fur-lined gloves, and sometimes we'll even wear a hat. But we're not prepared for rain.

The closest thing I had to waterproof was a thin yellow windbreaker that I wear sometimes when I ride my bike on cool days. I pulled on a long-sleeved t-shirt, a fleece pull-over, a hooded sweatshirt, and the windbreaker over it all. For good measure, I grabbed an old pom-pom hat knitted by my mother years ago. It was lopsided and out of date, but it was a cheery yellow and orange and it was warm.

I was worried about the effect the pouring rain would have on our thin cardboard signs, but when Annie and I arrived at the church parking lot where we had arranged to meet, Lucy was there with the lid of her car trunk open, two gigantic umbrellas propped over it, and a warehouse-store roll of plastic wrap inside. She was helping people wrap their signs to keep them protected from the wet. She also had a box of flashing reflector lights for people to attach to their sleeves so they wouldn't accidentally get hit by a car in the gloomy morning, and she had a large pile of plastic garbage sacks that people could pull over their heads to help keep themselves dry. The woman was prepared.

"What a great idea," I said loudly as we approached. The wind and rain muffled voices.

She looked up and flashed me a big smile. She wore a traditional bright yellow slicker with matching buckled rain boots, like Jack and Sally wore to splash puddles in old fashioned first grade readers. She looked adorable. "I couldn't let your cute little drawings get ruined," she said.

I helped Annie wrap her sign. I never did get around to making a sign of my own, so I pitched in and helped the other teachers wrap theirs. The signs inevitably got a little wet, but nothing that would be noticeable from a distance. The problem was, it was such a dark, wet day, the signs themselves were hardly noticeable from a distance.

As soon as a sign was wrapped, the teacher would take it and walk toward the road in front of the school, which was only a few hundred yards away. Already a line of a dozen or more teachers were marching along the side of the road, signs waving, but if it weren't for the blinking reflector lights on their arms, they would barely have been seen from the passing cars. By nine o'clock, more than fifty teachers had shown up, nearly the entire teaching staff. I left Lucy and walked over to join Annie in the march.

It was *wet*. As if the rain weren't making us wet enough, the passing cars splashed the puddles up to hit us from all sides.

"What do we want?" a union rep shouted.

We answered in unison. "Smaller classes!"

"When do we want 'em?"

"NOW!"

"What do we want?"

"New books!"

"When do we want 'em?"

"NOW!"

We marched for an hour, the activity keeping us warm, and then people began taking turns heading back to the church parking lot for a break. Someone--probably Lucy--had brought a portable canopy and set it up, and placed a card table and a couple of chairs underneath it. That same someone had run back to town and picked up cartons of hot coffee, chocolate, and donuts. The breaks were almost worse than marching, though, because when we stopped moving, the cold set in. The rain had seeped through my windbreaker within the first thirty minutes, and I could see that the raingear of my co-workers was faring no better. By noon, there were more people huddled underneath the canopy than there were marching. Our walkout was becoming a bust.

"Don't give up," Lucy shouted to those shivering beneath the tarp. She must have been shouting a lot. Her voice was growing hoarse.

"The rain got through the plastic," someone complained in a quavering voice. "My sign disintegrated."

"Nobody can even see us," someone else said. "They don't know we're here."

"That's not true. *They* know." Lucy pointed to the administration building. We'd seen the superintendent and some school board members arrive and enter the building at various times during the morning. "*They* know you're here. That's what matters. And the news crews still may show up."

"We're not important enough for them," a voice griped.

Lucy sighed, and I could tell from the muscles moving in her jaw that she was grinding her teeth. This wasn't her fight. She was only the lawyer, but she was out here in the freezing rain just like the rest of us, doing everything she could to help our protest be a success. I was embarrassed for my whining co-workers, but privately I thought Lucy was a bit too optimistic. The superintendent and the school board members were no doubt sitting in their nice warm administration building, watching us drown and freeze out here, and they were laughing their asses off. We'd just saved them thousands of dollars by refusing to work the curriculum day. Our grand gesture of sacrificing our own time and money so the kids wouldn't miss a minute of education time was being noticed by no one. I suspected the news crews were too busy covering

the city's record-breaking rainfall to care about our little protest. Still, I didn't want to let Lucy down. I grabbed a sign in one hand, Annie in the other, and headed back to the school to march.

By now, there were only about fifteen of us marching, and we were exhausted. We kept up our chant, but it was weak. We felt futile.

It turned out, however, that Lucy was not too optimistic after all. Around one o'clock, just when even the most stubborn of us were about to call it a day, a news truck from Channel 4 drove up and stopped on the side of the road. Maybe they wanted to put a human face on the big storm, and we were a bunch of crazy humans who'd been out in it all day. Or maybe they were still interested in our little school district because, after all, a human heart was found in our middle school dumpster less than three weeks earlier. Whatever the reason, Channel 4 decided we were news.

Barry Owens, the only union rep still marching, stepped forward when Kyla Hansen, the Channel 4 news/weather girl asked who was in charge. The camera turned in his direction and flood lights brightened the day for the first time.

"The rest of you keep marching," Kyla directed. "It's good background color."

So, while Barry spoke to the news reporters, the rest of our decimated little group marched diligently in the background, our few signs drippy and soggy, trying to provide good background color. Suddenly a door in the side of the administration building burst open and three men erupted from it. I lied when I said no one in Spokane owns an umbrella. All three of those guys did, and they were each carrying them as they rushed over.

When they showed it later on the news, it was laughable. The camera zoomed in first on us poor, miserable, unpaid and sopping wet teachers, marching in the drenching rain all day long just to improve the education of our students, and then it panned to the three dry men in their dark suits and black umbrellas scurrying toward the news cameras as if intent on preventing Barry from speaking. They looked like the evil henchmen in a Superman comic book.

When I saw that one of the three men was Donald Stern, something came over me. Whether it was the Superman comic book image or the vision of him masturbating in his living room, he seemed more laughable than a real threat.

"What do we want?" I chanted loudly. "A new school board! When do we want it?"

"*NOW!*" everyone shouted.

The camera got it all, especially me, screaming for a new school board in my sopping wet but still bright yellow and orange pompom hat, the sign over my head bearing a picture of Donald Stern rolling dice at a craps table. The camera panned to the real Donald Stern and, to my surprise, despite the greedy grin on one face and the furious scowl on the other, the resemblance was unmistakable.

After the news crew left, we did call it a day. The superintendent and the two school board members had tried to tell their side of the story to Kyla Hansen, but when she pointed to my sign and asked Stern, "Is that you?" he'd turned and walked away, effectively ending the interview before it started.

Lucy declared the day a success. By then there were only a dozen of us left. We felt the camaraderie of a group of people who'd been through an ordeal together, and we didn't want it to end. As we folded up the card table and chairs and brought down the canopy, we hatched a plan to go home, get in dry clothes, and meet at a local pizza parlor at six o'clock to eat, drink beer, and watch Channel 4 news in hopes of seeing ourselves on TV.

Lucy met my eyes. "You going?" I nodded, and we both smiled. There hadn't been a repeat of our first quasi-date, but I had a feeling we were headed there.

I went home, stripped off my sodden clothing, and hopped in the shower. The hot water was delicious, and I stayed in it until it started to cool off. Putting on warm dry jeans and a sweater felt like luxury. Just as I was zipping up my coat, the phone rang. It was Annie.

"They're gone," she said. "Both of them just took off, in separate cars. She had a suitcase with her, and he had a backpack. I think they'll be gone a while."

"Now?" I asked in dismay. "You want me to steal the dog *now*?"

"It's dark enough," Annie said, "even though it's early. And Ken's gone too. That hardly ever happens."

I looked at the black, rain-streaked window. "But it's still raining," I complained. "I was going to go have pizza."

"I know it's still raining, Kim," Annie scolded, "and that poor dog's been sitting out in this mess all day long. You've been bugging me to call you as soon as there was a chance. Who knows how long it'll be before there's another one."

Oh, that poor dog. Annie was right, I couldn't pass up this opportunity. "All right, okay, I'll be right over."

My heart ached for that poor dog. But damn the timing.

I called Lucy. "Hi, it's me, Kim."

"Hi, Kim." Her voice was warm, and I could tell she was smiling. Crap.

"Uh, it turns out I'm not going to be able to make it to pizza after all." There was silence on the other end, and I knew she was waiting for me to tell her why. But how could I? Lucy had made it very clear the week before that she didn't want to know anything about our dog-napping plans.

"Something's come up," I said vaguely, then winced. It sounded so lame. It *was* lame. What would Lucy think?

"I see." She was no longer smiling, and her voice was several degrees chillier. "That's too bad."

"Yeah." I bit my lip, uncertain of how much I should say.

"Well, thanks for letting me know. I'll tell everyone you won't be coming." Like that was the only reason I'd called her, to use her as a messenger service.

"Thanks," I said. "I'm sorry."

"No problem," she said coolly. "Things come up. I'll talk to you later, okay? I have to go."

"Sure. Yeah, thanks. Bye."

I hung up the phone, kicked the couch, and went to change into my black dog-napping garb.

Chapter Twenty

DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME hadn't kicked in yet, but it still got dark early in October, and the heavy clouds added to the gloom, though miraculously it had finally stopped raining. By the time I reached Annie's, it was nearly pitch black. Like before, I parked a block behind the Stern's house and walked through the little woods. Since it was still technically daylight, I decided to walk as if I had a right to be there, rather than skulk. My progress was quick.

The Sterns' house was dark. I glanced at Annie's. The light was on in her bathroom window, and I could see the silhouette of her head and shoulders. She was watching for me. When she saw me, she gave a thumbs up gesture. It was still on. The Sterns had not returned home.

Still acting as if I was doing nothing wrong, I walked right into the Sterns' yard and called softly, "Here puppy."

I had the leash in my left pocket and hot dog pieces in the right. I fumbled with the baggie of meat treats to lure the puppy out, but there was no need. She tore out of her doghouse and lunged herself at me in delight. The chain caught her up short and she was jerked back hard into the wet dirt. Undeterred, she twisted herself back around and bounded up again. She was caked in mud.

"Okay, okay." I reached for her collar. They had her chained with a massive clasp, and I couldn't figure out at first how to unhook her. Even once I figured it out, my hands shook so badly I could

hardly get her collar released, and it didn't help that I had to simultaneously dodge muddy puppy paws and a vigorous tongue. Quickly, I slipped the hook of the leash onto the collar and, without letting myself think about it, hurried her out of the yard, through the trees, and back to my Rav. The puppy bounced beside me, her leaps bringing her head nearly level with mine. This was a great game.

I had some trouble when I reached the Rav. The only memories the poor dog had in her entire life were of being on the end of that chain. The opening of the back door scared her, so that she pulled back on the leash. But she wasn't the only one who was scared. With adrenaline rushing through my veins, I leaned down, grabbed all fifty pounds of her roughly around the middle, picked her up, and thrust her into the back of the car. Fortunately the back of my Rav was already grimy, because she was a mess. I slammed the door, hurried around to climb in, and took off. I didn't see a soul.

I don't remember much of the drive home, except that the puppy quickly got over her fear of the car and bounded from one window to the next to look out, which made it difficult for me to watch for police in my rear view mirror. When I got home, I reversed into the driveway and angled the Rav up to the back yard gate. I climbed out, opened the gate, then opened the rear door of the car and let the puppy leap out into the yard. I closed the gate again. My fence is made of six-foot tall cedar planks. I couldn't see the puppy, but I stood and listened. She made one short, high-pitched yelp, then turned and began exploring. I sighed in relief.

I went inside, filled a bowl with the doggie kibble I had bought in advance, and filled another bowl with water. I went to the back door, opened it, and set down the bowls. The puppy immediately jumped up on me, paws on my chest. I couldn't get much muddier, but it wasn't a habit I wanted her to get into.

"Down," I said firmly, and pushed her paws off me, but she didn't get it. She jumped right back up. "Down." I pushed her paws off me again, quickly turned my back to her, and went inside the house.

I didn't want to let the puppy into the house, at least not tonight. Not only was she filthy, but Pepper had never been exposed to dogs. I'd have to introduce them gradually. I wasn't worried about leaving the dog out all night. She was used to sleeping outside, the rain had stopped, and though my back porch is small, it is covered. She could sleep there. I found an old blanket and a pillow, sneaked the door open, and slid them onto the porch.

As I stripped out of my second set of wet and muddy clothing, I reached into the right-hand pocket of my black sweatshirt for the baggie of hot dog pieces and froze. The pocket was empty. Oh crud.

I had a distinct memory of pulling the baggie out of my pocket when I approached the dog in the Sterns' back yard. After that, I remembered only wrestling with the chain and the collar and the leash. I ran out to the Rav and quickly searched it. No hot dog baggie. I ran inside and grabbed the phone.

"Annie!"

"I watched the whole thing. You were great." Her voice was excited, but hushed. Ken must have come home.

"But Annie, I dropped the hot dog baggie. In his yard. You have to go get it."

"What? No, I can't. Ken's home."

"But Annie, they're supposed to think the dog just got loose and ran away. If they find that baggie of hot dogs, they'll know somebody stole her."

"They won't know it was you."

"My fingerprints are all over the hook at the end of the chain. It was huge. What if he calls the police?"

"Why would he do that? He doesn't even like that dog."

"He would do it just for spite," I said. "You know I'm right. Just because he doesn't want her doesn't mean he'd let anyone steal her."

Annie, *please*. I did everything else. You're right there."

She sighed heavily. "All right, I'll see what I can do. I'll call you back." She hung up.

I finished stripping, crawled into my flannel pajamas, and dropped, exhausted, onto the couch. I pulled the afghan over me and hoped with all my being that I wouldn't have to go out again tonight to retrieve that baggie of hot dogs. I glanced at the clock. It was only seven. I wondered if Lucy was still at the pizza parlor. Pizza and beer sounded delicious. I was tempted to give her a call and ask her to bring some pizza over. I had a feeling she might do it. But of course I couldn't ask. She'd still expect an explanation about why I couldn't go to the pizza parlor myself, and I couldn't tell her about the dog.

The phone rang and I snatched it up.

"I got it," Annie whispered breathlessly. "And just in time. I'd barely reached my deck when his car pulled in."

"Oh, thank you Annie, thank you. I couldn't face going out again."

"And I wiped the hook with my shirt. So your fingerprints are gone."

"You're the best. Now will you bring me some pizza?"

"Dream on. I'm making Ken fix my dinner tonight. I'm worn out."

"Yeah, me too."

I heated a can of tomato soup, grilled a cheese sandwich, washed it all down with a glass of milk, and was in bed asleep by eight-thirty.

Chapter Twenty-One

I WAS AWAKENED at dawn by the sound of galloping in the back yard. Instantly I remembered. The dog! I got up and peeked out the back window. It looked as if it had snowed. Dirty white goose down stuck to the ground in damp patches, and the puppy galloped around it in circles, throwing the empty pillow casing up in the air and catching it again. She ran and ran and ran before slowing to toss the pillow casing up again. She had a big doggie grin on her face.

My yard isn't large, but it must have felt immense compared to the six square feet she was used to maneuvering in. I laughed.

"Pepper, where are you? Pepper, come here. I want you to meet someone."

Pepper is an unusual cat. She comes when she's called, just like a well-trained dog. She sauntered in from the living room to see what I wanted.

"Here, Pepper, look out the window with me. What do you think?" I lifted her up and propped her on my shoulder. The movement of the dog running immediately caught her eye. She stiffened, her claws creeping out just enough to prick my skin.

"It's all right, Pepper. This might be our new dog. Will you try to get along with her?" I turned my face toward hers and our eyes met. She looked skeptical at first, but then she leaned in to smell my breath and I knew she'd agreed to give it a chance.

"Okay, then, I'm going to let her in. You stay here for now." I carried her to the couch and set her on its back where the afghan lay. It was her favorite spot. "Ready? I'm going to let her in."

The dog heard me unlock the back door. As soon as I opened it she was there, tail whipping wildly back and forth, her tongue lolling out exultantly.

"Good morning, pooch. How are you?"

She leaped up on me, front paws muddying the front of my pajama top, and tried to lick my chin.

"Oh, no you don't. Down. *Down.*" I lifted her paws off me and put them on the ground. She was thrilled with that, because it brought my face right down there next to her. She wiped her tongue across my mouth. "*Ick.* No, no, dog. Oh, what am I going to call you?" I stood straight, but kept one hand on her back and one on the top of her head. "Stay down, you. No jumping, you hear me? You understand?"

Amazingly, she seemed to. As long as I kept both my hands on her, she was content to stand and gaze at me adoringly. I used my butt to bump the back door open and stepped back. "Do you want to come in?"

She looked behind me, startled, and took a tiny curious step forward to peek into the house. I snatched a towel off the stove handle and rubbed it quickly over her muddy paws. She'd need a real bath later, but I was impatient to introduce her to my home. The inside of a house was completely foreign to her. She'd seen humans go into houses, but her chain wasn't close enough to the door of her old house to allow her to see inside. Maybe she'd thought that our houses were like her dog house, an empty shell and a floor. She certainly seemed taken aback by the contents of my kitchen.

She leaned heavily against my leg and took a brave step forward, then another. She sniffed at the recycling bin, at the legs on the chairs and table, the stove, the fridge, and the pantry door. I tried to imagine it from her perspective. I couldn't begin to understand what she was learning through her nose, but her eyes were wide with wonder. Then she reached the living room, with its carpet on the floor, the wooden rocking chairs, the miniature tree in the oversized planter, the leather couch, and the cat.

She froze when she saw Pepper. They stared at each other for a long minute. I wasn't worried about Pepper's safety. The back of the couch was high enough that she was out of the reach of the dog, unless the dog jumped onto the couch, but if that happened, Pepper would leap to the top of the bookcase, far out of everyone's reach. She'd done it before. But for now, she just stared. Finally, the dog's tail began to wag, hesitantly at first, and then with more vigor, and she gave a high-pitched yelp of excitement. Pepper didn't move, but she grimaced and gave a loud bossy yowl directed right at the dog. The dog instantly sat. We all got the message. Pepper was in charge.

"Okay, missy." I sat in the rocker. The dog transferred her attention from Pepper to me. She tried to crawl into my lap. I pushed her down. "No, no, no. You're too big for that. Now what shall I call you? Let's see, I stole you, so you're stolen goods. Shall I call you Contraband? Connie?" She tilted her head sideways and looked at me quizzically. "Okay, not Connie. You're right, that's dumb. How about Booty. Here Booty." She glanced from me to Pepper, perhaps wondering what she'd gotten herself into. "Loot? Will you answer to Loot?"

Either she was tired of my questions or she really liked that name, because she chose that moment to put her paws on my lap again and swipe her tongue at my face. "No, Loot. Down, Loot. Sit." I pushed her paws down and reached back and pushed her butt down as well. She sat. "Okay, then, there it is. Your name is Loot. Welcome to the family."

The phone rang. Loot jumped up, ready to flee from the strange sound, but when she saw that Pepper didn't stir and that all I did was reach for the phone, she relaxed.

"Hello."

"Hi, it's me," Annie said. "Have you seen the paper?"

"The dog's fine. Thanks for asking."

"Good. Have you seen the paper?"

"No, are we in it?" I asked, thinking of the walk-out. I hadn't noticed any newspaper reporters yesterday, but I could have missed them. They're not as obvious as television cameras.

"No, it's not that."

My blood froze. "It's not the dog, is it? Did they report it stolen?"

"No, and it wouldn't be newsworthy even if they did."

I relaxed. The dog gave a big sigh and lay down at my feet. Of course the dog wouldn't be newsworthy. Loot. I had to remember her name was Loot.

"They found a body, out by the school."

"What?"

"They found a body. In the woods behind the school."

"By our school?" I nudged Loot aside and went to the front door to retrieve my paper. Loot jumped up and followed me, glued to my side. A thought made me catch my breath. "Was it missing a heart?"

"No. They didn't give any details, but it does say that the person died sometime in the last day or so. So it couldn't be missing a heart. At least," she added thoughtfully, "not *that* heart."

I sank into the rocker, and Loot lay again at my feet. I opened the paper and quickly scanned the first-page article about the body. It was short. Details were scarce. The deceased was male. The body found late last night, most likely died in the last day or so.

"Why is this happening?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"I mean, I've taught for ten years, and I know bad things happen. Donna Mickelman got killed by that hit-and-run driver a few years ago, and Patrick Lowe died of leukemia, but dead bodies, missing hearts? What's going on?"

"I don't know," Annie said again. "Maybe it's not related. Maybe some homeless person got lost in the woods out there and died of exposure. Maybe it has nothing to do with Basalt Falls at all."

Chapter Twenty-Two

BUT IT DID. By Sunday, the body had been identified as that of Daniel Wrigley. We knew him as Danny. He was a junior at the high school. I'd taught him when he was in the fifth grade. The news didn't report exactly how Danny died, but it did say that the police were trying to determine if the death was murder or suicide. He clearly hadn't died from exposure, although the body had been found in the woods north of the high school on one of the wettest days in Spokane history. And since I've never heard of anyone committing suicide by removing one's own heart, I assume the heart remained in the body.

As I'd mentioned to Annie, we'd had students die before. It was always hard, even if it had been years since I'd taught them. They always remained fifth graders in my memory, and there's nothing more tragic than a child's death. But Danny's death struck a particularly sensitive chord.

Everybody knew Danny was gay. He was one of those femme boys who never could hide it, from the second grade on. He was feminine to the extreme and very, very pretty. He had gigantic blue eyes with long blond lashes, silky golden hair, and a perfect pink and white complexion. When he was little, his parents kept his hair cut short and boyish and insisted he wear ordinary t-shirts and jeans, but they could do nothing about his doll eyes and porcelain skin, his pink bow lips, his flirtatious grin, his dimples, and his girlish mannerisms. He was the prettiest girl in his grade, except he had a penis.

By the time Danny was in my class, his parents had given up the battle. They worried about him because they were afraid of what troubles life might bring him, but they no longer fought the truth. Danny was gay, and they loved him. They let him grow his hair long and wear pink shirts and play girls' games if he wanted to. Substitute teachers and guests at the school always mistook him for a girl and, even when the error was pointed out to them, shook their heads in disbelief. He didn't wear dresses or make-up or fingernail polish, but Danny looked and acted like a girl.

Before he reached the fifth grade, Danny's classmates didn't think there was anything odd about his looks or behavior. They were used to him. They'd known him since kindergarten, and he was just Danny. But in the fifth grade, the elementary schools combine to create the middle school, and there were students in his grade who had never met Danny before. They found him odd. It

wasn't too bad when he was in the fifth grade, or even the sixth. There were some comments, some jokes, a bit of name calling, but his sixth grade teacher and I kept a sharp eye out for such behavior and nipped it in the bud. We didn't let kids say, *Oh, that's so gay*, when they didn't like something, and we made sure Danny worked in groups that accepted him as he was.

In the seventh grade, school became more difficult for Danny. For the first time, he had to dress down for PE, there were after-school dances, and students were allowed to choose electives like cooking, sewing, wood shop, and machines. While plenty of girls chose wood and machine shop, and quite a few boys chose cooking, when they learned they got to eat what they cooked, Danny was the only boy who picked sewing.

I always felt I'd done my part to help ease Danny's life in middle school. I'd initiated discussions with students and faculty about acceptance of diverse lifestyles. I'd made sure Danny knew I liked him as he was, and I didn't let it slide when I heard kids call him names. But the one thing I never did, and that I now regretted with all my heart, was let Danny know I was gay too. I'd been too afraid.

Annie and I didn't carpool on Monday. She needed to get to school early to coordinate with counselors from other school districts who had volunteered to be on hand for students who needed help dealing with their grief and fear. Most of the volunteers would be at the high school, where Danny was better known, but a couple of them would help out at the middle school.

When I drove past the high school that morning, I saw more activity than usual. There were police cars and parents and news reporters. I was relieved to see that the middle school was quieter, and my own fifth graders hardly seemed aware that anything unusual had occurred. They were more excited about the arrival of Halloween at the end of the week.

"What if I just dye my hair black the night before?" Pia asked. "They can't send me home for that, can they? I can dye my hair if want to."

"I wouldn't push my luck, if I were you," I advised. "They really might send you home."

She crossed her arms and sat back in her chair with a thump, and several other students mimicked her in a pouty show of solidarity. I had just read aloud the bulletin announcing the nocostumes-on-Halloween rule. Students were warned that if they wore so much as a dab of make-up or a kerchief or a sequin that could be construed as part of a costume, they would be sent home and suspended for two days. A similar rule applied at the elementary schools where they had celebrated their previous Halloweens, but the elementary schools were inclined to turn a blind eye to the maneuvering of teachers to get around it. Teachers had been known to coincidentally assign oral book reports that required the students to dress up like a character in a favorite book. There were history presentations, with students dressed up as a character from another time. There had been harvest festivals, with students dressed as scarecrows and pumpkins, and one daring fourth grade teacher had even assigned science reports that allowed students to come to school as spiders and mad scientists and skeletons.

The middle school permits no such shenanigans. It has been deemed that middle school students are too excitable to handle Halloween. In middle school, Halloween is not allowed to exist. I'd even been reprimanded two years earlier for having my students perform a fifth grade version of Macbeth, which they had been practicing since the first day of school. We held our dress rehearsal on Halloween, which I thought was a clever way to satisfy the kids' itch to get into costumes on that day while still maintaining the spirit of the rule. But no. I was warned that if I ever conducted any lesson that even remotely included a scrap of a costume, I too would suffer a two-day suspension. Unpaid.

"Sorry, kiddo," I said, with real sympathy. "I know it's no fun. We'll try to have a good day anyway, okay?"

She scowled.

The normalcy of the conversation, at least for the time of year, put me off guard, and I was caught by surprise when Ms. James showed up at my door just then to whisper that Detective Hunt wanted to see me. Ms. James would watch my class until my return.

Detective Hunt? I glanced at the clock. It was only nine fifteen. Shouldn't Detective Hunt be at the high school assisting with the murder investigation? Why did she need to talk to me? Maybe it had something to do with the Jell-O heart. Or perhaps the walkout.

Dear God, it couldn't be about Loot, could it? I couldn't give Loot back now. She was part of the family, and her perpetual doggie grin told me I wasn't the only one whose heart would break if they took her away. Even Pepper would miss her. She'd taken to lurking, hunched over the top of the couch like a vulture, to slap Loot on the head, claws retracted, when she ambled by. Loot loved it, delighted with attention from any source whatsoever, having lived most her life without it.

The thought skittered across my mind that maybe I should call the lawyer Lucy had told me about. Last time I'd been questioned by the police I had called her, and she said I'd done the right thing. But I couldn't imagine I was going to be questioned about anything as serious as last time.

Chapter Twenty-Three

IF IT HAD been Ron Springer, maybe I would have just asked what it was all about, but it was not. Detective Hunt looked at me coolly as I stood in the doorway like a naughty student, and I didn't have the nerve. She gestured for me to come in, shut the door, and sit down, all without a word or a smile. Her suit was a crisp black today, with a severe white blouse buttoned up to her

neck. The green and blue children dangling from her neck were the only spots of color on her ensemble.

"Where were you on Friday, Ms. Wayland?"

I blinked. A lot happened on Friday. "I was at the walkout."

"All day?"

"Yes. I was on TV," I added, in case she needed evidence.

She nodded, asked me when the walkout started, when it ended, and did I leave to grab a bite to eat during the day? I was puzzled, but I had no difficulty answering the questions. Then she asked about after the walkout, and I grew cautious. Was this going to be about Loot after all?

"I went home."

"Did you stop anywhere?"

"No."

She looked up, her gray eyes narrowed as if she didn't believe me. "No?"

"No." I tried to assume a poker face. Why did I feel like I was lying when I wasn't? "I went straight home."

"What time was that?"

"I got home just after five."

"And then what?"

"Then what? Then nothing. I was home, that's all. I changed my clothes. I was cold and wet."

"What clothes did you change into?"

What the hell kind of question was that? And how did I answer it? Did I tell her what I changed into first, when I thought I was going out for pizza, or second, when I went out to steal the dog, or third, when I knew I was in for the night? "Jeans," I said finally. "And a sweatshirt."

"Did you leave the house again after you got home?"

Again, maybe if it had been Ron Springer questioning me I would have said something different. Maybe I would have told him the truth, trusted him not to arrest me for stealing a neglected dog. But something about Detective Hunt suggested that she might like an excuse to lock me up in the hoosegow. So I flat-out lied. "No."

She didn't look up. She didn't narrow her eyes at me. She didn't say "no?" like she didn't believe me. She just wrote it on her note pad and said, "You taught Daniel Wrigley, didn't you?"

"Yes." I was surprised at the turn in the conversation. "When he was in the fifth grade." My thoughts scrambled. This was about Danny, and my whereabouts on Friday--when he was apparently killed. Were they questioning me about my *alibi*?

A chill went down my back. I had just lied to the police about my alibi for the time of a murder. A murder of which I must be at least a minor suspect, or why would they question me about my whereabouts at all? Oh crap. I should have called that lawyer.

I considered briefly coming clean about the dog, but Detective Hunt looked up then, her eyes as cold as Friday's rain, and I chickened out. She would not be sympathetic.

"Have you spoken to him recently?"

"Danny? No, not recently. I don't think I've even seen him since he was here at the middle school. In the eighth grade."

"No?" Now, when I was telling the truth again, she doubted me. She frowned, and though she tried to conceal it, an expression of distaste crossed her face. "You are aware that he was gay?"

"Yes. Everyone knew Danny was gay. And that he was a great kid."

"You didn't ever talk to him about--that?"

"That? You mean that he was gay? Sure I did. Sort of." Damn. Just when I was getting my confidence back, she hit me in my soft underbelly. "I told him he was a good person, I told him that the kids who teased him and were mean to him were the weak ones. I told him to hang in there, because it gets better after high school."

Suddenly my voice wobbled and my eyes swam with tears. Danny would never get to find that out for himself. He would never get out of high school, never join a gay club at college, never get to find the other boys who were like him, never get to find out for himself that he was okay the way he was, never get to find the men who would love him even more because of the way he was. Poor, poor Danny.

"Did you tell him you were gay?"

"No." I shook my head and sobbed.

Detective Hunt sighed, rose, and walked around the desk to the door, and I realized the interview was over. "You can go now, Ms. Wayland."

I slipped into the women's bathroom to finish my cry. I blew my nose and wiped my eyes. Fortunately, I'd had the foresight to skip the mascara that morning. I knew I'd be crying at some

point during the day, and I'd rather have no make up on at all than streaks of it running down my face. I ran my fingers through my hair and returned to my classroom.

The counselor's office is at the far end of the hall. I don't have to pass it to get from Ms. James' office to my classroom, but as I was walking down the hall I could see little Ryan Richardson sitting on the floor outside Annie's office. His legs were stretched out in front of him in a large V, and he threw a small rubber ball against the far wall so that it bounced back at him. I slinked past my classroom door and approached Ryan. When he saw me, he quickly pocketed the ball.

"Hey, Ryan," I said. "What are you doing out here?"

"Waiting my turn for Mrs. Gold," he said.

"Your turn? Why?"

"All the kids that knew Danny Wrigley got to talk to her."

I squatted down next to him. "You knew Danny Wrigley?"

He nodded, then shrugged. "Sort of. Mostly Ricky did. But Mrs. Collier said if anybody had brothers or sisters who knew him, we could see Mrs. Gold too."

"Ricky knew Danny?"

"Uh huh. They were friends."

"I'm glad." I was pleased to learn that Danny had a friend like Ricky. Ricky was one of the more popular boys, and if he'd taken Danny under his wing, maybe Danny wasn't bullied as badly at the high school as I'd feared.

"Yeah," Ryan said, but as if he didn't mean it. He pulled the rubber ball out of his pocket and began absently bouncing it. "But I miss Ricky."

"Oh. He hasn't come home yet?"

Ryan shook his head, then looked up at me, his brown eyes filled with anxiety. "Maybe Danny knew where he is, and now he can't tell us."

"But you said Randy knows where Ricky is."

Ryan sighed and said resentfully, "He won't tell me."

"Do your parents know that Randy knows where Ricky is?"

"No." Ryan's eyes grew big with fright. "Randy said don't tell. They're mad at Ricky. They don't want to talk about him. Don't tell, Ms. Wayland, please?"

"I won't tell." As if I'd voluntarily call Candy or Calvin Bunch. "Maybe you should tell them, Ryan. They might be more worried about Ricky than you think."

He shook his head. "I'm not telling. Then they'll get mad at me." He gave the rubber ball a particularly hard bounce. He caught it before it ricocheted down the hall, but it recalled him to the fact that he was playing with a forbidden toy in front of a teacher. He pocketed the ball again and assumed an innocent expression.

I ruffled his hair and stood up. "Okay. See you later, alligator."

He smiled. "In a while, crocodile."

I returned to my classroom and let Ms. James return to her office.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"YOU *LIED* TO the police?"

"Oh come on, Annie, I had to. She would have arrested me."

"Stealing a dog is a far cry from murder, Kim."

"We don't know Danny was murdered. Anyway, I didn't know she was questioning me about Danny when I lied. I was worried about Loot."

"Loot?"

"That's what I named the dog." I rubbed my feet on Loot's belly and rocked back in my chair, the phone at my ear. Loot lay on her back, her legs splayed, head dropped to the side, and her tongue lolling out in ecstasy.

"So, you decided to keep her?"

"She decided, Pepper decided, we all decided together. She fits here. I can't give her up now."

"Why didn't you talk to Lucy before you talked to Detective Hunt?"

"It didn't seem like that big a deal. I thought maybe they just had a follow-up question about the Jell-O or something. Anyway, Lucy said not to call her if I needed a criminal lawyer. She gave me that other lawyer's name."

"But that was before you two became so close."

"We're not that close. Besides--"

"Besides what?"

"Besides, I blew her off Friday night. We were going to meet for pizza, remember? I had to cancel to go get Loot. And I couldn't tell her why."

"Oh."

"She may never want to see me again."

"Oh, I'm sure she will," Annie said, but she didn't sound sure.

"So will you back me up if the police ask you about my alibi?"

"I'm not going to lie to the police, Kim."

"Well, then, you'll have to confess to Ken that you aided and abetted in dog-napping from your next-door neighbor." Silence. "Think about it, Annie."

"I'm not going to lie to the police," she repeated, less certainly this time. "But I doubt they'll even ask me. Why would they?"

"They probably won't," I agreed. "I think the only reason Detective Hunt even questioned me is because I'm a lesbian and Danny was gay. She must think we all belong to the same club or something."

"You don't think it's because you found the heart?"

"What does the heart have to do with Danny? He died three weeks after I found the heart, and his heart was still in his body."

"Still, it's a pretty big coincidence, you finding a heart in the dumpster of the middle school and then three weeks later a high school student is killed. Add to that the fact that you're both gay, I can see why they'd want to talk to you."

"How do you see that?" I asked, getting irritated. "Being gay has nothing to do with it. I didn't find that heart because I'm gay."

"You're assuming you're innocent."

I was so dumbfounded by that remark I stopped rocking and my foot stopped caressing Loot's belly. She rolled her eyes at me and stretched her tongue out to lick my leg.

"Oh, Kim, you know what I mean. *I* know you're innocent, and *you* know you're innocent, but *they* don't know it."

I started rocking again, slowly, and Loot resumed her comatose position. "Crap. What should I do, Annie?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. Or--maybe you should call Lucy."

I dug my toes into Loot's belly. She grinned, but I didn't feel much like smiling. I couldn't call Lucy. Not only was she not my lawyer, I wasn't even sure she was my friend.

Chapter Twenty-Five

NO HALLOWEEN AT school. Uh huh. Right. Just try to impose such a rule on a bunch of ten year olds. Nearly every student had managed to sneak at least one subtle part of that evening's Halloween costume into his or her school garb that day. Pia wore the giant hoop earrings that were part of her Gypsy fortune teller costume, Karmeeeka had a bandana knotted around her neck, Ian had his left arm in a sling for some inexplicable reason, and Jack brought a toy retractable dagger, apparently part of his pirate costume. Any sort of weapon, real or not, was automatically a punishable offense any day of the year, so I sent Jack down to the office to join the rest of the long line of students awaiting a Halloween visit with the vice principal. Aside from Jack and his dagger, though, my students' costume attempts were harmless, and I ignored them for the most part. When they made a game of it, though, and started guessing each other's costumes from the hints they'd worn, I had to ask them to stop it, at least in my presence. I'd already lost one day of pay that month due to the curriculum day walkout. I couldn't afford a two-day suspension.

Given that the administration had strong-armed costumes out of the school because they felt middle school students were too excitable to handle anything out of the ordinary on Halloween, I was surprised to hear the TABFAK alarm go off that morning shortly before lunch. Of all the days to pick.

The students didn't need any reminder of what to do this time. They immediately tipped their desks, the contents of which flew everywhere, and ducked down behind them, hoop earrings, bandanas, and all. Ian's left arm had long abandoned its sling, which hung limply down his back. I went to the classroom door and poked my head out to see if any errant students roamed the hall.

There was one. Bodey Mead stood like a statue halfway between my door and Eva's. I was amused to see that even the big eighth graders weren't immune from the desire to sneak in

costume bits. Bodey was tall, nearly six feet already, though he was only fourteen, and he wore a long black cattle driver's coat, like those seen in movies about the Australian Outback.

I waved him toward my door, but he just stared at me, eyes wide. He looked more frightened than little Ryan had during the last TABFAK drill. Of course, Bodey shouldn't have been there. Eighth graders weren't allowed in the fifth and sixth grade wing without a special pass. Maybe he was afraid of getting an infraction. I glanced at his hands to see if he carried the orange card that would indicate he was allowed in our wing.

He did not. What he did carry, though, nearly hidden in the folds of his dark coat, was a long black rifle. I was puzzled about how he had managed to hold on to such a prop until this late in the day. I'd sent Jack down to the office at the beginning of first period. I looked back at Bodey's face and was even more puzzled to see his eyes flood with tears as he raised the rifle and pointed it straight at me.

I don't know why it took me so long to be afraid. I guess it was because I *knew* Bodey. I had taught him, only three years earlier, when he was a foot and a half shorter. I'd scrounged in the lost and found for a pair of sweats for him to wear the day he wet his pants, and none of the other students ever found out about it. I'd drawn a smiley face next to the cartoons he drew on the edges of his math paper, even when he got nearly every problem wrong. I'd convinced his parents to have his hearing tested when I realized Bodey wasn't deliberately failing to follow directions, he truly didn't hear them. It turned out he had a forty percent hearing loss in his right ear.

This was *Bodey* pointing the rifle at me. What was there to fear?

And, indeed, it turned out I was right. Although the rifle was loaded, and he did fire it. I watched his eyes as, tears dripping down his face, he deliberately aimed the rifle at me, silently mouthed the word "sorry", and then jerked the rifle to the left and began firing rounds at the concrete block wall.

He was at least eight feet away from me, but I don't recall taking any steps. It seems to me I just flew through the air, but the next thing I knew I had tackled Bodey and we were both on the ground. I lay on top of him, my face only inches from his. He didn't struggle. He lay there, limp, staring past my face at the ceiling, tears dripping now down the sides of his face toward his ears.

Then others were there. Hands lifted me to my feet, and other hands grabbed Bodey. I heard screaming and shouting and little kids crying, but I didn't make out any words. I started to return to my classroom, but somebody stopped me and directed me to a spot near the wall at the far end of the hall, where I was told to sit. I protested, but then Annie was there, and she sat down on the floor next to me and held my hand, and it was all right.

"The students," I said.

"They're sending them home," Annie said.

"Oh."

I could see Bodey, far down at the other end of the hall. He was held standing against the wall, two male teachers flanking him, holding his arms in grips that were sure to leave bruises, but Bodey didn't struggle. He hung limp in their arms, head tilted back against the wall, his eyes closed. The rifle lay on the floor where it must have fallen when I tackled him.

I heard sirens. Moments later uniformed police were there, and not long after that Ron Springer showed up, along with Detective Hunt. They both looked grim. Ron stopped in front of me, hitched his pants, and carefully squatted down to my level. His knees cracked loudly.

"You all right?" he asked, his eyes searching.

"Sure," I said. "He wasn't trying to hurt me."

Ron compressed his lips and nodded, acknowledging my words, but not as if he believed me. Bracing himself with the wall over my head, he inched himself upright again. He looked at Annie. "You'll stay with her?"

"Of course," Annie said.

Ron went to join Detective Hunt, where she had joined the group of blue uniforms surrounding Bodey. More police were taking photos of the wall, where the bullets had gouged gray holes in the white painted concrete. Others were marking where the casings had fallen, measuring distances, taking more pictures.

"He really wasn't trying to hurt me," I told Annie softly.

"He fired a rifle at you, Kim," Annie said.

"Not at me. He aimed for the wall."

"He hit the wall right next to where you were standing. How do you know he didn't just miss?"

"He didn't miss. He aimed for the wall."

She squeezed my hand but didn't answer. She didn't believe me.

Neither did Ron or Detective Hunt, when I repeated my story for them later, over and over and over again. They didn't *say* they didn't believe me. They listened politely to everything I said and were, in fact, very gentle with me, as if I were sick or crazy. But I could tell they didn't believe me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I HAD DRIVEN that day, but Annie took my keys and drove me home. There were news crews out in front of the middle school, one from each of the three local news stations, but we slipped out the back and they didn't notice us. Although the shooting had occurred before noon, it was nearly five o'clock by the time we got to my house. It had taken a long time for Ron and Detective Hunt to question me, and they kept having to take breaks every time someone came to the door with information.

I was surprised to see Becca sitting on my front steps when we pulled into the driveway. She jumped up when she saw me.

"Oh my God, Kim, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. "How did you know about it?"

"It's been on the news all day."

I unlocked the door, and we all trooped in.

"I'm Becca," she said to Annie.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Annie."

"I thought so." Becca dropped onto the couch.

I sat down in my favorite chair and rocked. Annie remained standing, ready to take action, I suppose, should any be necessary.

"They said there was a shooting," Becca said, "and that it was a fifth grade teacher who brought the gunman down. I just knew it was you. It was, wasn't it?"

"It wasn't a gunman," I said. "It was just an eighth grader. Bodey Mead."

"Eighth graders can't be gunman? What about that kid in Moses Lake a few years back? Didn't people actually die that time?"

I shrugged. I knew this was different. This was Bodey we were talking about.

"So what happened?" Becca asked.

"We had a TABFAK drill," I said. "So I went out into the hall to see if there were any kids I should bring in, and there was Bodey with a rifle."

"It wasn't a drill," Annie put in. "It was the real thing."

"Did someone see him come in with the rifle?" I asked, my curiosity roused for the first time. "Why didn't anyone stop him?"

"Maybe because he had a rifle?" Becca suggested.

"No one saw him come in, as far as I know," Annie said. "His mother called and said he was coming to the school to shoot someone."

That was news to me. Before I could ask about it, though, there was a knock at the door. I jumped at the sound. The events of the day must have shaken me more than I realized, since I don't normally envision gunmen on my porch when someone knocks.

Annie walked over, peeked out the peep-hole, and opened the door wide. "Welcome," she said.

Lucy stepped in. She walked over quickly, crouched in front of me, and put her hand on my knee, her eyes on mine, assessing. "I couldn't get away sooner. How are you?"

"I'm fine." I covered her hand with mine. A tight knot I hadn't realized existed relaxed in my chest, and I breathed deeply. It seemed I was forgiven for cancelling out on pizza the week before. I was glad she was there.

Apparently satisfied, Lucy rose and turned her gaze toward Becca. They seemed to need no introduction. They surveyed each other in silence for a moment, taking each other's measure, like men do. Lucy was dressed in power-suit mode that day. A crisp black suit over a shimmery cream and black knit shell, with a long red wool coat draped over it all. Becca wore a stretched out navy sweater over the loose sweatpants she'd favored since her shoulder operation, and her arm was still in the sling. Lucy looked great, and of course Becca was cute in anything. As far as I was concerned, it was a draw. Finally Lucy stepped toward the couch with her hand stretched out.

"Hello. You must be Becca."

"And you're Lucy," Becca said, bringing her gaze back up from Lucy's shiny patent-leather boots to her face. They shook hands solemnly. "It's nice to finally meet you."

They both seemed to feel it was a moment of great import, and I squirmed a bit wondering what exactly it was I had revealed to each about the other.

I hadn't asked for an attorney to be present when I was questioned by Ron and Detective Hunt that afternoon. It hadn't really occurred to me, since they were there as rescuers, not interrogators. But only now did it occur to me to wonder *why* Ron and Detective Hunt had appeared in response to the shooting. Why didn't some other detectives cover it? Why had they questioned me so closely? The shooting was just a random event, wasn't it? Except, why did it happen to *me*?

"So what exactly happened?" Becca asked. "The TV said you tackled him."

Annie frowned and shook her head at Becca.

"No, it's okay," I said. "I don't mind talking about it."

Annie settled in on the opposite end of the couch from Becca. Lucy gave my shoulder a squeeze, crossed over, and sat in the other rocker.

"It's all kind of a blur, though," I said. "He was in our hall, and he shouldn't have been, since he's an eighth grader. And he had the rifle. But I thought it was just part of his Halloween costume. Then he started shooting, and the next thing I knew, I was on top of him. I guess I did tackle him."

"Did he resist?" Lucy asked.

"No, he just lay there. Crying." I turned to Annie. "How did his mother know what he was going to do?"

"He left a note."

"Did it say who he was going to shoot?" I asked.

"I don't know," Annie said. "All I know is that the office got the call. Bodey's mother said he was coming to the school with a rifle to shoot someone, and then they rang the TABFAK alarm. But it was too late, of course."

"At least it went off before he went into any classroom," I said absently. I was concentrating on controlling my voice before asking my next question. I did *not* want to sound pathetic.

"Why did it happen to me?" I finally asked, keeping my voice merely curious. "I mean, why this *too*?" I counted on my fingers. "I'm the one who found the heart, I'm the one they questioned so much about Danny, and now this? Why is it all happening to me?" It sounded pathetic. There was no way around it.

Lucy looked at me curiously. "Danny? You mean the kid who was killed? When did they question you about him?"

I thought back. "Monday. At school."

Her eyebrow made a question, and I rushed on to answer it. "I didn't call you because you're not my lawyer. And I didn't have anything to do with Danny's death. They only questioned me because I'm gay. I didn't want to call that other lawyer."

"What's being gay got to do with it?"

"Danny was gay. Detective Hunt seems to think we all belong to the same club. Never mind that he was a sixteen-year-old boy and I'm a thirty-two-year-old woman."

There was another knock at the door. We all froze. Slowly Annie rose and approached the door, followed by Lucy, who hovered behind her. Annie peeped through the hole again, laughed, and said as she opened the door, "Do you have any candy?"

"Trick or treat!" A gaggle of princesses and pirates stood on the porch, sacks and pillowcases proffered.

I'd forgotten it was still Halloween.

"Hold on." I went to the kitchen and pulled the giant bag of treats from the cupboard, emptied it into a large orange bowl, and brought it back to the living room. "Here."

By then the princesses and pirates had been joined by Spiderman and Hannah Montana. Annie dropped a large handful of candy in each sack, shut the door quickly, and turned off the porch light. "I don't think we want to be answering to trick or treaters tonight."

"We'd better turn off the living room lights too, then," I said, switching off the lamps. "If they see any light at all, they'll knock."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

WE MOVED TO the kitchen and pulled chrome and leatherette chairs around my old blue Formica table. I sat at the end nearest the back door, with Lucy on my right, Becca on my left, and Annie across from me at the other end. Annie put the candy bowl in the center.

"What sort of questions did they ask you about Danny?" Lucy asked, reaching out to snag a Milky Way from the bowl.

"Oh, you know, things like how well did I know him, when did I last see him, where was I the night he died, things like that."

"When did he die?"

I hesitated, reluctant to even mention pizza night. But Annie was not sensitive to that issue. "Last Friday," she said. "In the evening."

Lucy looked at me thoughtfully as she sucked caramel off her teeth, but she refrained from asking me where exactly I had been last Friday evening.

"Maybe your neighbor killed Danny," Becca said to Annie, speaking up for the first time since she'd greeted Lucy.

"My neighbor?" Annie asked, surprised.

"Yeah, the pervert." Now it was Becca's turn to count off on her fingers. "He had the motive, he had the opportunity. And what's the other one. Means? How was Danny killed?"

"What was his motive?" Annie asked.

"What was his opportunity?" Lucy added.

"His motive," Becca said, "is that he likes pretty little gay boys. What do you want to bet that he either made a move on Danny, or Danny found out about what the perv likes, so--what's the perv's name again?"

"Donald Stern." I was perfectly willing to believe Donald Stern was a murderer. I already knew he was a creep.

"So this Stern guy had to get rid of him, so he wouldn't spill the beans," Becca said. "Or maybe Danny was blackmailing him."

"Maybe you watch too much TV," Annie said, frowning at Becca.

"How do you know he likes pretty little gay boys?" I asked.

"I took his porn, remember? I watched enough of it to know what he likes."

"It's not child porn, is it?" Lucy asked anxiously.

"No, it looks legal enough," Becca said. "He bought it at Castle. The wrappings were still on most of them. The actors are probably all eighteen--just."

"He's been married for more than thirty years," Annie said, perplexed and somewhat alarmed. "He has three grown children. He has grandchildren."

"That's an old story," I said.

"It happens more than you might think," Lucy agreed. "But being closeted with a penchant for young men is a far cry from being a murderer. And when was his opportunity?"

"Well, we know he wasn't home that night, at least for a while," Becca said. "Where did he go and what did he do?"

"How do you know he wasn't home?" Lucy asked.

I glared Becca quiet, and neither Annie nor I broke the guilty silence.

"Kim?" The expectant look that accompanied Lucy's quiet question left me no choice. Whatever was growing between us was too fragile to expose it to such a denial of trust.

I sighed, got up, and walked to the back door. Normally I would have let Loot in as soon as I got home from school, but I hadn't gotten around to it yet when Lucy showed up, and after she arrived I thought maybe I could still keep Loot a secret. I'd heard her barking periodically, presumably at trick or treaters, but no one else had seemed to notice. It didn't matter, I now realized. Keeping Loot a secret from Lucy was not an option. I opened the door, and let the jet black mass of wriggling puppy in.

Loot was delighted we had company. She leaped up on me first to lick my face, then wheeled around and dropped her front paws onto Annie's lap, pushed off and zipped around to nuzzle Becca's crotch, and had just reached Lucy when she was brought up short with a sharp "*Down.*"

Loot stopped because she was startled at Lucy's firm command, not because she knew what it meant. When she started to leap up again, Lucy put one hand on Loot's collar, the other on her butt. "Sit," she commanded, pushing with one hand and pulling with the other.

Loot sat, tail wagging, eyes on Lucy, eagerly awaiting some more attention.

"Stay," Lucy said, putting the palm of her hand in front of Loot's nose. Loot licked it.

Lucy sighed and looked at me. "You stole Donald Stern's dog."

I nodded.

"Friday night?"

I nodded again. Lucy sat back and looked at me, just her eyes smiling, as she suddenly understood about pizza night. It was like a wink without the wink, and Gilly, my favorite goldfish, did a cartwheel.

Loot took advantage of Lucy's momentary inattention to lunge forward, put her front paws on the table, and gnash at the bowl of candy.

"Loot, *no.*" I lunged across the table, yanked at Loot's collar, and pried the Snickers bar from her jaws. I hauled her around to a spot beside my chair. "Lie down," I ordered and, as incentive, I kicked off my shoes and rubbed at her with my feet. She rolled over onto her back, tongue lolling, and let me knead her belly with my toes.

"And this happened the night Danny Wrigley was killed?" Lucy asked, digging into the candy bowl again.

"That's what they're saying," I said. "Danny left a friend's house at five o'clock that afternoon, right after it stopped raining. He was heading for home, but he never made it."

"His body was found later that night," Annie added. "In the woods behind the school between his friend's house and his home. His father found him."

"And the perv was gone at the exact same time," Becca said, relishing the evidence against Donald Stern.

"I called you as soon as he left that night," Annie said, looking at me. "What time was that?"

"It was just after five." I glanced at Lucy. "Right before I called you."

"And when you called me to go get the hot dog pieces?" Annie asked. "It was around seven, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "And it was only about ten minutes later that you called me and said that Donald Stern had just come home. So he was gone only for a couple of hours, from around five to seven."

"The same time Danny was killed," Becca said again.

"What did you tell the police when they asked where you were Friday night?" Lucy asked.

I hesitated, gave a cheesy grin, and said, "I told them I was home all night."

Lucy winced. "You lied to the police?"

"I had to." I looked down at my orange Halloween socks, so bright against the black of Loot's fur. "I couldn't tell them I was stealing Loot."

"Well you're going to have to tell them now," Lucy said, matter-of-fact, and her words hit me like the rifle shots that had hit the wall next to my face earlier that day.

"No, I won't tell them, I won't give up Loot!" At least that's what I tried to say. But it was more of a wail, or the howl of a coyote, or a wolf. It was suddenly all too much. I slid from my chair and dropped onto the floor next to Loot. I wrapped my arms around her, buried my face into her fur, and sobbed. Loot spun around, startled, and--being an unsympathetic soul--wriggled out of my arms and slunk away. But that was all right, because by then Lucy was there, right beside me on the floor. Her arms wrapped around me and she was holding me and rocking me, and I clung to her and wept.

I cried because Bodey had fired rifle shots that missed me by inches, and I cried because Danny was dead, and because I'd found the heart in the dumpster, and because Dale had outed me at school. I cried because too much had happened in too short a time, and the best thing to come out of it all--except Lucy, perhaps--was Loot. I cried because I couldn't lose Loot.

When I finally slowed down, I realized that I was sprawled halfway on Lucy's lap, my butt nestled in the well created by her crossed legs. We were both sitting on her nice wool coat on the floor, and I had ruined the jacket of her suit with my tears and snot. I dragged my face away from her chest and looked up at her. Her expression was tender, and tears leaked from her eyes. I reached up and touched a tear with my thumb.

"Why are you crying?" I asked in my tear-clogged voice.

"Because you are," she said.

"Oh." That struck me as achingly sweet, and I wept a few more hiccupping tears, but basically I was done. I looked around. "Where are Annie and Becca?"

"They fled." As she said it, they poked their heads into the doorway from the living room.

"All clear in here?" Becca asked in a hushed voice.

Embarrassed, I crawled up from Lucy's lap and reached a hand out to help her up. I grabbed a handful of tissues and mopped up my face. "I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be," Annie said, coming into the kitchen and sitting back down at the table. We all resumed our previous places as if I hadn't just made a fool of myself. "You've been through a lot."

That made my eyes sting again, but I blinked back the tears. "Yeah," I said in a shaky voice. "I guess so."

Loot had returned to the kitchen with Annie and Becca, but instead of lying beside me, she had chosen to plop her butt down next to Lucy. She gazed up at Lucy adoringly, as if begging for another command. I glanced from Loot to Lucy. Lucy was watching me. I reached my hand across the table and Lucy took it.

"Lucy," I started.

"I know." She looked down at Loot and sighed heavily. "You can't give her up. I know." She bit her lip, and I watched her anxiously. Becca and Annie watched us both. Lucy looked at Annie. "Can't you just tell the police what time Stern left and came back? You're his next door neighbor. You're the one person who would naturally be in a position to know that."

"Only if I was standing in my bathtub," Annie said. "Besides, why would they even want to know where he was? Without knowing the rest of it too?"

"They need to know about the porn," Becca said. "The motive and the opportunity go together. By themselves, they don't mean anything."

"And they can't know about the porn," I said, "without telling them how we know about it. And then they'll find out about Loot."

Lucy gnawed at her lip some more. I knew she was wrestling with her legal conscience, disturbed at the thought of withholding information from the police but also as reluctant as I was to risk damage to our tender new--whatever it was.

Finally, Lucy looked up and said, "The police only need to know about Stern if he's guilty, right? If he's innocent, they won't ever need to know anything about him or his porn or the dog, right?"

Becca and Annie and I looked at each other, then looked back at Lucy and nodded.

"So all we have to do, then," Lucy said, "is find out if he's innocent."

She looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded her head slowly as if agreeing with herself. "Yeah, that's it. We can do that." She looked around the table, met each of our eyes, and said, "We just need to find out if Stern did it."

I was stunned for a moment by the brilliance of her plan. If we found out that Stern was innocent of Danny's murder, Loot would be all mine. If he was guilty, well, we'd deal with that if it came to it.

"You're brilliant," I said.

Lucy grinned. "So you're in?"

"I'm in." I gave Lucy's hand a squeeze.

"Me too," Becca said, bouncing in her chair with excitement. She put her right hand on the table and I clasped it, then she carefully lifted her sling and put her left hand on the table toward Annie, and Lucy did the same with her right.

Annie looked at the two hands doubtfully. "I'm not sure this is such a good idea."

"Oh please, Annie," I begged. "After all we've done for Loot, we can't give her up now."

"Come on, Annie," Becca said impatiently. "It'll be fun."

"Fun?" Annie asked skeptically.

"You can just be our scout," I said. "Like when I took Loot. You can watch Stern from your window and report to us. You don't have to do anything else."

"Annie?" The fingers of Lucy's hand wiggled as they lay on the table, flirting with Annie. "Please?"

Annie's dusky cheeks turned faintly pink. She looked across the table at me, rolled her eyes in resignation, and slid her hand first into Lucy's, then Becca's. "All right. I'm in."

"Great," Lucy said. "Now is there anything to eat around here besides candy? I'm starving."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

THEY LEFT AT ten o'clock, all three of them at the same time, though Lucy sent me a look that suggested she would be calling later, or maybe even stopping back by. In fact, I had just let Loot out into the back yard and tossed the empty pizza box into the trash when a knock came at the door. I smiled. She must have gone no farther than around the block, just far enough to throw Annie and Becca off her trail. I skipped to the door and opened it.

It was Dale.

I slammed the door shut, but Dale used to be a cop. She knew that trick. She had already stuck her foot into the opening. She pressed the door open. I pushed back, but it was futile. The door burst open, and she stepped in. She wore no coat, only a long sleeved green t-shirt and jeans. I was panting, but she wasn't even short of breath.

I stepped backward and she followed. I stepped back again but was prevented by the entryway wall from retreating further. She neared, her amber eyes fixed on mine as if she were a cobra or a python or whatever snake it is that hypnotizes its victims before it strikes. I wrenched my eyes away from hers and looked down. She wore thick army green flip flops, despite the cold, and her toenails were painted black with orange jack-o-lanterns in the center.

"What are you doing here?" I asked the toes.

"You didn't even call me," she accused.

That again. "We've gone over this, Dale," I started, but she interrupted.

"I'm talking about today!" she yelled. "I had to see it on the news, Kim. Some creep *shoots* at you and I have to see it on the *news*."

I glanced up, startled at the cause of her anger. Her snake-eyes look had been replaced by one of anguish. She gave a short, harsh laugh and took another step forward.

"Yeah," she said, her voice choked with tears and anger. "Why would you call *me*? You just don't get it, do you? You think everyone has a heart of stone, like you. But some of us actually

feel things, you know?" She struck her chest hard with her fist as tears flooded her eyes. "You don't even know what that feels like, do you? To really care about someone? *You should have called me.*"

I flinched as she shouted the last words. From anguish to fury in one second flat. Her emotions were ricocheting like the bullets from Bodey's rifle, and I didn't trust what would come next. I sidled sideways, hoping to get to the living room, where I could make a break for the back door, but she slapped the wall beside my head with the flat of her hand, and I stopped.

"Look, Dale." I licked my lips. "I would have called you but there wasn't time--"

"Bullshit! Don't lie to me, Kim. You never gave me a thought."

"I did. Let's sit down and have a glass of wine and--"

"I don't want a fucking glass of wine."

"Well, what *do* you want? Let's at least sit--"

Suddenly a large black shape barreled through the still-open front door and leaped upon me.

"Oof!"

A true heroine--Lassie, for example--would have tackled the bad guy, not me, but at least Loot's abrupt appearance startled Dale enough to cause her to retreat a few steps into the living room.

"Where the hell did that come from?" she demanded.

I was puzzled about that myself, since I'd just put Loot in the fenced back yard, but I wasn't about to look a gift dog in the mouth. I pushed her muddy paws off my midriff and back onto the floor, pressed my hand onto the back of her head, and said, "This is my dog."

Loot wagged her tail and greeted Dale with a grin. I looped my fingers through her collar to keep her beside me. "She's a guard dog."

Dale immediately called my bluff. "Yeah, right. C'mere killer." She snapped her fingers at Loot and clicked her tongue. Loot wriggled in excitement and lunged forward, but I held her back. Dale stepped toward me, ignored Loot, and reached to close the front door.

"Stop." Lucy stood in the doorway, her long red coat flapping in the wind. She clutched a dripping lawn chair in her hands, aluminum legs aimed straight at Dale, like a lion tamer. "Leave the door open."

Dale stared, astonished, but only for a moment. "Oh, Jesus. It's the fucking lawyer."

"I called the police," Lucy warned breathlessly. "They're on their way."

Dale laughed. "On Halloween? They won't be here for hours."

"I told them you have a gun."

Dale's eyes narrowed as she tried to gauge whether Lucy was bluffing. Suddenly she reached out, grabbed a leg of the lawn chair, and whipped it out of Lucy's hands. The chair smashed against the living room wall, bounced back, and hit my tall stained glass lamp. As if in slow motion, the lamp timbered over and crashed onto the coffee table. The shade crunched, and two pieces of stained glass tinkled onto the floor. Loot proved her guard dog capabilities by ducking behind my legs and barking fiercely at the broken lamp.

"My Tiffany," I cried.

"Bullshit," Dale said. "You made that lamp yourself."

That was true, but I had named it Tiffany.

Dale started for the door. No longer armed with a lawn chair, Lucy lost her courage and shrank back, eyes wide, but Dale just brushed roughly past her onto the porch, where she stopped. By then we could all hear the sirens, and Dale was too savvy to try to run. Suddenly calm, she let her arms hang loosely by her sides and waited in resignation for the police to arrive. Lucy edged away to the far side of the tiny porch, trying to stay out of the reach of Dale's long arms. I slipped out and joined her there, shutting Loot inside.

"Better watch yourself, lawyer lady," Dale said conversationally to Lucy. She nodded her head toward me. "She's heartless. I mean it. She doesn't have a heart of her own, so she steals other people's. Uses them for a while, then tosses them aside. She'll do the same thing to you, I guarantee it."

"Don't worry about me," Lucy said shortly.

"Huh. I'm not worried about you," Dale said. "I'm just telling you, that's all."

"It's not true," I said.

But no one was listening to me. They faced off at each other, one at each end of my six-foot porch. Lucy's eyes, still wide with fright, skittered from Dale to the street to the door and back to Dale, as if she were weighing her options in case Dale lunged at her. Dale stared unblinking at Lucy, her eyes filled with dare and contempt and pity.

The police cruiser pulled up in front of the house, blue lights flashing. As soon as the officer opened his door, Dale raised her hands above her head. "I don't have a gun," she announced coolly.

"I'm the one who called," Lucy yelled. "We have a restraining order out against her."

"Keep your hands up," the officer shouted, crouching behind the door, gun pointed at the porch. "All of you."

Lucy and I raised our hands. I repressed a hysterical bubble of laughter. It was the second time in one day that I'd had a firearm pointed at me, and this time it was by the police. It was too unreal to take seriously. A second car pulled up behind the first, and two more officers got out, both women, and they crouched behind their car as well, weapons drawn.

"There's no gun, officers," Dale said, her voice controlled and assertive.

"She's violating a restraining order," Lucy said again.

"Shut up! Keep your hands up."

All three slowly rose from behind their cars. One of the women holstered her gun and walked toward us while the other two officers kept their weapons aimed at us.

"There really isn't a gun," I assured them, but they ignored me.

The woman patted Dale first, then me, then Lucy. Finally assured, she gestured for us to put our arms down.

"You," she said, nodding at Lucy. "What happened?"

"I thought she had a gun," Lucy said, nodding at Dale. "She has a restraining order to keep away from Kimberly here. This is Kim's house."

Dale sighed and shook her head, but handed her drivers license over without a word. She did not appear surprised when, after calling in her information, they returned to escort her to the back of one of the cars. They didn't cuff her. She turned and stared at me mournfully from the back of the cruiser as it pulled away.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

AFTER THE POLICE left, Lucy slumped onto the couch, her vibrant red coat billowing up beside her. She looked a bit shattered.

"I'm sorry about all of this," I said, sitting beside her. She didn't answer, just swallowed and looked pale. "Are you going to throw up?"

She shot me a reproving glance, considered, and shook her head. "I don't think so. I feel all right. Are you going to cry?"

Fair enough. I thought about it a moment and said, "No, I feel all right too."

"You've had a pretty rough day," Lucy commented.

"Yeah," I agreed. Being threatened by Bodey hadn't frightened me nearly as much as everyone seemed to think it ought, but the scare from Dale and the police on top of it had contributed to make it, indeed, a pretty rough day. "There have been some good parts, though."

Lucy thought about that, then shot me a coy little look. "Yeah? Like what?"

I grinned. "I liked that part where you sat on the floor and held me."

"You liked that?"

I nodded.

"We could do it again," Lucy suggested. "But maybe not on the floor."

"And you could take your coat off first."

"Good idea."

I helped Lucy take her coat off, hung it in the closet, and sat back down on the couch, closer this time. I leaned into Lucy's side. We looked at each other and had a long conversation, but without words. We both melted forward at the same time, and our lips met and caressed with perfection, as if we'd been kissing each other forever. She put her hands on the sides of my face and I put mine on the back of her neck, and we kissed some more. It was a magnificent, impeccable, kiss. Just the right touch of tongue, the perfect head tilt, the ideal pressure of breasts skimming breasts, and just the right amount of breath. We parted and looked into each other's eyes once more.

"Wow," I said, stunned by how well we fit.

"Yeah," Lucy agreed breathlessly.

I grinned, delighted, but there was something I had to clear up before we went any further.

"I'm not heartless," I said, thinking of Dale's words.

"Of course you're not," Lucy said, but she sounded more polite than convinced.

"I'm not," I argued.

"I know," Lucy agreed. She stroked the back of her fingers against my cheek. "You're just a heartbreaker."

I sat up straight. "No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are." Lucy tugged me back down to rest against her side. "You told me you were, when we had our first date."

"So that *was* a date?" I asked, enjoying the feel of her soft breast nestled against mine.

"I meant it to be one," Lucy said dryly. "It didn't turn out to be much of one."

"No," I agreed. "I wasn't sure--I thought maybe you just wanted to talk about discrimination lawsuits."

"Well, I did," Lucy said, "but I could have done that in my office. I thought maybe the dinner and wine would tip you off that I had an ulterior motive. And, by the way," she said, pulling her head back to scrutinize me, "have you gathered those records yet?"

Oh yeah, the records. "Of course I have," I said. "Some." I'd thought about them once or twice, anyway. "I've been kind of busy lately, you know. Dodging bullets and talking to the police and all."

"Uh huh." Lucy gave a crooked little smile. "Adorable pout, Kim." She leaned forward and kissed me again on the lips.

"Anyway," I said, smiling and snuggling deeper into her embrace, "I didn't tell you I was a heartbreaker. All I said was that sometimes women fall in love with me, even though I warn them not to. Is that being a heartbreaker?"

"I don't know," Lucy said. "All I know is that forewarned is forearmed."

"Exactly. I forewarn them, so they should be prepared." Lucy went quiet, and after a moment I said, "That's not what you meant, is it?"

"Not exactly."

I sat up straight again and looked at her, surprised. "You mean *you*? *You're* the one who's forewarned?" Her little smile was resigned. "No, Lucy, I'm not talking about *you*."

"Why not? Don't I deserve fair warning too?"

"No, I mean--" I started, stopped, and pondered what to say. "You're different," is all I could come up with.

"Can you promise me you won't break my heart?"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Of course I couldn't promise any such thing. "I don't want to hurt you."

"I know you don't. You don't want to hurt anybody," Lucy said. "That's why you try to warn them ahead of time that you won't--love them back."

I leaned against Lucy again, troubled by the truth in her words. I didn't want to warn Lucy away from me. I really liked her. But was it fair not to? I wasn't a very good security risk.

In a small voice, I asked, "Aren't you afraid to get involved with a heartbreaker like me?"

"Yes."

I winced. "I don't want you to be afraid of me."

"How can I not be, Kim? I'd have to be stupid not to be cautious. I'm getting involved here with a woman who trails a litter of broken hearts behind her. I just met exhibit A tonight."

"Dale doesn't count," I said. "She's crazy. Besides, you met her before."

"I was talking about Becca."

I looked up, stunned. "Becca? No. Becca's just a friend."

"You think so?"

"I know so. She's--well, I can tell you this now, because it's over, but I kind of had a thing for her for the last couple of years."

"A thing?"

"You know," I said. "I would have liked to have been more than friends, but she was never interested."

"Uh huh."

"It's *true*."

"Nobody wants to get her heart broken," is all Lucy said.

"So you think I'm going to break your heart."

"I think you might."

"Then," I asked, my voice smaller than ever, "why are you here?"

I felt Lucy's lips on my forehead. "Maybe I find you irresistible," she suggested lightly. "Maybe I think you're worth the risk. Maybe I think I'll be the one who finally wins your heart. Or--" Her arms tightened around me. "Maybe I'll regret it."

I didn't know what to say. There *was* something different about Lucy. She was different than any of the women I'd dated before, and my feelings for her were different as well. But would it last? How could I reassure Lucy I wouldn't break her heart when I had no idea myself?

"Should I leave?" Lucy asked softly.

"No." I looked up. "Stay with me tonight, please? I'm scared to be alone." I thought I saw a flicker of disappointment cross Lucy's face and I cursed my choice of words. "I mean, I want you to stay with me, Lucy. Please."

She smiled. "Of course." And she kissed me again.

Chapter Thirty

IT REALLY HAD been a difficult day. We were both exhausted, so despite the delightful undercurrent of sexual tension that shimmered between us, we decided to just go to sleep. I loaned Lucy my Paul Frank nightshirt to sleep in, and I wore my Big Dog boxer briefs and a tank top. We were both cute enough to be in a pajama commercial, I swear.

We crawled into bed and took turns holding each other and tried to sleep. But, tired as we were, sleep would not come. Every time one of us would start to drop off, the other would ask a question, and we'd talk for twenty more minutes, or our bare legs would fall together in a sleepy dance beneath the covers, keeping us awake in their own way. When my head rested in the crook of her shoulder, my free hand rested naturally upon her breast, and I had to make a conscious effort to move it away. When her head rested in the crook of my shoulder, I could sense her having a similar struggle. We were simply too new to sleep.

"Tell me about your family," Lucy said.

"Bor-ring. Tell me about yours instead."

"I asked you first." She nudged me with a hip. "C'mon."

"Oh, all right." But it really was incredibly boring. "I was born in Coeur d'Alene. I was an afterthought baby. They had five children, one right after the other, boy-girl-boy-girl-boy. Then, sixteen years after the last boy, they had me."

"Wow. You must have been a shock. So you were the baby of the family," Lucy observed. "That explains a lot."

"What do you mean?"

"Your charm," Lucy said smoothly. "It comes from being the precious baby, I think."

"No, I don't think so," I said doubtfully. "I think I was more inconvenient than anything else."

"Inconvenient?"

"They were getting pretty old already by the time I came along," I explained. "They were tired of kids. They were looking forward to a little rest, finally, and then I showed up. Mom thought I was menopause at first."

"I'll bet."

"I was lucky, in a way. I got to do all kinds of things my brothers and sisters never got to do, because Mom and Dad didn't care so much any more. It still drives my brothers and sisters crazy that I got to go to camp every summer, and spend the night with my friends all the time, and start driving as soon as I turned sixteen. They think I was spoiled."

"Are your parents still alive?"

"Oh, yeah. They're both in their eighties. They still live in the same house. With a lot of help, though. They're kind of--demanding people. I leave them to my brothers and sisters, for the most part. They don't think I'm old enough to be responsible for anything anyway."

"How old *are* you?"

I laughed. "Thirty-two. But to them, I'm still the baby. How old are you?"

"Older than that. Are you out to them?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of out?"

"Well, I told them, and they pretend like I didn't."

"Oh. What about your brothers and sisters?"

"What about them?"

"Do they pretend you didn't?"

"Them, too," I said. "They're all still hoping I'll grow out of it."

"Are you close to them?"

I yawned and shrugged sleepy shoulders. "Not really, no. They're just too much older. When I was a kid, they were at that age, you know, when you're busy just figuring out who you are, becoming an adult. They didn't have time to pay attention to a little kid. They played with me sometimes, though. They weren't mean. They were just busy. And then they started having kids of their own. Now they have grandkids. I'm a great aunt eleven times over."

"But," Lucy said, sounding perplexed, "who were you precious to?"

"Precious?" I gave a short laugh. "No one, probably." Her question made me feel a little sorry for myself, though I'd never missed being precious before. "Tell me about your family now."

She hesitated, as if not ready to leave the subject, then said, "My family really *is* boring. I had a kind of *Leave It To Beaver* family. Mom stayed home. Still does. Dad worked. Still does. Mom's sixty-two and Dad's sixty-four, just about ready to retire. I have one brother, four years younger than me. He's married and has two boys."

"Are you out to them?"

"I was out to them before I was to myself. Mom helped me figure it out. I was in high school and was going through wretched turmoil because I just didn't *get* the whole idea of liking boys. I tried to date and had a horrible time. At the same time, she saw me flirting with girls. Finally Mom just came out and asked me if I thought I liked girls the way other girls like boys. And the light bulb went on."

"She didn't mind?"

"If she did, she never let on. Dad either."

"Are you precious to them?" I asked sleepily.

Her arm, which was wrapped around me, gave me a little squeeze. "Yes, I am."

I chewed my lip in the darkness, pondering that new thought. What was it like, to be precious--not just loved, as parents dutifully love all their children--but to be *precious* to someone? What must it be like to be accepted and loved by your family, just as you were?

I pulled my head up from Lucy's shoulder and looked at her. It was dark, and I could only see her outline, but I leaned in, unerring as a homing device, and kissed her on the mouth. She moved her lips against mine and ran her hand down my side, then back up again, her hand slipping underneath my tank top. She wrapped a smooth leg over my hips. I groaned and arched my Big Dog shorts against her, reveling in the feel of her body and hands and legs and skin against mine. Resistance was futile. We finally abandoned our attempts to sleep and made love.

Chapter Thirty-One

IN THE MORNING we made love again. This time, though, we were fully awake, with the added bonus of being able to see each other. Afterward, as Lucy lay stretched out and sated on my sheets, I sat up cross-legged beside her and gazed, rapt, at her body. I had never before made love to a woman without first seeing her naked, and I found delight in looking now at the body I had loved only by feel in the middle of the night.

These are Lucy's breasts, I noted. They were full and round. I recalled the feel of her long, erect nipples in my mouth, but now the nipples were flat and innocent, like a boy's. The areolas were large and dark, a brownish pink. If I were painting them, I'd mix a little mauve with burnt sienna to achieve that tone. I wondered if she would let me paint her sometime.

And these are Lucy's hips. I ran my eyes down her sides to the flare of her hips. She twitched them slightly, as I stared at her, but when I looked at her face, she just smiled, her hands behind her head, and let me look. She had a classic hourglass figure, but she normally hid her feminine curves behind loose fitting trousers and roomy jackets. I felt honored to have been allowed inside to see the curvaceous body she kept so secret.

This is Lucy's pubic hair. It was dark, with a few gray curls mixed in, and it was neatly trimmed, so that her tender pink lips could peek out, just barely, from beneath it. I had loved those lips lavishly in the night, and it made me ache a bit to see them now, so sweet.

I have loved many women's bodies, but I found myself loving Lucy's body, not because it was beautiful, but because it was *Lucy's*. My artist's objective eye let me down. I could not say whether Lucy's body would be beautiful to others. I only knew it was beautiful to me.

A rumble erupted suddenly from her midsection, and we both laughed. Lucy slapped a hand to her tummy.

"French toast?" I asked.

"Love some," she said, and rolled off the bed to her feet.

Lucy was sopping the last of her French toast into a puddle of syrup and I was slipping a crust to Loot over Lucy's frowning objections, when the phone rang. It was my brother, Wade.

"You're in the paper again," he said, disappointment heavy in his voice.

"Uh huh," I said. "What's it say?"

"I'm sure you know already," Wade said, "since you were there.

This is three times in the last month, Kim."

"Three times?"

"Three times you've been in the news," he said, clearly not happy with me. "First, you find that heart in a dumpster, of all things. Then you get filmed at that strike you guys had. And now this."

"Well, I didn't get shot at on purpose, Wade."

He ignored me. "This one's the worst. It was all over the front page. I had to tell them the entire main section got ruined from the rain. They're ready to cancel their subscription."

I sighed and sat down across from Lucy. *My brother*, I mouthed, and made a face. Lucy frowned.

"So why are you keeping it secret from them?" I asked.

"Are you kidding? They worry so much about you now, living all alone in Spokane like you do. This would give them heart attacks."

"What do you expect me to do about it?"

He sighed, as if the burden of telling me what he expected was nearly too much for him. "Just don't talk about it around them," he said. "Okay? You'll be at dinner tomorrow, won't you?"

I glanced at the calendar. Sunday dinner at my parents' house was a historic ritual, though they no longer cooked it. My siblings took turns going to the house and preparing the meal there, and everyone else came to eat it and clean up the mess. I avoided going when I could, using school, a cold, the weather, any excuse I could come up with, to get out of it. But tomorrow was my youngest niece Alyssa's fourteenth birthday, and I loved Alyssa. I had already bought her a pre-paid cell phone that her parents would hate, so I didn't want to miss that one.

"I'll be there," I said.

"Good. Just don't say anything about the shooting, okay?"

"My lips are zipped. Oh, and Wade?" I added snottily. "I'm fine. Really. Thanks for asking." I dropped the phone into its cradle.

"Oh, my God!" Lucy exploded. "I can't believe that. That's your *brother*? And he didn't even ask how you were?"

"I know." I shrugged. "They just don't want the old ones to get upset. It's well intentioned, really."

"No, it's not," Lucy protested. "It's thoughtless and it's selfish and it's mean."

"But how do you really feel about it?" I asked, drawing a grudging smile from her.

She rose, walked around the table to me, and drew me into her arms. She gave me a long, caressing kiss, looked into my eyes, and said, "You are growing precious to me, Kim."

Gilly, who had been beaten senseless during our lovemaking earlier, came to and gave a triple flip with a twist. Lucy's words thrilled me, but they also drew forth an emotion I wasn't prepared for, and I looked away quickly before she saw the fear and uncertainty in my eyes. As if she sensed it, she gave me another quick kiss and stepped away.

"It's shower time for me," she said briskly and left the room.

"Need any help?" I called after her, but she just snorted and shut the bathroom door.

"ARE YOU SURE you'll be okay alone?" Lucy asked later as she prepared to leave.

"I'm sure," I said. "Becca will be here in less than two hours. And Loot's here."

"All right, then. I'll see you at Annie's at three."

"Okay. And Lucy?"

She quirked an eyebrow.

"Will you not say anything to them? Annie and Becca? About us, I mean."

"I won't be a secret, Kim."

"No, no, not a secret," I assured her. "It's just that, I don't know if they're ready, you know? Annie, anyway, to see--that. She's never seen me with a woman. She just found out I'm a lesbian six weeks ago. I don't want to shock her."

"I really think she'll be all right with it."

"Maybe, but I just want to prepare her first. I want to tell her in my own way. Please?"

Lucy examined me for a minute, then nodded slowly in agreement. "All right. I won't say anything." She leaned over and gave me a kiss. "For now."

Chapter Thirty-Two

BECCA ENTERED THE shop and stopped abruptly. "What?" she demanded.

"What what?" I asked innocently.

"You know what what. Something happened since I left last night. What happened?"

"Well," I said, "Dale came over."

Her eyes widened. "*No*. You didn't. Tell me you didn't. Not with *Dale*."

"Oh, God, no, I didn't," I assured her quickly. "Not with *Dale*." I bit my lip. I'd meant to keep it secret. How had I managed to let the cat out of the bag in the first thirty seconds?

Becca thought a moment and gave me a knowing look. "Lucy?"

I fought a sheepish grin, but it was futile. I gave up and nodded.

"I knew it," Becca crowed. "There was something different about her all along."

"Oh, I don't know," I said, not quite willing to concede that point. "The situation's what's different. Anyway, Lucy thinks I'm risky," I probed, recalling what Lucy had said about Becca. "She thinks I might break her heart. She says I've left a trail of broken hearts behind me."

Becca laughed. "She's got your number, all right."

"Becca! You think she's right?"

"I know she's right. *You* know she's right. Jeez, Kim, you do it every year. Every summer."

"Yeah, but every single woman I've ever dated has known right from the start that it's only short term. That's the deal. I *never* promise anything beyond the summer. How is it my fault if they don't believe me?"

Becca heaved a large sigh and shot me such a direct and honest look that I found myself wishing I hadn't asked. I took a step back and braced myself against the workbench.

"Actions speak louder than words, Kim."

"Huh?"

"You tell them that you only want a summer fling, but then you *act* like you've fallen in love with them. You hang all over them, you spend every minute with them, act like you can't live without them. *You* know it's just an act, and *I* know it's just an act, but they don't know it."

"It's not an act," I protested. "I *do* want to spend every minute of the summer with them. All I have is the summer, Becca. I have to pack everything into it that I can. Nine months of the year I'm all alone."

She was unmoved by that pathetic little statement and shot me a don't-be-stupid look. "You're alone because you choose to be alone."

"I wasn't *out*."

"So what? That's not why you stayed alone. Any one of those women would have been willing to keep you closeted, if that's what you wanted. You never gave them the chance. As soon as the summer ends, you just pack your bags and dump them like they never meant anything to you at all."

"No. They meant a lot to me. But I *told* them it would only be for the summer."

"And that's supposed to make them feel better?"

I opened my mouth to say yes, but stopped. "I don't know," I said lamely.

"What are you going to tell Lucy?" Becca asked softly. "*'Summer's over'* won't work this time."

I felt a shiver run down my spine. I had never entered into a relationship that didn't have a built-in end date in sight. I'd never made a commitment for longer than a few weeks. I'd never taken responsibility for anyone else's feelings, I realized. I'd always preempted that by making sure they knew from the get-go that they could expect nothing from me but a few weeks of fun. That way, if they got hurt, it was their own fault, not mine. Right?

I didn't want to hurt Lucy, but I was terribly afraid that I was going to.

"You just missed Kyla Hansen," I said, changing the subject abruptly.

Becca's eyes widened. She was easily distracted. "Kyla Hansen? From Channel 4 News? She was *here*?"

I nodded.

"Is she as hot in person as she is on TV?"

"Hotter," I assured her. "And the newspaper guys were here too. Not so hot."

"You talked to her?"

"Yes." It actually hadn't taken much persuading from Kyla Hansen to get me to open my door. She *is* hot, after all, but it was also a way to thumb my nose at Wade. I was used to having my feelings dismissed by my siblings, but it still stung that he hadn't even asked me how I was doing after the shooting. "I asked them to explain that Bodey wasn't really aiming at me."

Becca gave me a doubtful look.

"That's the look they gave me, too," I said, exasperated. "Why won't anyone believe me? I was the only one there, except for Bodey. You should listen to me."

"I'm listening," Becca said. "It's just hard to believe, that's all."

"Whatever," I grumbled. "We'd better get started if you want to finish your flower before we head out. Can you move your arm yet?"

"Only from the elbow. You still have to help me."

"Okay, but I got a new igniter. Look." I picked up my new BernzOmatic TS2000, held it in my hand like a spray bottle, and pushed the red button. "See the spark? You can ignite the gas with one finger using this baby."

"Cool. Let me try."

I handed her the igniter and turned on the gas. We were working on a simple flower design made with scraps of metal for the petals. Last week I had taught Becca how to cut metal with the torch. I really wanted a plasma cutter to make nice clean edges, but I couldn't afford one, so I made do with a cutting torch. We had already cut the petals out the previous week, so this week we welded them together in a ring that looked a little bit like a flower. I used a C-clamp to hold one petal steady and used a vise clamp to hold the other piece, while Becca used her one good arm to wield the torch. Then we attached a metal pole through the center so that it could be staked into a garden or a potted plant. It was a homely little thing, but Becca was proud of it.

We cleaned up, and I drove us to Annie's. We'd decided the night before to meet there at three o'clock, the four of us, to begin sleuthing. The plan was to drive from Annie's house to the woods behind the school where Danny's body was found to see if Donald Stern would even have had time to murder Danny between five and seven o'clock that night. If he couldn't have done it, we wouldn't have to say a word about him to police, and I'd be home free with Loot.

Chapter Thirty-Three

LUCY WAS ALREADY at Annie's when we got there. I pulled up next to her car. When we got out, we heard voices coming from the back yard, so we walked around the house and found Annie and Lucy sitting at the picnic table. It was a cool, brisk day, not freezing, but cold enough to make sitting outside appear a bit odd. Becca waved her flower at them as we walked up.

"Look what I made," she called. I thought about disputing that statement, since she'd hardly done it by herself, but the flower was so crudely made that I decided I didn't really want any credit for it.

"What are you doing out here?" I exchanged a sneaky warm look with Lucy. I hopped up and sat on the table next to where she sat on the bench. My knee brushed her shoulder, and she leaned into my leg just slightly.

"I'm showing her the scene of the you know what," Annie said.

"Which you know what?" Becca asked.

"Both," Lucy said.

I looked at Stern's yard. It had been a week since I'd taken Loot. The dog house was still in the same spot, the massive chain curled in the exact same position it had been when I'd dropped it after releasing Loot's collar. The water dish lay upside down beside it.

"They never said anything to you at all?" I asked in a hushed voice.

"Not a word," Annie whispered back. "It's like they didn't even notice she was gone."

"That's just crazy," Becca said.

Lucy nodded. "Very strange."

"*Really* crazy," Becca emphasized. "Psychopathic, almost."

"Oh, come on," I said. "You're just dying for him to be the murderer, aren't you?" I was immensely gratified when Lucy laughed out loud.

We were jarred out of our musings when the Sterns' sliding glass door opened and Donald Stern stepped out onto his deck. He frowned at us, no doubt wondering why the four of us were hanging around Annie's picnic table in forty-five degree weather staring at his yard. He walked down the steps to the lawn and ambled over to us, his hands in the pockets of his weekend corduroys. He remembered to paste a fake smile on his face at the last moment. We stood silently watching him, a bit stunned, I think, at the sight of our murder suspect in real life right before our eyes.

"Annie," he said, instead of hello. He glanced uneasily at Lucy, then looked at me. "Ms. Wayland, isn't it? The one c--, er, all the trouble's been happening to?"

He was going to say *causing* all the trouble, the dirty bastard.

"Glad to see you've recovered from yesterday's incident," he said, but he didn't sound like he meant it. He was just like Wade. All he cared about was keeping Basalt Falls out of the news. I gave him a nasty look and didn't answer.

Lucy stood up and stuck her hand out toward Stern. "Lucy Deveroux," she said pleasantly. "We've met before, I think. At the negotiating table."

He nodded, a tiny frown between his eyes, and reluctantly put his hand in hers. No doubt he was wondering what the union's lawyer was up to now. "Is there something I can help you with, Ms. Deveroux?"

Lucy raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Me?"

"You're not here on, ah, official business?"

Rather than deny it, Lucy gave a small secretive smile. "Nothing you need to worry about, Mr. Stern."

His mustache twitched, evidence that he was not reassured by her words.

"This is Becca," Annie said. Becca unsmilingly waved her magic wand at him, but he ignored her. "I've been wondering what happened to your dog," Annie continued. "I haven't seen her in a few days."

"Oh yeah, that," he said, glancing back at the dog house as if he'd already forgotten about it. "We, ah, we got it a good home."

"Really?" I asked. When I realized how skeptical I sounded, I quickly added, "That's good to hear. Really, really good." He eyed me, and I gave a big fake smile of my own.

"Yeah, we're more cat people, you know?" he said smoothly, though they didn't own a cat. "I need to get this doghouse out of here before the snow falls or it'll kill the grass in the spring."

"Yes, it is November already," Lucy agreed solemnly.

"Know anyone who needs a doghouse?"

I did, but there was no way I was going to let Loot step one foot into that little house of misery ever again. Then, since we were supposed to be sleuthing, after all, I decided to jump start the investigation.

"It sure is strange, isn't it?" I asked. "All the things that have been happening up at school."

He looked at me blankly.

"You know," I prompted, "murders, shootings, hearts in dumpsters. Things like that."

He frowned at me. "Nobody ever said that boy was murdered," he said. "And it didn't take place at school, anyway."

"It was a student who was killed, though," I said. "Danny Wrigley."

"Did you know him?" Becca asked.

He gave Becca the sort of look you give your shoe when you step in dog poop. "I don't know *all* the students."

"But did you know Danny?" Becca persisted.

Stern finally really looked at Becca for the first time. "Who *are* you?"

"Nobody you know," she said airily. She waved her wand over her head and glanced at the blank plate glass window behind him, and I knew she was thinking that she knew *him* a lot more intimately than he could possibly guess.

"Hmm, well." He glanced at his watch and looked back at Lucy, clearly uneasy about leaving her hanging around unmonitored. "I have to go. I have an appointment. But if there's anything going on, school related, I mean, I'd like to hear about it."

"Of course," Lucy said in a cool, official voice.

His mustache gave an exasperated twitch, and he returned to his house without another word.

"We should follow him," Becca whispered as soon as the sliding glass door closed behind him.

I liked the idea. We could drive to the site where Danny's body had been found another time. I wanted to know where Donald Stern was going.

"How can we?" Annie asked. "He'd see us. He knows my car, and yours are both sitting right there in the driveway."

That was true. My little red Rav was distinctively adorable and would certainly be noticed tailing anyone. Lucy's soft green Saab was sedate and subdued, but it was equally distinctive, for all that. Annie drove a nondescript blue Taurus, a great car for tailing someone, but she lived right next door to Stern. He would certainly recognize her car immediately. We heard the groan of a garage door opening, and a moment later Stern backed his gray Chevy Suburban out of his driveway and took off down the road.

"Too late now," Annie said, pointing out the obvious.

"What does he need such a gas guzzler for anyway?" I asked, feeling grumpy about his gigantic carbon footprint.

"Transporting bodies," Becca said ghoulishly.

"Stop it," Annie said. "His garage is right next to my bedroom."

"Well, we should probably get going," Lucy said and stood up. I watched as she swiped a hand across her butt to brush off any dirt or pine needles she might have picked up. Now that I had seen Lucy's butt bare, I found the denim clad version more interesting to look at. "We can take my car. It's roomy."

"I have to go to the bathroom," Becca announced, and we decided that was a good idea for all of us. We trooped into Annie's house and slipped off our shoes, mindful of the creamy carpet, and took turns using the bathrooms. For a moment, while Becca was in the guest bathroom and Annie used the master, Lucy and I were alone. We grinned at each other and sneaked a quick kiss.

"How are you?" Lucy whispered a moment later.

"I'm great. I had a wonderful time last night." I leaned into her, my body drawn toward hers. "And this morning."

"Me too." She wrapped an arm around me. "Can we have a wonderful time again tonight?"

I giggled. "I think I can squeeze you in."

"I'll squeeze *you* in," she said, and proceeded to do so quite effectively.

The opening of the door to the master bath made me jump away. Lucy gave me an impatient look. "Tell her soon," she whispered.

"I will," I promised, "just not yet."

But I'd forgotten that, as nice as it was to have Lucy to myself for a moment while Becca and Annie used the bathrooms, that meant that Becca had Annie to herself while Lucy and I did the same. By the time I returned from the master bedroom, Annie had a self-conscious look on her face, and Becca looked smug. Becca had spilled the beans. Before I could say anything, though, Lucy came out of the guest bath. We all put our shoes on and filed out to Lucy's car.

"Kim should sit in the front seat with Lucy," Annie said in an unnatural sing-song voice.

I rounded on Becca. "I told you not to tell."

"So what?" Becca said. "I didn't promise. Besides, it's stupid to try to keep that kind of thing a secret. Anyone can tell you're lovers just by looking at you."

"Becca!" My cheeks flamed, and Lucy laughed. Becca and Annie climbed into the back seat leaving the front passenger seat for me.

Lucy started the car, pulled smoothly out the driveway, and headed toward Highway 2. I turned around and looked at Annie, who was sitting right behind me. She met my eyes and smiled.

I turned back around and tried to assess that smile. It didn't seem fake, not like Donald Stern's had been to me and mine to him. Annie's smile seemed like a genuine smile, supportive and warm, a happy-for-me smile. But I was still doubtful. It couldn't be that easy.

Lucy startled me then by reaching over and clasping my hand in hers. I froze a moment, then forced my fingers to relax. She gave my hand a squeeze.

I looked back again at Annie, and once more she smiled at me, and this time she nodded as well. "It's okay, Kim. I'm fine with it. Stop worrying about me."

"Told you so," Becca said, like a five-year-old.

"In fact," Annie said, "it's only because of me that you two are together at all."

"*What?*" I asked.

"Not only you," Lucy protested.

"I'm the one who invited Lucy to lunch that day," Annie said. "If I hadn't, you probably wouldn't even be talking."

I looked at Lucy. She kept her eyes on the road, but a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

I faced the front again. In the back, Annie asked Becca a question about her shoulder, and Becca's long answer meandered from surgery to welding to waitressing to her last girlfriend. I glanced again at Lucy, and this time she took her eyes off the road long enough to smile at me and give me a reassuring wink. I released some of my pent-up breath and tried to relax.

I was out. I was holding hands with a woman right in front of my best straight friend, who happened to be having a conversation behind me with another lesbian about the perils of dating bisexual women.

"I could never give up the penis," Annie was saying. "I enjoy it too much."

"There are ways around that," Becca said informatively.

I smiled. I was out, and it was okay. I heaved a relieved sigh and curled my fingers around Lucy's hand.

Chapter Thirty-Four

WHEN WE REACHED the woods behind the school, we ran into a slight hitch.

"Where to now?" Lucy asked, navigating onto the dirt road that ran parallel to the edge of the woods. On our right was the back side of the track and field area of the high school. The woods abutted the school property but were not part of it. The woods ran together with state land that formed part of Mount Spokane State Park. No more than half a mile wide at the start beside the school grounds, the woods rapidly grew wider and spread deep, continuing on unimpeded for miles up the mountain. We knew Danny's body had been found in the woods, but where?

"Where now?" Lucy asked again, glancing in the rearview mirror at Becca and Annie.

Silence. None of us had a clue.

Lucy let go of my hand, stopped the car, and turned in her seat to look at each of us.

"Nobody knows?"

We all shook our heads.

She chewed the inside of her cheek a moment as if trying to bite back a smile, or something less benign. "Okay. Well, how long did it take us to get this far?"

More silence. I looked at Becca, who looked at Annie, who looked at me. None of us had thought to time the drive.

"Probably about twenty-five minutes," Annie suggested hesitantly.

After another moment of silence, Becca said in a small voice, "We suck."

Lucy gave a little laugh at that. "O-kay." She put the car back in gear and moved slowly forward. "Let's see if we can find the place. Is there a road that goes into the woods here? That would be a logical place to start looking."

"I don't think there is," I said. "Just trails. The cross country team uses it for practice sometimes."

"There's a trail right there." Lucy pulled the car over and stopped at a trailhead. "Is there more than one?"

"Yes," Annie said. "There are several near the school."

"They all kind of run into each other and cross over each other." I'd taken my class to the woods once for a nature hike, but the web of trails was so disorienting I'd never dared it again. It was too easy to imagine a fifth grader wandering off and getting lost.

"There would be tracks, wouldn't there?" Becca unhooked her seatbelt and leaned across Annie to look out her window. I looked out my window as well. The ground was still damp from the rain the night before, but the leaves and pine needles looked undisturbed.

"*'And both that morning equally lay in leaves no step had trodden black,'*" Lucy quoted, and I knew what she was thinking. When we found the trailhead nearest the crime scene, the ground there should be trampled and black, not like this innocent trail.

Lucy started off again, driving slowly, and we kept vigilant watch for another trailhead. We found another, as pristine as the first, and then Lucy turned the car around and we headed in the other direction. The trailheads nearer the school were wider and clearly more used, but when we reached the correct one, it was obvious.

"This is it." Lucy pulled the car over as far to the side of the road as she could and turned off the engine. We got out and stood silently looking down the trail. There was still plenty of daylight, but it was a cloudy day, and the woods themselves appeared much darker than the road we stood on. The entrance to the trail was a mess of mud and slippery black leaves, footprints and narrow wheel marks, and the imprint of something being dragged. They might as well have wrapped it in yellow crime scene tape.

I looked at our feet. Lucy, prepared as always, wore a pair of hiking boots. Annie wore a pair of Keds, old and worn, but still pristine white. Did she bleach her *shoes*? Becca wore her Uggs, and I wore my running shoes.

"Well," Becca said, taking a brave step forward, "this is what we came for, right?"

"Right." Lucy took a step forward as well. Annie and I followed, and we all stepped onto the trail, not quite shoulder to shoulder, but in a tight little group.

"Lions and tigers and bears," Becca chanted.

"Oh my," we obediently replied and laughed a bit nervously. Creeping into the dark and scary woods to search for the scene of the murder was a bit more than any of us had bargained for, but no one suggested abandoning the adventure. I felt a welling of warm feelings for all three women. They were only doing this so that I wouldn't have to tell the police about Loot.

"How far do we have to go to make sure Stern couldn't have done it?" I asked.

"Good question," Lucy said. "It would be easier if we knew how long it took to get this far."

"We'll time the drive back," Annie said.

"Stern would have walked in," Lucy said, "just like us."

"Carrying the body," Becca added.

"No, Danny could have been alive on the way in," I said.

"He would have walked faster than we are," Lucy said, "if he knew where he was going."

"It was raining that day," Annie reminded us. "Buckets."

"It had stopped by five o'clock, though," I said.

"If we haven't reached the crime scene within fifteen minutes," Lucy said, "we can probably assume Stern didn't do it."

We reached the crime scene in far less time than that. No more than five minutes had passed when we rounded a curve in the trail, and the footprints that had marked the passage of so many people spread out into a wide trampled circle that surrounded a slightly wider section of the trail. Tied around the trunk of one tree was a scrap of yellow crime scene tape, torn off at the end and left to hang on the ground. It was obviously the scene of the crime.

We didn't notice that, though, not right away, because standing in the middle of the trail, right in the center of the darkest trampled spot, stood five living human beings. They formed a circle, with their hands raised to each side, fingers of one touching the fingers of the other, like an ancient statue of wizards or Druids or something.

We stopped as a group and clutched one another, converging into a clump. If we could have sat on each other's laps, we would have. Someone behind me whimpered. I think it was Lucy.

They turned at the sound, but we couldn't see their faces, since they were all wearing black hoods. Before we had time to scream or flee, they scattered, disappearing into the trees like wild animals or ghosts or children. Which, it turned out, is what they were.

"Those were Hitlerwrath kids," Annie said when all sounds of their flight had evaporated. "That's what they wear. Black hoods."

"What's a Hitlerwrath kid?" Becca asked, slightly loosening her grip on my arm.

"It's a kiddie cult." Annie released her hold on my shoulder. "They listen to Hilterwrath music and supposedly follow its dictates. Things like--"

"Cutting hearts out of animals." I stepped forward. A tug on the back of my jacket stopped me. I looked over my shoulder to see Lucy plucking anxiously at the nylon on my back. I twitched out of her grasp and moved toward the darkest part of the circle. I was on the edge of the spot the

Hitlerwrath kids had circled. It must have been where Danny's body was found, but I saw no blood.

"But Danny's heart wasn't cut out," Lucy said with hardly a quaver in her voice. "Why would the Hitlerwrath kids be here?"

"Maybe they're just attracted to death," I suggested.

"They're attracted to anything gruesome." Annie stepped up to the circle with me. Her white sneakers were black with mud. "It's a kiddie cult, but there's nothing childlike about it."

Lucy joined us, and Becca scurried after her, her Uggs sodden and droopy. We stood in a circle like the Hitlerwrath kids had. There was nothing to see on the ground, or on the trees nearby either, except for the scrap of yellow tape. But we'd found what we were looking for. We knew the murder must have occurred no more than a five minute walk into the woods. Donald Stern could have done it.

"I didn't know Randy Richardson was a Hitlerwrath kid," I said.

"Randy?" Annie frowned. "As far as I know, he isn't."

"He was just here," I said, pointing in the direction I'd seen him run. "I recognized his coat. I wonder if Ricky's a Hitlerwrath kid too. Or was," I amended, "before he ran off."

"I doubt it," Annie said. "He's what, sixteen? Seventeen? Hitlerwrath kids, at least the ones around here, are mostly middle school kids."

"What do you mean, before he ran off?" Lucy asked.

"He ran away," I said. "About a month ago."

"How do you know that?" Annie asked.

"Ryan told me, when we had our TABFAK drill, he said--"

"About a month ago?" Lucy interrupted. Her voice was sharp. "Do you know when, exactly?"

We all looked at Lucy, a bit surprised by the sudden urgency in her voice.

I thought back. Ricky had run away on Ryan's birthday, I remembered.

I don't remember the birthdays of all my students, of course. When I was a new teacher, I'd tried to do so. I'd let the birthday king or queen lead the flag salute that day, run errands, and be at the first of the line for lunch and recess. But one day about mid-year, little Bobby came up to me at the end of the day, tears in his eyes, and said, "Ms. Wayland, you forgot it was my birthday." It broke my heart. After that, I had the students make a calendar cutout of their own birthdays, and

when we changed the calendar every month, each student would put his or her own birthday reminder on the calendar. When Ryan was pulled out of my class in September, we had already prepared the October calendar, and Ryan's birthday was on it. It still was, in fact, since we hadn't yet taken October down, and I had looked at it every day for the past six weeks. "October fifth," I said.

Lucy looked at me as if I'd sprouted an extra head. "You mean to tell me this kid's been missing since right before you found the heart? And you haven't told the police about it?"

"No," I protested, astounded by her implication. "Ricky's not missing. Randy knows where he-- is." My words trickled to a stop, as the implication struck me too.

"Randy, the Hitlerwrath kid?" Lucy asked.

"No," I protested again, but feebly this time. I looked from Lucy to Annie and Becca, who looked as dumfounded as I felt. "You don't think the heart--?"

"I think," Lucy said slowly, "that we'd better call Ron."

Chapter Thirty-Five

ALYSSA IS MY parents' youngest grandchild, the only one, in fact, who is still a child. All her cousins are grown ups, or nearly so, and many of them have children of their own now. I have always felt an affinity with Alyssa, as we were both the misfit youngests, and I try to pay some special attention to her when we meet at family gatherings.

Her eyes lit up when she opened my gift to her. "A cell phone? Oh my gosh, Aunt Kim, *thank you*."

"A cell phone?" Her father, my brother Stan, reached across a passel of next generations and snatched the phone from Alyssa's hands. "Kim? Why would you get her a cell phone?"

"It's okay," I assured him. "It's prepaid. She can't run up any charges."

"Yeah, it's okay, Dad," Alyssa said, trying to grab her phone back. "It's prepaid."

Stan frowned at me and held the phone out of Alyssa's reach. "You think that's the only reason we don't let her have a cell phone? Geez, Kim, you teach kids this age. You should know better than that."

"Yeah, that's how I know they all have cell phones," I said, irritated. "There's no harm in it."

"Yeah, Dad, everybody has cell phones," Alyssa said, reaching desperately for the phone.

Stan tucked it into the breast pocket of his short-sleeved pastel plaid Sunday shirt. "Maybe next year."

"But it's mine." Alyssa grew teary with frustration. "Aunt Kim gave it to me."

"Well, Aunt Kim should have checked with us first," Stan said coldly. "You're not having a cell phone."

"Da-ad."

"Jesus, Stan." I didn't try to hide my disgust. "Why do you have to be such an ass about it?"

"Kimberly, language." The sing-song reprimand came from my sister, Donna, who sat nearby with her two-year-old grandson on her lap. "Little pitchers, you know."

I rolled my eyes. "I'll get you something else, Alyssa." I wondered if I dared sneak her another new cell phone behind her father's back. "I didn't realize your dad was such a freak."

"You'll understand when you have kids of your own, Kim," Stan's wife, Barbara, said in a condescending attempt to smooth the waters.

"She'll never have kids if she doesn't get a move on," my oldest sister, Linda, said. "You're not getting any younger, Kim."

"I'm only thirty two," I said, wishing I had the nerve to add, "and a lesbian besides."

Exasperated, I stood up and weaved my way out of the crowded dining room. If I'd known my gift was going to be such a flop, I wouldn't have come. I'd have stayed home, maybe convinced Lucy to spend the day in bed with me. The thought made me smile. Our second night together had been even better than the first. After the police left, that is.

Ron had been very interested in the disappearance of Ricky Richardson, particularly when he learned that Ricky and Danny had been friends. I didn't see the connection myself. After all, Danny's body had been found with heart intact. Well, maybe not intact, since it wasn't exactly beating, but at least it was still in his body. Besides, I was confident that the heart I had found in the dumpster was not Ricky's. Despite the fact that Randy had put on a black Hitlerwrath hood, I didn't believe he could have cut his own brother's heart out and thrown it into a dumpster. And Candy and Calvin Bunch had never reported Ricky missing, not even after news broke that a human heart had been found. That could only have been because they knew it wasn't Ricky's, which meant they knew he was safe and sound somewhere else, despite what Ryan said.

So, after Ron had questioned us and left, I was untroubled by worries about the heart and was able to devote my full attention to Lucy, which is what I did. Which is what I wished I was still doing, in fact.

Not that she had time for me today anyway. Lucy was spending the day with her mother. They were going to a movie together and out to dinner. Voluntarily. No special occasion, just for fun, she said. *Fun*. I tried to imagine spending time with my mom just for fun, but had to give up. It was unimaginable. Our family spent time together out of duty, not because we found pleasure in each other's company. Still, I decided to go looking for Mom. Fun didn't stand a chance, but I could still say hi.

Mom and Dad ritually demanded that the family dance attendance on them on Sundays, but that didn't mean they paid any attention to us when we got there. They really weren't interested in Alyssa's fourteenth birthday. They'd had Wade write a birthday check from the account he shared with them. Obligations met, they entertained themselves at her party in their own chosen ways.

Dad was in his easy chair in front of the big screen TV in the living room. His chair had an automatic seat lifter, so that with the push of a button he could stand without putting any strain on his arthritic knees. A show about duck hunting was on the screen, the sound turned up loud so Dad could hear it over the birthday racket in the other room. My oldest nephew, Rick, only two years younger than I, sat on the couch, a beer in his hand, watching the screen as if stupefied. A couple of great-grand-toddlers played on the floor at Dad's feet. Rick looked up, dull-eyed, when I entered. He lifted a hand in greeting and let it drop back down onto his lap as if it weighed a ton. He was bored witless.

I waved back.

"Hi Dad!" I yelled over the sound of the TV. Dad looked up, waved a heavy hand, and let it drop, just like Rick. A family trait. He returned his attention to the TV.

I moved through the living room to the rooms beyond. Mom and Dad's house was one of the oldest in Coeur d'Alene, built by a silver mining baron in the late eighteen nineties. The rooms were large, and there were a lot of them. There were two staircases, the back one intended for servants, and an entire third floor that had originally been servants' quarters, but that we'd used as a playroom. It was a good house for a family with six kids, but there were quite a few years there when I was the only one left, and Mom and Dad and I had rattled around in it by ourselves. It was a lonely place then, and I had escaped from it every chance I got.

A modern kitchen had been added onto the back of the house, and Mom had turned the original kitchen into a sitting room all her own. It was where I could always find her when I was growing up, and it was where I found her now. She rocked in her own recliner with automatic seat lifter. She had TV trays on both sides of her, piled with her personal clutter: a mystery novel, crossword puzzle books, magnifying glass, a bowl of jelly beans, phone, tissues, cup of tea, and the TV remote.

My seventeen-year-old niece, Tara, my middle brother's only girl, was sitting cross-legged on the floor with her laptop in her lap. She'd hooked it up to Mom's TV and was trying to show Mom how the Internet worked. They both glanced up when I entered the room, but neither said anything.

"See, Grandma?" Tara said. "I move the cursor to this spot right here, and I can type in a search word. What do you want to look up?"

"I don't want to look anything up," Mom said irritably.

"C'mon, there must be something," Tara urged. "You could look up recipes. Is there a recipe you'd like to look up?"

"I don't cook much any more."

"How about books by your favorite author, or a movie star? Or you could look up words. For your crossword puzzles." Tara reached over and grabbed Mom's crossword puzzle book from the TV tray. "Like this one. Hexahedron. See, I just go to Dictionary.com, right here, and type in hexahedron. Then click this. And look, there it is. *A hexahedron is a polyhedron bounded by six plane faces.*"

Mom shook her head impatiently. "I have a dictionary already."

"Yeah, but," Tara looked up at me. "Tell her, Kim. This is so much faster, and there's *everything* on here. I mean, anything you could want to know."

"You're wasting your time, Tara." I sat on the arm of the couch.

"Hi, Mom." "I'm eighty-four years old. I don't want to learn new gizmos." "It took her ten years just to get used to the microwave," I told Tara.

Tara threw her hands up and dropped them onto her knees, clearly frustrated. "*God.*" She rose to her knees and started furiously unhooking her laptop. "Fine, Grandma, you can just watch cable TV the rest of your life and bore yourself to death, for all I care."

"All right." Mom allowed herself a tiny pleased smile. She'd easily won that little skirmish. Tara hadn't stood a chance. Mom turned to me. "What's new with you, Kimberly?"

"Oh, nothing much." Tara shot me a look. She knew, of course, that I was lying. My siblings had made sure that Mom and Dad hadn't seen the regional section of the newspaper that morning, but nothing would have prevented the rest of the family from seeing it. In fact, they could hardly have missed it, as the photograph of me took up nearly the entire top half of the front page of Section B. The frumpy newspaper reporter had somehow captured a photo of me that made me look unusually frail and waif-like, all big eyes and trembly lips. I looked like one of those pathetic big-eyed puppies that my sisters used to wear on their t-shirts when they were teenagers.

"*Humble Heroine!*" the headline read, deviating from the truth with the very first word and veering further away from it with every word that followed.

"He wasn't trying to shoot me,' Ms. Wayland insisted bravely, but police sources say bullets flew within inches of Wayland's head, and it was only by the sheerest of good luck--and Wayland's quick thinking--that she was not seriously injured or killed. Ms. Wayland's endearing attempts to downplay her heroic actions only emphasize her bravery and the humble nature of her character. At a time when the world needs more heroes, Spokane is proud to call Ms. Wayland its own humble heroine."

Gag me.

There was also an article about the streak of bad luck dogging Basalt Falls: the heart, Danny's murder--they weren't pretending it was anything else--the shooting, and even the walkout, as if that were on par with murders and body parts.

Tara had read the articles, no doubt, as had all my brothers and sisters and the older nieces and nephews, but no one had said anything to me, lest it reach the tender ears of Mom or Dad. It felt very strange, lonely almost, to be in the bosom of my very large family and be so isolated from them by the things we could not talk about. It had always been that way, of course, at least ever since I tried to tell them I was a lesbian, but it was suddenly more noticeable. This was due in part, I suppose, to the fact that so very much had happened to me lately, but in part I think it was because of Lucy. I kept imagining Lucy and her mom, her dad, her brother, all loving one another so openly, talking about things with each other, no barriers, no taboo subjects. Having fun with each other. I imagined Lucy and her mom openly discussing whether young Lucy's feelings for girls might mean she was a lesbian. What would such a conversation be like?

As if on cue, Mom asked, "Do you have a boyfriend yet?"

"No," I replied, then daringly added, "I have a girlfriend though."

Tara looked up, a shocked expression on her face, though whether it was because I'd dared hint at my sexual orientation to Mom or because it was news to Tara, I did not know. She needn't have worried that Mom would be bothered by my words, though. Mom only understood what she wanted to understand.

"You can't marry your girlfriends, Kimberly," she said, as if I were stupid. "You need to settle down with a man and have some babies."

"I'm only thirty-two," I said again. Why the sudden rush for me to procreate? "Besides, aren't there enough babies in this family?"

"You're going to end up all alone, if you're not careful," Mom warned.

"*'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished,*" Tara quoted. The seniors must have been studying Hamlet at Coeur d'Alene High.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Besides, I won't be alone. I told you, I have a girlfriend." It felt good to say it. I wondered if it was true.

"*Kimberly*," Wade barked at me from the kitchen. "Give me a hand in here, will you?"

Crap. Busted by the Big One.

Tara quickly hopped up and sat next to me on the couch. "Do you mean what I think you mean?" she whispered urgently.

"I don't know," I whispered back. "Depends on what you think I mean."

"*Kim!*" Wade again.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming." I pushed myself off the couch toward the kitchen, but before I left the room, I turned to Tara, behind Mom's back, pointed to myself, and mouthed silently, "*I am a lesbian.*"

Tara grinned and gave me a thumbs up.

It was a cowardly way to come out to the next generation, but it was a start.

Chapter Thirty-Six

TUESDAY WAS ELECTION Day. Lucy was as excited as if it were her birthday. She arranged to get off work early, ordered a take and bake pizza the size of a wagon wheel, and was waiting with it on my front porch when I pulled into the driveway at three fifty-five.

"*Hurry*," she called as I came up the stairs. "The polls in the East close in five minutes. We might miss something."

"You're weird," I said and gave her a quick kiss.

"I know. I got a combo. People can pick off what they don't like."

I unlocked the front door. She passed the pizza to me, plopped down on the couch, and immediately turned the TV to CNN.

"Take off your coat and stay a while," I said.

She grinned, shot me a wink that made Gilly flip, and shrugged out of her coat.

I went to the kitchen and dropped off the pizza, let Loot in and shooed him into the living room, and turned on the oven. I unwrapped the pizza and set plates, forks, and knives on the counter, then prepared Loot's dinner in the vain hope that if she were fed, she would not bother us for pizza.

I've never been particularly interested in politics, though I'd been swept up, like everyone else, into this year's presidential election. It was historic, no matter how it turned out. But Lucy's excitement was far beyond anything I'd ever experienced regarding politics. It was odd, but contagious. Having her in the house as the election results came in was like having a little kid around at Christmas.

I returned to the living room and sat next to Lucy on the couch. "The oven's heating up," I said.

Lucy waggled her eyebrows at me. "Me too," she said. She cupped her hand on the back of my neck and leaned in for a kiss.

"Careful," I warned. "You might miss something."

She peeked at the TV, which showed a blank electoral map. "Not yet."

We spent a thoroughly pleasurable two minutes making out on the couch. Then Lucy relaxed back with me in her arms and gave a very self-satisfied sigh.

"I showed my mom your picture in the paper," she said.

I raised my head from her shoulder to look at her. "Oh, God. That picture. Did you tell her I don't really look like that?"

"Why would I tell her that? You do look like that."

"I do not. It made me look all helpless and scared. It made me look like a wimp."

"No. It made you look like a strong and brave and very beautiful woman who had been through a frightening ordeal." She tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear. "Which is exactly what you are."

"Oh." How could I argue with that? I let my head fall back onto her shoulder. "Who did you tell her I was?"

"I told her you're the girl I'm dating." She pressed her lips to my temple.

"Oh." It seemed so simple when Lucy said it.

"She wants to meet you."

"Mm."

Lucy chuckled. "No rush."

The doorbell rang, and I got up to answer it. It was Becca.

"McCain's ahead," Lucy announced as soon as Becca stepped in.

"*What?* No way!" Becca wailed, dropping into my rocking chair.

"Just kidding," Lucy said, grinning.

"You bitch," Becca said mildly. She turned to me. "Where's Annie?"

"She should be here any minute," I said. "She said she'd come right after school."

The oven dinged. I went to put the pizza in, and forty minutes later, piles of greasy napkins and empty beer bottles cluttered the coffee table, along with dirty plates and little piles of Becca's rejected onions and spicy sausage.

"Oh, my God," Lucy cried, bouncing in her seat. "He took Pennsylvania. There's no way McCain can win now." She snatched up my hand, pressed it to her chest, and turned glowing eyes on me. Her cheeks were flushed and she couldn't stop smiling. "This is so big, Kim. This is the biggest thing since Roosevelt. This is going to change the world."

"Maybe the world has already changed," I suggested lightly. "Maybe that's why Obama won."

"Biggest thing since Lincoln," Becca said, tipping her head back to dribble the dregs of her fourth beer into her mouth.

"I'm so glad I got to live to see this day," Lucy said, a bit melodramatically, if you ask me. She grabbed a napkin to dab at her eyes.

The doorbell rang. It was Annie, finally. It felt good to even the numbers. There weren't enough sober people in the room. Even though Lucy was only drunk on election results.

"What took you so long?" I asked. "We ate without you."

"That's okay," she said, removing her coat. "Who's winning?"

"Obama!" Lucy shouted. "They're already calling it."

"Biggest thing," Becca said importantly, "since George Washington."

"Uh huh," Annie said, taking in Becca's condition with a glance.

She looked back at me, and I could tell something was wrong.

"What happened?" I sat again beside Lucy. "Why are you so late?"

"I've been talking to the police." She pulled the other rocker forward and sat down next to Becca. "They've identified the heart."

Lucy leaned forward and pushed the mute button on the remote. We all stared at Annie, everyone suddenly sober.

"It's Ricky's."

I sucked in my breath and shook my head in disbelief. I knew that's what everyone else had suspected since Saturday, but I hadn't. I'd been too certain that Ryan was right, that Ricky was safe somewhere, that Randy knew where he was. I couldn't believe that the heart that I'd held *in my hand* belonged to a boy I knew. *Ricky*.

After a moment, Lucy asked quietly, "What about Randy?"

"They've arrested him."

"Oh, no," I said quickly. "Not Randy."

Maybe I was in denial, but I simply could not fathom that Randy could have killed his own brother, cut out his heart, and thrown it into the dumpster. It wasn't possible. "Randy couldn't have done it."

"Whether he did it or not," Annie said, "he's in it up to his eyeballs. He's been telling people for weeks that he knows where Ricky is. And Ricky's been dead all along."

That was true. He'd told me the same thing when I ran into him in the hallway that day, long after I'd found the heart. I never would have guessed he was lying.

"He's just a kid," I said weakly. "Maybe he was just pretending like he knew where Ricky was so he could sound important."

Annie looked at me regretfully. "Bodey started talking, finally, after they told him they'd arrested Randy. He says Randy's the one who told him to shoot you on Halloween."

"What?" I couldn't take it in. "Why would Randy do that? I don't even know Randy. I never taught him. Why would he want Bodey to shoot me?"

"And why would Bodey do it," Lucy asked, "just because Randy told him to?"

"I don't know Randy's reasons," Annie said. "But Bodey was trying to save his dog."

"His dog?" Becca asked, tracking the conversation remarkably well, considering. "What's his dog got to do with it?"

"Randy had threatened him," Annie said. "He said he was going to kill Bodey's dog--in a particularly gruesome way--if he didn't do what Randy told him to do. And Randy was the head Hitlerwrath kid, so Bodey believed him."

I glanced at Loot, gnawing on a rawhide bone at my feet, and felt nothing but pity for Bodey. "And Randy told him to kill *me*?"

"That's what Bodey said."

"But he didn't say why?"

"He says he doesn't know why. And Randy's not talking."

We sat silently for a moment, watching the map on the TV fill up with blue states. Annie's news had sobered us all. Even Lucy barely got giddy as Barack Obama was declared the next president of the United States.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

IT IS FORTUNATE, I suppose, that middle school students are so remarkably self-centered.

They were upset, of course, to learn that the heart found in the middle school dumpster belonged to the brother of their fellow students. Few had known Ricky, but many of them knew Randy or Ryan, and they were naturally devastated on their behalf. The fact that Randy had been arrested, though stories varied about why, only fueled their angst. Factions arose between those who always knew there was something strange about Randy and those who were prepared to defend him to the death.

But the trauma surrounding Ricky's death and Randy's arrest paled in comparison to the outrage that arose when the Harvest Dance, scheduled for that Friday, was cancelled.

The Harvest Dance was the first of two dances held yearly at the middle school, and for many of the students it was to be their first dance ever. It was limited to seventh and eighth graders, so the fifth and sixth graders had two years to wait before it came their turn to don a gallon of perfume or aftershave, shave their legs or upper lips for the first time, and spend an hour and a half, from three thirty to five p.m., standing around in the school gymnasium, staring at the opposite sex who stood aromatically on the other side pretending not to stare back.

When Danny died, his parents opted for a private memorial service, family only. But Candy and Calvin Bunch planned an elaborate memorial service so the entire Basalt Falls community could join them in saying goodbye to Ricky. The school district superintendent agreed to let them to use school facilities in order to accommodate all the high school mourners. And the service would take place in the high school gym on Friday afternoon. Unfortunately, that meant the boys' basketball team was displaced from practice. Apparently it did not occur to the coach to cancel practice to allow the team to attend the memorial service. Instead, he asserted his authority as the winningest coach in school history, to usurp the middle school dance so he could hold his practice in our gym.

We probably would have cancelled the dance anyway, since those of us who were assigned to chaperone this year intended to go to the memorial service instead. I, for one, thought it was very obliging of Coach Trent to be the bad guy, so we didn't have to.

I was having a hard enough time as it was. The identification of Ricky's heart had resurrected and magnified people's curiosity about me. They began wondering all over again why I hadn't reported the heart when I'd first found it. With the subsequent shooting incident added into the mix, I was getting a lot of speculative and leery looks, as if people couldn't quite believe I wasn't somehow responsible for *something*. The speculation wasn't limited to my coworkers, either. The students, who had been fairly insulated from the rumors the first time around, were fully aware of my involvement this time. I'd received too much notoriety lately for them to be unaware that I had been the one to find Ricky's heart. My own students were too accustomed to me to be afraid, but many of the others clearly went out of their way to avoid me when they passed me in the hall.

I stayed in my classroom as much as possible. It would appear too strange to absent myself from the teachers' lounge at lunch time, so I still gathered my cottage cheese and pineapple, carried it down to the lounge, sat next to Annie, and tried to act as if everything were normal. But the conversations were stilted, or the laughter was forced, or the silence was awkward, so that I was relieved when it was time to return to class.

I hoped that with Ricky's memorial service, it would all get put behind us, and we could return to normal. For reasons we would probably never understand, it truly did appear that thirteen-year-old Randy had killed his brother and tried to get Bodey to kill me. Danny's murder was still a mystery. The fact that it was I who had found Ricky's heart was pure coincidence, so maybe after the memorial service, people would forget I had ever been involved. Right.

On Friday, out of deference for death, I wore black slacks and a subdued beige and black blouse, and I tried to avoid all messy lessons in an attempt to keep myself clean. The students were released at one o'clock. They chose to think it was compensation for missing their dance, which we let them believe. At two o'clock, Annie and I walked together to the high school gym.

Ricky was well liked. The bleachers were already nearly filled with students and the service wasn't scheduled to start for another half hour. Folding chairs were set up on the floor. A small stage was set up at one end, and a slideshow of photographs of Ricky played on a gigantic screen above it. Annie and I found two empty chairs and sat to watch the slides, like everyone else.

An astonishing number of photographs had been taken of Ricky in his short life. When I was his age, pictures were still taken on a roll of film, which had to be taken to a store and developed. Only after you got the pictures back could you see what you'd actually taken a picture of. As a result, few photos exist of my childhood, and those that did were so bad it was left to my imagination to figure out what I *really* looked like. Not so Ricky. It appeared from the flashes on the screen that not a moment of his life had been left unrecorded.

Any moment not captured by his parents' cameras had been caught by his friends on their cell phones and then downloaded to show up now on the big screen.

Ricky's fifth grade class photo appeared. I was startled to see myself, six years ago, standing proudly beside my students. Ricky sat in the front row, cross legged, in a green t-shirt that sported goggle eyed *South Park* characters. That was before his religious stepfather entered the picture, of course, or no doubt *South Park* would have been on the sin list. Danny stood in the row behind Ricky, two students to the left. Those who didn't know better would have taken Danny for a girl, with his peach shirt and blond curls. It *was* incredible, I had to acknowledge. Two students from the same class, killed within weeks of each other. Both murdered, apparently, and their old fifth grade teacher targeted as well. How likely was it that all three incidents were unrelated? Murmurs from the crowd suggested that others were speculating about the coincidence as well. Then the photo changed to Ricky in a *Pirates of the Caribbean* costume, and the murmurs changed to subdued laughter.

I continued to think about that fifth grade photograph. I tried to remember that year. Had Ricky and Danny been friends back then? I could remember that Ricky had been popular, and Danny had not. Danny had not yet become the butt of much teasing, but the students had already sensed he was different than they were, and they had little to do with him. Ricky hadn't cared much about what the other students thought. He was friendly with everyone. I never had to worry about where to situate Ricky's desk, or which work group to put him in, like I did with so many students. I was more likely to use him as a buffer, in fact, put him in groups with the less likeable kids, because Ricky would happily welcome and work with anyone. I couldn't remember Ricky befriending Danny, in particular, but I was certain Ricky would have been kind to him.

But they became friends later, according to Ryan. Two high school juniors, both murdered within weeks of each other, one gay and one-- Well, I didn't really know if Ricky was straight. I'd assumed he was, but isn't that what we're all conditioned to assume about one another? It was certainly what everyone had assumed about me for years. Shoot, my family *still* assumed it. Ricky was a regular boy. The photographs on the screen showed him playing baseball, snow boarding, horsing around with football players, flirting with cheerleaders, there were pictures of him at dances with pretty girls at his side. But what did all that signify? I knew from experience that it signified nothing.

A startling picture showed up on the screen, a close up of their two faces. It was a recent photo, a photo that showed that before their deaths Ricky and Danny had been turning into a pair of handsome young men. Their heads tilted toward each other, Ricky's dark hair touching Danny's blond, and they were laughing together at the camera. I felt tears start in my eyes, but before they could fall, they were chased away by an angry shout from the front of the gym.

Ricky's stepfather, Calvin Bunch, erupted from his seat. His gray sweater stretched taut across his massive shoulders, and his arms were as big around as a seventh grader. He strode toward the podium, where the computer sat alone. It looked as if he were going to snatch the computer and smash it, but a skinny boy rushed up and hovered protectively over it. He stared at Bunch with terrified eyes, risking his young life, he clearly believed, in order to save his laptop.

Bunch pointed a thick, shaking finger at the boy. "Get that faggot off of there," he said, his voice wobbling with emotion. "This is a memorial service. This is no place for that kind of--of--." He trailed off, unable to think of a word terrible enough. "You get it off of there, you hear me?"

The boy nodded his head and quickly shut down the slideshow software, frantically pushing keys to remove the photo. Bunch returned to his seat, dropped his head into his hands, and started crying. Candy wrapped her arms around his huge shoulders and held him as he shook. His loud, harsh sobs resonated throughout the gymnasium.

The angry murmur that had arisen from the student crowd at Bunch's words subsided. Previously dry eyes grew wet, and noses sniffed and blew, disarmed at the open weeping of the big man. Even I felt my eyes sting at Bunch's unmistakable grief, though I was angry at his hateful words about Danny. Moments later the slideshow resumed, without the offending picture.

Aside from that preliminary skirmish, the memorial service went off without a hitch. Teachers spoke, students spoke, relatives spoke, and everyone cried. I'd brought a mini pack of tissues, but it was not enough for Annie and me both. I resorted to reusing my tissues until they were soggy and shredded.

It was not until after the service, as people milled about sharing memories of Ricky, that Calvin Bunch spotted me. I'd been talking with some of my former students, kids who'd been in Ricky's fifth grade class. Bunch did a double take and his eyes, swollen from crying, widened, as if he couldn't believe I was there. He shouldered his way past the students and stopped directly in front of me.

I already knew Bunch was homophobic. That had been made very clear to me when he'd had Ryan pulled from my class. But I hadn't been aware, until his eruption at the photo of Ricky and Danny, how fanatical his homophobia was.

I took a step back, my heart pounding rapidly.

"You shouldn't be here." His voice was low, almost conspiratorial, as if I were his secret mistress who'd shown up unexpectedly and should have known better.

"He was my student," I said. "I cared about him."

"Well, *don't*." He shot a quick guilty glance around, I guess hoping no one had noticed he was talking to a lesbian. His lips wobbled with emotion and foam gathered at the corners of his mouth. "You leave my boys alone. Don't even *think* about them."

One of his boys was dead, and another was in jail being held for the murder of the first. He only had one boy left, and he'd already effectively removed Ryan from my reach. After today, there would be no reason for me to ever see Mr. Bunch again, but I couldn't resist the urge to try to get back at him, just a little, for his treatment of me, for pulling Ryan from my class, for calling Danny a faggot.

"It isn't contagious, Mr. Bunch," I said with fake gentleness. "You know, most homophobic people are really just insecure about their own sexuality."

He blanched and blinked and worked his lips again. Finally he managed to speak, his voice still low but filled with venom. "You shouldn't even be allowed in this school."

I felt a splat of spittle land my hand and shook it off with repulsion. "Say it, don't spray it," I said intelligently. Kids get the best lines.

His chest swelled and his face turned red, but before he could speak again, or throttle me, Detective Ron Springer suddenly appeared at my side.

"Hello, Mr. Bunch, Ms. Wayland," he said calmly, as if he hadn't just interrupted a possible hate crime. He looked serenely around the room. "A lot of people sure liked your son, Mr. Bunch, didn't they?"

Bunch released a shaky breath, almost a sob, and said, "Of course they did. Ricky was a great boy."

I relaxed muscles I didn't realize were clenched, thanked Ron with a smile, and slid away, my legs like jelly. I considered sticking around the memorial service until the last chair had been folded and put away, just to spite Bunch, but all I really wanted to do was get away from there. I grabbed Annie, and we left.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"HEY, YOU DROVE yourself," I noted with approval as Becca climbed out of her yellow bug.

"Yep. I got my wing back." She flapped her arm up and down for me, showing off her sling-less arm.

"That's great." I opened the garage door and ushered her in. "Welding with one hand is a pain in the patootie. We're starting plant stands today. I thought we'd make the legs today, and some braces. Then next week we'll add the stand part."

"Next week?"

"Yeah. It's too much for one lesson."

"Maybe we could make something easier," Becca suggested. "Something that can be finished in one day."

"Why?"

"This might have to be my last welding lesson."

I turned and looked at her. "Why?"

Becca flapped her arm again. "I'm better. I start work again next week. Saturdays are busy days at the Spaghetti Factory."

"Well," I said slowly, feeling somewhat deflated, "our lessons don't have to be on Saturdays. Sundays would work too."

"Are you kidding? After working Saturday night? I'm exhausted on Sundays."

"We could figure out a couple of weeknights," I suggested. "We'll just do shorter lessons."

"Yeah," Becca said doubtfully. "But I'm not going to have much time on my hands. Especially since--" She gave me a hesitant little smile. "I think I'm going to start seeing someone."

"Oh." I was taken aback. I hadn't even been aware there was anyone on her horizon. I guess I was supposed to ask who she was, how they'd met, and what she looked like and all that. Maybe if I had, she wouldn't have picked a fight with me. But I was a little put out by her cavalier attitude toward our lessons, so all I said was, "I didn't realize I was just helping you kill time."

"Oh, come on, Kim, it was more than that," Becca said. "You taught me a lot about welding."

"You haven't even welded anything yet," I said, a bit sulkily. "Not by yourself."

"So? I just wanted to know what it was like, and now I do." She looked at me closely. "And we had fun, didn't we? What's the problem?"

I looked at the pile of supplies I'd bought for the plant stands, the extra gloves I'd bought to fit Becca's hands, the new goggles, the torch with the built-in igniter so Becca could light the flame with the push of one red button. "I went to a lot of trouble for these lessons, Becca." I didn't even try to keep the reprimand out of my voice. I sounded like someone's cranky dad.

"C'mon, it's not that big of a deal." Becca eyed me again. "Are you sure you're not just ticked because I'm thinking about dating someone?"

"Of course not." I pulled my welding shirt on over my t-shirt and buttoned it up to the neck.
"Why would I care about that?"

"You always get pissy when I start dating someone," Becca accused.

"I do not. I am not pissy." I heard myself and amended, "I mean, I'm a little pissy, but not about that. I bought you new goggles."

"Well, I didn't ask you to." She jiggled her car keys in her fingers for a moment, a thoughtful frown on her face. From out of the blue, she said, "You never wanted me, but you can't stand it when someone else does."

"*What?*" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "I did too want you. I chased you that whole summer. You're the one who turned *me* down, remember?"

"No." She held up a wagging finger to shut me up. "That is *not* what happened, Kim. You just offered me your standard deal. You said you'd date me for the summer, but after that it would be over. I just happen to be the only girl who believed you and turned you down."

"Maybe," I acknowledged, "but that's not why you didn't date me."

"And how would you know?" Becca asked, her hands on her hips.

I stared at her in disbelief. "You mean to tell me, if I hadn't said we could only date for the summer, you would have dated me?"

"Why is that so hard to believe? You knew I liked you. We liked each other, didn't we? Still do, I think." She frowned at me dubiously, as if questioning her taste. "Of *course* I wouldn't date you. I didn't want to get dumped at the end of the summer."

"I wouldn't have dumped *you*."

"Oh, Kim." Now Becca was the one who stared at me in disbelief. "You are so full of shit. You know you would have. The only reason we're still friends today is because I refused to date you."

"That's not true."

"It *is*. The reason *we* never dated is because *you* never really wanted to. If you wanted to date me, you would have done it, and not just during the summer. Like you are now, with Lucy."

"I've just been *outed*," I reminded her. "That's why I can date Lucy now."

"Bullshit," Becca declared. Her voice turned snide. "You didn't come running to ask *me* out when you got outed, did you? It turns out it wasn't because you were closeted after all, was it? You've just used that damned closet as an excuse for years, because you're so freaked out by relationships."

"Nuh uh," I argued expertly. "Besides, how do you explain Lucy? I'm not using an excuse not to date her." Hah! I had her cornered now.

But she just looked at me as if she'd won and said, "Bingo."

"Huh?"

"That's my point," Becca said slowly. "You're not dating Lucy just because you're not in the closet any more. You're not in the closet anymore *because* you're dating Lucy."

"Huh?" I asked again.

"You're dating Lucy because you *want* to. You really like her. If you didn't, you'd be making up an excuse again, like you did with me and all your other summer girls."

"That doesn't make sense. Dale outed me," I said again. "That's why I'm not in the closet any more. It has nothing to do with Lucy."

Becca was so frustrated, she stomped her foot. "Jesus, Kim, can't you ever just be honest for once, at least with yourself?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just what I said. God, you are so full of shit." Becca stomped her foot again. "Your whole *life* is a lie. You lie at school. You lie to your family. You're lying to me right now. I'll bet you even lie to Lucy, and you are *definitely* lying to yourself."

"I am not!" My voice grew screechy from the injustice of her accusations. "I do not. I *had* to lie at school. You don't know what it's like. You never had to be closeted at your job. *Or* with your mom."

"Neither did you," Becca said shortly. "You just chose to. Look, you're out at school now, and the world didn't end, did it?"

"I had three kids pulled out of my class."

"So? How many stayed? Twenty-five? You didn't stay in the closet all those years because you were afraid three little kids would be pulled from your class."

God, she was pissing me off. "You don't have any idea what teaching's like."

"Well, who made you be a teacher?" she asked, tossing my career aside like a broken toy. "Don't you get it, Kim? You've had choices all along. You've just chosen to stay in the closet your whole life because it's safe. You're *still* choosing to be in the closet. Why don't you tell your parents you're a lesbian?"

"I did. They didn't believe me."

"And you never tried again. It's easier to live a lie."

"They're *old*."

"Oh, I forgot. Old people don't have lesbians in the family."

"God!" I yelled. "Would you just shut up? Why are you being such a bitch?"

"Because you're being a chicken shit!"

We glared at each other for a long moment. Finally, I said, "I don't feel like teaching you welding today."

"Good. Because I don't feel like learning it."

"Good."

She turned around and marched out, and I heard the putt putt of her car pulling out of the driveway.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

DAMN BECCA!

I pulled on my goggles and gloves and cranked up the oxygen and acetylene. I had no interest in making stupid plant stands. That was baby stuff. I grabbed some of the tubing I had purchased for the legs and used the brand new push-button ignition torch to hack at the ends. Rough jagged points appeared, like gnashing teeth, which was exactly how I felt.

How dare she accuse me of living a lie? Just because she leaped out of the closet the first minute she figured out she was a lesbian. It wasn't so easy for all of us. What did she think Don't-Ask-Don't-Tell was all about, anyway? All those people in our armed forces, sacrificing their lives for ours day in and day out, and *they* had to live a lie. There was nothing dishonorable about staying closeted when you were forced to, for the good of the people, was there?

Okay, the situations weren't identical. But when I first started teaching, I could have been fired for being gay, and if I'd chosen to stay in Idaho and teach in Coeur d'Alene, where it was still legal to discriminate against gays and lesbians, it could still happen. It's not my fault I learned to

live a lie before they changed the law. Gays and lesbians all over the world have been forced to live lies forever. Becca just happened to come out at a time and in a place where she had nothing to fear. Well, goodie goodie gumdrops for her.

I experimented with making the jagged points longer, narrower, sharper. I had no idea what I would do with them. Maybe I could insert them in my seaweed platform. Man-eating fronds. Woman-eating fronds. *Becca* eating fronds.

And what was she getting at about Lucy? Did she think, if I'd met Lucy before I was outed by Dale, that I still would have dated her during the school year? Not likely. I've been asked out a time or two during the school year by women, the kind of women with pinpoint accuracy gaydar who saw right through my straight little teacher disguise, but I was never tempted to say yes. Why would it have been any different with Lucy? Unless--would it have been? Things *were* different with Lucy, there was no denying that, but was it different because we didn't meet until after I'd been outed? Or would it have been different anyway?

As if she knew I was thinking about her, the phone in my pocket began singing Lady Gaga's *Let's Dance*, Lucy's ring. I turned off the gases, drew off my gloves and goggles, and answered the phone.

"Hi, doll," she said playfully.

The surprising endearment made Gilly flip in my belly. I smiled. "Hi."

"How's welding with Becca going?"

"Fine," I said automatically. After I'd said it, I heard myself. I'd just lied to Lucy. I winced and bit my lip.

"Good. I'm glad you're having fun. I won't keep you, but I had some extra time here this morning and--"

"Wait." I interrupted her. "That's not what I meant to say. I mean, welding's going fine. Not with Becca, though. I didn't mean to say that." There. It wasn't a lie anymore. I'd fixed it. "I'm welding by myself."

"Oh. Well, that's--Is everything okay?"

"Sure, everything's fine," I said. "She's cleared to go back to work now, so we just decided not have any more lessons."

"Oh, that's too bad," Lucy said. "I know you were looking forward to making those plant stands."

"Yeah, well--" Crap. I'd done it again. Was Becca right after all? Had I been living a lie for so long that I didn't even know how to stop lying when I didn't need to? I resolved, from that moment on, I would not lie to Lucy ever again. "Actually, Becca and I sort of had a fight."

"Oh," Lucy said again, then asked hesitantly, "Anything I ought to know about?"

I thought a moment. Then, fairly certain it was the truth, I said, "No. It's stupid, and I don't even know why-- Did you know Becca's seeing someone?"

After a moment of silence, Lucy said, "No, I didn't know that. Does that bother you?"

"No," I said quickly. "It doesn't. That's not what--why does everyone think that? I was just surprised, that's all."

"Oh."

She'd believed all my lies, but now that I was telling the truth, she didn't believe me, and I'd hurt her feelings to boot.

"It doesn't matter to me, Lucy," I assured her. "Really, I don't care. Becca can date a dozen women for all I care." But even I could tell that I protested too much to be convincing. My shoulders slumped. How could I explain it to Lucy when I didn't understand it myself?

"Well, anyway," Lucy said, abruptly changing the subject. Her voice was brisk and official. "I just called to tell you I've been doing some research this morning, about sexual orientation discrimination in schools. The law as it applies to teachers is still very vague, but I found some avenues I want to explore. I really need to look at that data you've got for me."

"Data?"

"Yeah, your records. You know, the class rosters, letters, emails? You told me you had them."

"Oh that. Yes, yes, of course I have them." I had told her that. I had, in fact, lied about it, since I had never taken any time to gather the records she had asked for. Okay, so I had just resolved not to lie to Lucy any more, and I would not. But this, I reasoned, was not a new lie. It was more of a continuation of a previous lie, from back when I used to lie. It didn't really count.

"Great," Lucy said. "I'll pick them up tonight. I'm picking you up at six-thirty?"

I glanced at the clock. "Can you make it seven?"

"Sure, I'll see you then. Bye." She hung up, sans endearments, and I felt just a bit bereft. I ran to the house, grabbed my coat and keys, and ran out to the car.

It was not yet four. Three hours should give me plenty of time to get to the school, gather enough records to cover up my lie, get back home, shower, and still be ready for our date at seven. After that, I promised myself, no more lies.

Chapter Forty

THE DAYS ARE very short in Spokane in November, and by the time I reached the school, it was nearly dark already. There was enough light still to see a couple of cars parked at the high school and two more in the administration building parking lot, including Donald Stern's Suburban. What the heck was he doing out here on a Saturday afternoon? But I didn't have time to worry about that. I pulled into the parking lot of the middle school, which was empty, and parked beside the outside door to my classroom.

I don't know why I hadn't taken a little time weeks earlier to gather the records Lucy had asked for. It was a simple job, and I could have done it in twenty minutes if I'd done it during my prep period on a school day. But this was Saturday, and everything seemed to take longer.

I turned on my computer and waited for it to boot up. I could print the class roster and the e-mails from there. What else was it that Lucy wanted? Voicemails and letters. I lifted the receiver and dialed in for my messages. I have a habit of skipping messages without deleting them, so I knew the relevant phone messages would still be in there, but it meant I had to listen to a slew of irrelevant messages to get to the good stuff. As I listened, I tucked the receiver between my ear and shoulder, grabbed a stack of papers from my desk, and quickly thumbed through it to see if I could find any letters. I couldn't recall if I'd ever received copies of any letters, aside from Dale's letter outing me. They were probably in Ms. James' files, no doubt locked up, but thumbing through the papers gave my hands something to do while I waited for the computer and the phone to catch up with me.

I found a copy of the notice of the school board meeting where Candy and Calvin Bunch had tried to get me fired. Some kind soul had forwarded it to me, thinking I might want to attend. As if. I pulled it out of the stack to copy for Lucy. Somewhere there would be minutes of that meeting. I'd have to track them down another time.

I noticed my fingers were shaking. I clasped my hands and forced myself to calm down. There was no reason to be nervous. My classroom is like a second home to me. I'm normally as comfortable there as I am in my living room, or my shop. But I was not normally there on a Saturday, alone, when it was dark outside. The window in the back door stared at me like a giant black eye. I glanced at it and briefly imagined someone standing on the other side staring back through it, at me.

The computer finally finished its whirring and I was able to pull up the class roster. I ignored the black-eyed window and quickly printed a current roster, then scrolled back to find one from the first of the year, before the three students were pulled from my class. I printed that too and turned to the e-mails. Just as with my voice messages, I don't delete my e-mails, and there were a ton of

them. All the relevant e-mails I had received were from Ms. James, so I arranged my inbox to show the e-mails I'd received from her in chronological order.

Suddenly her voice came on the line. I straightened up and put my hand on the receiver, as if I could hear it better that way.

"Kimberly, will you come see me right after school? I received a letter in the mail today, and I need to talk to you about it. Thanks."

That would have been the first phone call, when Ms. James received Dale's letter. I didn't know how to make a copy of a telephone recording, but one of the options was to forward the call to another number. I forwarded it to my home phone, and continued listening.

The first relevant e-mail was dated the next day, after I had met Ms. James in her office and she'd shown me the letter.

TO: waylandk@basaltfallsschooldistrict.wa.edu FROM:
jamesb@basaltfallsschooldistrict.wa.edu

I checked with the Sup's office. The letter has to be placed in your file but we're marking it confidential. Should be the end of it. No worries, ok?

The end of it. Right. It was probably the start of the whole thing. Who had she talked to at the superintendent's office about that letter? Whoever it was hadn't treated it as confidential at all, because the next e-mail came at the end of that week.

TO: waylandk@basaltfallsschooldistrict.edu FROM: jamesb@basaltfallsschooldistrict.edu
URGENT!

Come see me at lunch. Before you eat. We have a problem.

That e-mail coincided with another voice mail from Ms. James. Her voice was less calm this time.

"Kimberly? Are you there? I just sent you an e-mail. I need to talk to you immediately. Oh, blast. I'm coming down there."

That was the day Candy and Calvin Bunch showed up at my door. Ms. James did come down to my office shortly after she left that message, but she was too late. The Bunches were already on the way out the door, a tearful Ryan in their grip. She didn't even try to stop them. She just smiled nervously and followed them down the hall, assuring them the school board would be in touch with them shortly. She didn't say a word to me.

I glumly forwarded that voice mail as well and printed the e-mails. Listening to the voice mails and re-reading the e-mails was depressing. I felt almost as if it were happening all over again. My stomach churned, my shoulders tensed, and I caught myself nibbling on a fingernail. I didn't

see how these little records would help Lucy, but I'd promised, so I continued going through them and printed or forwarded every e-mail or voice mail that seemed at all relevant.

The printer was in the office, to which I had no key. This was not a problem, as we all knew how to push our fingers against the unlocked glass of the service window to slide it open and climb over the narrow counter to get in, but it slowed me down some. I glanced at the clock in the office. Five forty already. I needed to be on the road by six, or I wouldn't have time to shower before Lucy showed up.

Everything takes longer when you're in a hurry, of course. The printer was a combination printer-copier. I had to key in my mailbox number to access the items I'd sent to print, then wait for the machine to warm up before it would print anything. I glanced around the office and wandered idly over to Ms. James' door. I tried the handle, but it was locked, of course.

Once the machine started printing, it was fast. I grabbed the rosters and the e-mails, turned off the machine, climbed back over the counter, and slid the window closed again. It wasn't until I'd returned to my classroom and was putting the papers into a manila folder that I actually looked at the top pages. The rosters printed beautifully, with the names of students listed in alphabetical order, the students in my class as of September 15 on one roster, the students currently in my class on another. The problem was the tiny print on the bottom of each roster: *Printed on November 8, 2008.*

Crap. What kind of stupid program was that? How was I supposed to fool Lucy into thinking I had these documents all ready for her days ago when she could see, as clear as anything, that I didn't print them out until *today*?

Correction fluid. That's what I needed. I scabbled through my desk, but couldn't find any. I rushed back to the office, slid the service window open again, climbed over the counter, and searched through the clutter on the desk beside the photocopy machine. I finally found a correction pen, quickly painted over the incriminating date, blew on it, and ran copies of the rosters. I examined the results. A fine dark line showed the outline of the correction. Drat. I pushed the lighter/darker button toward the lighter side, printed them again, and examined the results. Perfect.

Again I turned off the machine. I tried not to crumple the small stack of doctored documents as I pulled myself again up onto the counter. Balancing on my knees, I pressed my fingers against the glass of the window and was about to slide it open when I heard a noise. I froze. It sounded like a door opening nearby. I hesitated, my heart in my throat, torn between quickly sliding the window open and skedaddling out of the office, or jumping down inside and hiding under a desk. From where I crouched, I could see only the blank concrete of the far hallway wall and a few feet down each side. I waited for the sound of the door closing so that I could gauge how much time I had.

My hesitation cost me. I'd forgotten that the front door of the middle school has pneumatic hinges that suck the door closed slowly behind you. By the time I heard the *thunk* of the door

closing, Donald Stern had already silently walked halfway down the hall and had reached the door of the office.

Chapter Forty-One

HE STOPPED SHORT, no doubt startled at the sight of me crouching in the service window. He was no more startled at the sight of me, though, than I was at the sight of him. I reared back, just a bit. Unfortunately my balance on the narrow counter was precarious, and my sudden movement threw it off completely. I fell backward. I flailed for purchase at the service desk, which slowed but did not stop my fall. I landed on my backside, doctored class rosters mixing with paper clips, pens, and other clutter that I'd knocked off the desk.

The door to the office opened--of course he had a key--and Stern walked in.

"*You*," he said with loathing. He came to stand over me, glaring. "What the hell are you doing in here?"

Uncomfortable with my vulnerable position, I scrambled to my feet and took two quick steps away.

"What are you doing in here, Ms. Wayland?" he repeated.

"W--w--working." My heart was racing. Regardless of whether he was the killer or not, I didn't want him to know what I was doing. I was using school resources, after all, to copy evidence for the union's lawyer, so that she could sue the school district. So that she could sue *him*.

"In the *window*?"

"I don't have a key." I bent down and picked up one of my doctored rosters. My fingers shook. "It's how we get in on the weekend. Everyone does it."

"What are you working on?" His eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Copying class lists." I flashed the roster at him. What could be more innocent than a teacher copying a class roster? I bent to pick up another. I didn't want him to see the versions with the correction fluid on them. They looked suspicious even to me. "This is the only printer in the school."

I quickly gathered up the rest of the documents. I hugged them to my chest and stepped away from him. "We keep asking for another printer, but there's no money in the budget, remember?"

His nostrils flared at the implied criticism, and I took a step back again. Don't piss off the killer, I chastised myself.

"Are you alone out here?" he asked.

"Oh, no." Lying doesn't count if you're trying to escape a killer, I decided. "Annie's here. In my classroom. She's probably waiting for me. I'd better go." I made a move toward the door.

He took a deliberate step sideways to block my path.

"Not so fast."

I stopped abruptly. I felt the blood drain from my face. Sure, we'd suspected Donald Stern of killing Danny. But, I have to admit, not *really*. Despite the fact that I'd found a human heart, that two boys had been killed, that Bodey had fired shots inches from my head, a part of me still didn't believe it was *real*, that in facing Donald Stern I was facing a real live killer. Suddenly, though, with Stern blocking my exit from the office, it was all *too* real.

I assessed my situation. He was a man, and obviously stronger than I was, but he was rather old, sixty at least, and kind of pudgy too. He might be strong enough to kill me, but only if he could catch me. I took another step back and prepared to lunge sideways. If I could get to the sick room in the corner of the office, I could close the door behind me and call for help.

He waved a hand in front of him, toward the floor. "You have a mess to clean up here."

"A mess?" I looked, barely comprehending, at the floor, at the office detritus that I'd knocked over when I fell. "You want me to clean up the mess?"

He sneered at me. "You were going to leave it for the office staff?"

"No." I quickly dropped to my knees, shoved the rosters into the back of my pants, and began scooping with trembling fingers, scarcely able to believe my luck. Maybe he wasn't going to kill me after all. Or, if he was, it wasn't going to be right then and there.

He stood, unmoving, his arms folded across his chest, while I scrambled to pick up each paper clip and pen and sticky note from the floor at his feet. He refused to move even when I tried to pry a paper clip out from under his foot. I flicked his shoe with my finger, and he finally raised his toe. Asshole. When I had the entire mess back on the service desk, he stood at the office door and held it wide open for me. I scurried past him and out of the office.

"Don't come out here again," he called after me. "Except to teach. Trouble follows you, Ms. Wayland."

I hurried back to my classroom. I stuffed the doctored rosters into the folder with the other records, turned off my computer, and went to the back door. I peeked out the black back window and saw nothing. I opened the door, darted for my car, jumped in, and closed and locked the

door. For the first time since I'd heard Stern enter the building, I took a full breath. I placed the folder on the seat beside me and started the engine. I glanced at the clock in the dash. Six ten. Still time to get home, shower, and have my date with Lucy.

I was halfway home before I realized someone was following me.

Chapter Forty-Two

I HAD BEEN too lost in thought, nursing a little resentment about Becca. All those wasted years. Why hadn't she given me a little hint that we could have been more than friends? Everything would have been so different, if only I'd known. I would have--I would have--well, I wasn't sure quite what I would have done differently. Maybe Becca was right. Maybe I would have dumped even her come September. Now that I finally knew how Becca had really felt about me, it was too late. She was seeing someone new. I'd lost my chance.

But hold on. I realized, suddenly, what I was doing. Geez Louise, Becca was right about that, too. I was making excuses, pretending to myself that I couldn't date Becca because *she* didn't want to. The truth was, I didn't want to date Becca. I never had, really. Because if I'd wanted to, I would have.

What I *wanted* to do was date Lucy. Nervously, shakily, I was entering into my first grown-up relationship ever, and it scared the piss out of me. But, despite the fact that I was afraid of hurting Lucy, despite the fact that I still wasn't sure how much my feelings for her were caused by the freedom of being out, I wasn't looking for an excuse to end it. I didn't want to end it. I really liked her.

Being honest with myself was hard work.

So that's why it took so long for it to register with me that the car behind me had been there for quite some time. Since I'd left the middle school, in fact. My first thought was that Donald Stern was the killer after all. Maybe he'd only made me clean up the paper clips because he didn't want to leave any evidence that we'd been in the office. But no, the headlights were too low to the ground and too closely spaced to belong to Stern's Suburban.

Maybe I was imagining it. I was on a fairly well-traveled road. It could be someone just heading in the same direction as me. I turned left onto Hawthorne Road. The car followed. That made me uneasy, but Hawthorne is a major road as well. There were plenty of reasons for the driver behind me to head that way. How often had I driven from one end of the city to another and seen the same car at every turn? It happens sometimes, and is invariably innocent. I turned right onto Crestline, and the car followed again. My heart beat faster. Too weird. I pulled abruptly into the

parking lot of a Walgreens, the last business before entering the heart of my residential neighborhood. I stopped in a marked slot, and the car drove on past. It was an old Thunderbird, a dingy brown. I didn't recognize it. I sighed with relief that it was gone. I couldn't think of any reason for someone to follow me, but too many strange things had happened lately for me not to be careful.

I backed out of Walgreens and drove to my house. I pulled into the driveway, grabbed the folder with Lucy's papers, and went inside. Loot was ecstatic to see me, of course, Pepper slightly less so. I fed them both, let Loot out back to do her business, and headed for the shower.

I was still wearing my welding shirt, and as I started to unbutton it, I paused. I'd rushed out of the shop pretty quickly after Lucy's call. Had I turned everything off? I tried to remember doing so but couldn't. I'd been too distracted to do it consciously. It was like one of those busy mornings when, half way through my shower, I couldn't remember if I'd already washed my hair or not. Usually I'll go ahead and wash it again, just in case, since I couldn't bear the thought of leaving the house with dirty hair. I sighed. Leaving oxygen and acetylene tanks in an open position is even more serious than going to school with dirty hair.

I let Loot back into the house and went through the side gate to the shop. I'd remembered to lock the shop, at least, so I unlocked it and flipped on the lights. I moved to the back, where the gas tanks were and checked the valves and regulators. Everything was closed and off, of course. I'd done it from habit, without thinking about it. I usually end up washing my hair twice too, no doubt.

I picked up one of the jagged tubes I'd been working on that afternoon. The end reminded me of the sharp snout of a vicious dog, set in a curved snarl. I snarled back at it. It wasn't bad, actually. It only needed a small lower jaw to make the image come through. I went to the scrap heap and picked out a handful of small metal pieces, brought them back to the work table, and positioned them one by one against the snout. I found one that would do. I grabbed my goggles and pulled them over my head, and slipped on my gloves. I was already wearing the shirt, after all, and this would only take a moment. I opened the regulator, adjusted the acetylene, and was adjusting the oxygen when a sound outside caught my attention.

Oh crap. Was Lucy here already? What was I *thinking*? I had a date. I was supposed to be showering. I set down the torch, pushed my goggles up, and was reaching for the valves when the door opened.

"I'm sorry," I said, turning. "I got caught up in--"

But it was not Lucy.

There, in the open doorway, his bulk filling the space from jamb to jamb, stood Ricky's gigantic, spittle-throwing, homophobic stepfather, Calvin Bunch.

Chapter Forty-Three

HIS PRESENCE IN my shop was terribly wrong and instantly ominous, far worse than seeing Donald Stern in the middle school on a Saturday afternoon. My body recognized it immediately, though it took longer for my head to catch on. After its first lurch, my heart grew steady, my muscles tensed, poised and ready to act, fueled by the certain knowledge that I was facing a moment of life or death. My left hand snatched up the man-eating frond and held it out like a sword, jagged doggie snout pointed at him, but my brain still didn't get it.

"Mr. Bunch?" I asked. "What are you doing here?"

He took a step toward me, and his eyes filled with tears.

That wasn't comfortable. I tried to retreat, but my back hit the shelf of the workbench. There was nowhere for me to go.

I poked my stick at him. "Get back."

He didn't. Instead, he took another step toward me. My shop is not large, and he was already a quarter of the way in.

"Get back," I said more forcefully. I jabbed the stick again for emphasis. The pole slipped slightly in my hand and I tightened my grip and brought my right hand up for support. The thick gloves made it difficult to hold the pole steady at that angle, but I didn't dare let go long enough to remove them.

He wiped the tears from his eyes, shook his head, and said, "I don't want to do this."

"Then don't," I said, certain that whatever it was he didn't want to do, I didn't want him to do it even more. The temporary steadiness of my pulse abandoned me, and my heart thrummed rapidly. I had a very bad feeling about this.

"I have to." A bubble of snot dripped from his nose and he sniffed at it ineffectively. "I have to stop you."

"Stop me from what? Take a step back and let's talk about it."

"God showed me." He took another step forward. "In that picture. You taught *both* of them."

"Both of them? You mean Ricky and Danny?" I gave a shaky laugh. "Is that what this is about? You think I killed them? I didn't, I *swear* it."

He shook his head impatiently. "I know that. *I* killed them."

His words stunned me with their force. If I hadn't already been backed up to the work bench, I would have fallen into it.

"*You* killed them?" It came out in a whisper. "*Why?*"

"I had to." His voice was suddenly high and helpless, like a little boy's. "God told me to."

"But why?" I asked again. "Because they were gay?"

Bunch's face hardened. "Ricky was not gay."

"Then--"

"I saved him." He struck his chest proudly with a closed fist. "I killed him before he could sin with that boy. Ricky went to heaven. I made sure of that."

Oh, crap. He was crazy as a loon. How was I going to reason with that? I couldn't. I abandoned reason.

"Good for you." I used the sweet encouraging voice I usually reserve for preschoolers. "For saving him that way. I mean, cutting out his heart like that and all."

He stared at a spot above my head and quoted in a deep voice that he must have thought sounded like God. "*If thy right hand offend thee, pluck it out.*"

"Uh huh."

"I had to pluck his heart out. It offended God."

"No, it offended *you*. You're not God."

He fixed his gaze on me. "God spoke to me."

"Yeah? Well, God just spoke to me too. He said to tell you to get the hell out of my garage."

He caught his breath and lunged at me.

I jabbed the snarling pole at his belly, but he grabbed the end of it and yanked. I had no chance of holding onto it, so I pushed it forward instead and let him use his own strength to pull the sharp end into his gut.

He yelped and jumped back. The pole dropped with a clang on the cement floor and rolled to a stop beside my seaweed sculpture. Blood seeped through his shirt where the sharp snout had gouged him. A red splotch the size of a tomato appeared, but it didn't spread any farther. I'd hurt him enough to get his attention, but not enough to incapacitate him.

"I have to stop you," he said, panting. "I won't let you teach any more of them."

"I didn't make Ricky and Danny gay," I said, panting as well.

"Ricky was not gay."

"Oh yeah, I forgot."

"They only kissed that one time," Bunch said, his tone argumentative. "One kiss couldn't make him gay."

"Of course not."

"It was the other boy who was the faggot, not Ricky. I saved Ricky before he sinned."

"Uh huh."

Behind him, Lucy stepped into shop.

My blood shivered and I shook my head. *Not Lucy*. I could handle anything Bunch might dish out to me, but I couldn't let the crazy bastard get anywhere near Lucy.

"So you killed Ricky to save his soul?" I summed up loudly, to let Lucy know what was going on and to cover up the sound she might make leaving, which I willed her to do with all my might. "And you killed Danny because he kissed Ricky. But what did Randy have to do with it?"

Leave, Lucy! Go, go now, don't let him see you.

But Lucy didn't leave. She didn't even move. The expression she'd entered with, curious and unwary, was now frozen on her face. I tried not to look directly at her. I couldn't let Bunch know anyone was behind him.

"That's not why I killed the faggot," Bunch protested. "I killed him because he was going to the police. He called me and told me he thought the heart was Ricky's. He said Ricky wouldn't have run away without telling him." An expression of disgust crossed his face. "Because he *loved* him."

"Why didn't you pluck his heart out too?"

"The faggot's?" Bunch seemed puzzled. "Why? He's not my boy. But you." He frowned and took a step toward me again. "You taught both of them. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have had to kill either of them. *You* are the root of all evil."

"Wait! I didn't teach them to be gay. I was in the closet back then so--"

Lucy moved, finally, but it was in the wrong direction. Against the back wall of the shop I kept an assortment of tools. Lucy reached silently while I was talking and pulled down the ax I use every year to chop down my own Christmas tree. I kept talking, speaking loudly to cover the sound of her movements.

"--nobody knew I was gay back then, and my students sure didn't know--"

"I need to kill the root," he said and lunged for me. I cringed and scooted left. He grabbed my right arm and dug his massive fingers into the flesh of my upper arm.

Swish!!

The ax zipped through the air, the blade heading straight for Bunch's neck.

Chapter Forty-Four

WHO WOULD HAVE thought Lucy had the nerve to chop the bastard's head off?

Unfortunately, the ax made a noise as it sailed through the air, giving Bunch all the warning he needed to drop my arm, turn, and slap the ax away before it reached him. Before either of us had time to move, he leaped at Lucy, grabbed her by the neck, and threw her halfway across the garage toward me.

She hit the workbench hard enough to knock over my can of steel rods. She slumped to the ground amidst the pinging of metal hitting the cement floor. I fell to my knees beside her.

"Lucy!"

She whimpered, groaned, and curled into a ball. I spread my arms protectively over her and looked up at Bunch. My ears pounded, my palms grew sweaty, and my vision narrowed to nothing but Bunch's terrible crazy eyes as he loomed over us.

Seeing red is not a meaningless phrase. It's real. As I stared at Bunch, he pulsed red in time to my beating heart.

"Stay down here, love," I whispered, smoothing Lucy's back. She was halfway under the workbench already and off to the left, safely out of the way.

I rose slowly to my feet and faced Bunch.

He glanced uneasily at Lucy. "Who's she? She wasn't supposed to be here."

The scrap metal box was to my left. Without taking my eyes off his, I dropped my hand and grabbed randomly.

He saw what I was doing. He lunged again and wrapped a hand around my throat. He squeezed and pulled me toward him, but not before I came up with the rough, jagged cross I had created for Becca in her first welding lesson.

I brought my left hand up and slashed the rough metal into his face with all the force I could muster.

Bunch screamed. He dropped his hold on me and held his hand to his face. Blood dripped between his fingers.

I fell back against the workbench again, gasped for breath, and tried to plan my next move. He still stood between me and the door, and even if he weren't, I couldn't leave Lucy. My left hand stung, and the inside of the glove was wet. The jagged cross must have cut through the glove into my hand when I gashed his face. I switched the bloody cross to my right hand. I would cut off both hands before I let him hurt Lucy again.

By then Lucy had emerged from her potato bug roll and was now on her knees. She put her hands on the workbench and pulled herself to her feet, wincing as she did so. Finally, she leaned heavily beside me, her hand pressed to her side where she'd hit the workbench.

"I thought I told you to stay down," I said.

"Don't expect me to obey," she said.

"She's not a lesbian," I told Bunch. "God wouldn't want you to hurt her."

He removed the hand from his face. Blood dripped from a long gash in his cheek, down his chin, and onto the front of his shirt. He eyed Lucy. She wore tan corduroy pants and a loose brown wool sweater with a forest of pine trees across the bottom of it.

"Is that true?" he asked her doubtfully.

She ignored his question. "I'm a lawyer," she said instead. "I can help you. You only did what you thought was best. I can probably get you off completely."

So Lucy could lie too.

"I'm not worried about that," he said dismissively. "I'll get my reward in heaven."

You mean hell, I thought. "What about Randy? He's in jail right now for what you did. They arrested him."

Somewhere along the way he'd started crying again. He rubbed the back of his arm across his cheeks, and blood and tears and snot smeared his face from chin to forehead. "He'll get his reward in heaven too."

"Heaven?" I asked. "He's in the eighth grade!"

He narrowed his eyes at me and apparently remembered he was there to kill me.

"I don't want to kill *you*," he said sternly to Lucy, "but I have to kill *her*. God's orders."

"Well," she said in a voice that hardly shook, "you're going to have to kill me first." She stepped in front of me.

"*No*." I shouldered her aside. She was still wobbly from being thrown across the room, and it wasn't difficult to move her. "You can kill me, but not her."

"I *am* a lesbian," Lucy claimed, sliding up next to me again. I could feel her tremble, but she stood straight and brave. "So you'll have to kill me too."

"She's lying." I grabbed her arm and pulled her behind me.

"No, I'm not. I've been a lesbian my whole life. I even fight for laws that give gay people rights."

"Lucy, will you shut *up*. I'm trying to save you, here." My eyes stung. "I *love* you. I don't want you to die."

She gave a wispy laugh, winced, and raised a hand to her side again. "I love you too, Kim, and I don't want to live without you."

"Stop it!" Bunch bellowed. "Stop talking about *love*." He tried to grimace, but it was lopsided. The muscles in his face weren't working properly. The blood continued to flow from the wound in his cheek. "God chose *me* to save the little children from *you*." He pointed his beefy finger at me.

"Get him!" Lucy shrieked and leaped upon his arm.

Perhaps if I'd known what Lucy was going to do, I could have stopped what happened next. But before I could even move, he'd swung his arm up and slammed her to the ground, like he was shaking mud from his fingers. Her head struck the concrete floor, and I heard it crack. Her feet bounced once, and she lay still.

This time I didn't just see red. Every color of the rainbow kaleidoscoped before my eyes, all throbbing and all centered on the evil, bloody face of Calvin Bunch. Bad enough he'd killed Ricky and tried to let a thirteen-year-old take the blame, bad enough that he'd killed Danny because he dared to love a boy. This time he'd gone too far. He'd hurt Lucy, my dear, sweet, brave Lucy, who never did anything to harm anyone, if you didn't count trying to chop Bunch's head off. Rage coursed through me and gave me courage and superhuman strength.

I flew at him, the bloody cross held high in my right hand. I brought it down hard toward his face.

Unfortunately, he had superhuman strength too, and mine was no match for his. He grabbed my arm before I could make contact with his face. He spun me around, yanked my right arm up behind my back, and wrapped his left arm around my neck.

I couldn't breathe. I used my left hand to pry at his arm, but it didn't budge. My right shoulder screamed as he wrenched my arm up even further. I lurched back against him, trying to ease the tension on my arm. I felt blood drip from his face onto mine. Gross.

His foot slipped briefly on one of the steel rods and he wobbled, trying to keep his balance as I struggled against him. Spots were forming before my eyes.

Desperately, I wrenched my body forward with all my weight and strength toward the workbench. He didn't loosen his hold on my neck, but it was enough to make him stumble forward. I grabbed the Bernzomatic, swung it up behind me, aimed it toward where I thought Bunch's face was, closed my eyes, and pushed the red ignition button.

The gas was still on. Even with my eyes closed, I could see the flash of the flame. I felt the heat against my ear, heard a sizzle, and smelled burning hair.

Bunch yelped and released me. He stumbled behind me, I heard clanging metal, and he screamed again.

I released the button and the flow of gas stopped. I wheeled around, gasping for breath, and held the torch high in both hands like a gun aimed straight at him, ready to push the ignite button again if I needed to.

I didn't.

Bunch, in stumbling back, had fallen onto my seaweed sculpture. He sat nearly upright on the bed of razor sharp fronds, a look of horror and pain on his gruesome face. His hair, eyelashes, and brows were gone. His eyes squinted and watered, tears ran down his face, the left side of which was red and already blistering from the flames, the right cheek still oozing blood from the gash. One particularly bold seaweed frond poked through his trousers right between his legs.

"Ehhh," he wheezed, waving his hands about as if searching for something to help him rise from his bed of massive nails, but there was nothing within his reach except more pointy fronds.

"Don't move," I ordered, waving the silent torch at him.

He froze, but not because of me. His small movements had made him settle an inch deeper onto the sculpture. I heard fabric tear, and an instant later a small patch of blood appeared on the front of his pants. "Ehhh," he said again.

"Lucy!" I called. "Lucy, can you hear me?"

"Help me," Bunch quavered.

"Shut up. Lucy!" I risked a glance behind me. The spot where she had fallen was empty. Lucy was gone. I took a step toward the back of the garage, but the short tube connected to the torch stopped me. "Lucy, where are you? Can you hear me? Call the police!"

I heard nothing.

I turned back to Bunch. "Don't move," I ordered again, emphasizing with the torch.

"I can't move," he said, barely even moving his lips. "Help me. This thing's trying to cut my balls off."

"Aw, too bad. You know what the Bible says. *'If thy right ball offend thee, cut it off.'* Right?"

Bunch whimpered.

Where was Lucy? The horrible sound of her head hitting the concrete floor replayed in my mind. She'd hit hard, but she'd obviously not lost consciousness completely.

Bunch seemed pretty securely impaled on the sculpture, but I was afraid to lower my guard against him.

"Lucy!"

"I'm here." Lucy crept through the door on her hands and knees, slower than any baby. A trickle of blood snaked down the side of her face and neck to bloody the front of her shirt. She raised her head to look at me. Her eyes were huge and dark, and her skin was white as chalk. In one hand, she clutched a cell phone.

"I called the police," she said, her voice tiny.

"Thank God," I said. "Are you all right?"

"No," she said, so softly I could barely hear. "Lay down now."

She gently collapsed onto the ground and closed her eyes.

A wave of rage unlike any I had ever felt came over me. I looked at Bunch, cowering and bloody, burnt and beaten, but he wasn't hurt badly enough to satisfy me. I raised the torch, closed my eyes, and pushed the button.

I didn't hit Bunch. I didn't even aim for him, I swear. But I scared him enough to make him jerk. He screamed and sank another inch down into the sculpture. The spot of blood on the front of his pants grew. He held his breath and tried not to sob, but I felt no pity.

If it weren't for the flashing blue and red lights that suddenly reflected through the open door, I might have succeeded in getting the bastard to castrate himself.

Chapter Forty-Five

"LOOK, JERRY, IT'S Kim." The hushed voice was infused with wonder, as if the speaker had spotted a movie star. I glanced over. The woman gave me a finger wave and smiled.

I wondered if she'd seen my picture in the paper or confused me with someone famous. I smiled weakly in acknowledgement, but then something about her mouth caught my attention and made me examine her more closely. I stepped toward her and said uncertainly, "Excuse me, are you--?"

She nodded eagerly. "I'm Lucy's mom, Barb." She held out her hand. "And this is her dad, Jerry."

I shook their hands, nearly dumbfounded at meeting them so abruptly after everything else that had happened that night. I looked around the emergency waiting room. "How's Lucy?" I asked. The last time I'd seen her she was lying on a gurney, unconscious, and attendants were lifting her into the back of an ambulance.

"They took her off to have her head examined," Jerry said jovially. "About time, if you ask me."

Barb made a face. "Ignore him."

She was a small woman, no taller than Becca, a little plump, with short, curly, dark hair, brown eyes, and a wide mouth. Lucy had inherited the eyes as well as the mouth. "They're just taking an MRI. She'll be all right. My kids have hard heads."

"Is she conscious?" I asked.

"She was when we saw her," Barb said, and the knot of fear in my chest loosened a bit.

"Confused, though. She couldn't tell us much of what happened."

"She said some guy hit her." Jerry frowned. He was a big man with pale blue eyes, saggy pouches beneath them, and droopy jowls. He had a ring of gray hair around the sides of his head, but the top was shiny bald. "Were you there?"

I nodded, but before I could elaborate, Barb asked, "What happened to you?"

I glanced at my hand, which I held upright to slow the bleeding. The police had questioned me and took pictures of my hand and neck, where the marks from Bunch's fingers still showed, but they were far more interested in my shop. The crime scene, they called it. Once the paramedics had determined my hand was not injured severely enough to warrant a trip in the ambulance, they'd wrapped it in cotton and gauze and ignored it. After the blood soaked through their wrappings, I'd bound a kitchen towel around it as well. I had been left on my own to seek further treatment.

"I think I need stitches." My voice quavered. I felt a bit sorry for myself, since I'd had to drive myself one-handed to the hospital. I'd thought about calling Becca, but after our fight--no. I called Annie, but she didn't answer. I wasn't about to call any of my siblings, and I hadn't turned to my parents in an emergency since I was a teen.

So when Barb said, "Let's get you checked in," and walked up to the intake desk and commanded the nurse's attention on my behalf, I nearly wept with gratitude.

"So what happened?" Jerry asked, when we'd settled into lime green plastic chairs to await my turn. The emergency room was busy, and the injury to my hand was not dire enough to entitle me a cut in line. "Who hit Lucy?"

"It was a guy named Calvin Bunch," I said. "He didn't hit her. He threw her to the ground and her head hit the floor. It had nothing to do with her. He was after me. He followed me home. Lucy showed up and tried to stop him. She went after him with an ax!"

Barb nodded in satisfaction. "That's my girl."

"Is it something to do with all that trouble out at your school?" Jerry asked.

"Yes. The guy who hit her, he's the stepfather of one my students. Former students, I mean."

"Ricky's dad?" Barb asked.

"Yes." I was surprised she had connected the dots so quickly.

"And Ryan's?" Barb added. "And the third one, what's his name?"

I stared.

"Who's the middle boy?" Jerry prompted.

"Randy," I said, astonished at their level of knowledge about the Richardson brothers.

"Randy, that's right," Barb said, nodding as if she should have remembered. "The boy who told that other kid to shoot you."

I gaped at them in wonder. "Does Lucy tell you *everything*?"

"Of course not," Barb said, but she gave me a sly look that suggested otherwise, and my face got hot.

"We've sure been looking forward to meeting you," Jerry said, apparently thinking along similar lines.

"It's been a long time since Lucy's been so excited about a girl," Barb explained.

"Since before Carmen," Jerry added.

"Carmen?"

"Her wife," Jerry said. "She didn't tell you about Carmen?"

I felt the blood drain from my face. Lucy had a wife?

"Don't scare her like that, Jerry," Barb scolded. "She's not married *now*. Carmen died more than three years ago."

"Why did Bunch follow you home?" Jerry asked, making my head spin with his quick changes of subject. "Why was he after you?"

"He was trying to kill me," I said. "So I couldn't, uh, corrupt any more children. Because I'm, um--" I glanced away. I knew Lucy was out to her parents, and it was pretty clear they knew all about me, but I still wasn't comfortable saying it out loud in a public place.

Barb had no such qualms. "Because you're a lesbian?" she asked. Before I could even cringe at the word, she went on. "What an ass. Does he really think it's contagious?"

"Wait a minute," Jerry said, struck by a thought. "Is he the one--he didn't--. Did *he* kill Ricky? His own *son*?"

"Stepson," I said. "He was afraid Ricky would go to hell if he didn't, because he was gay. He said he was trying to save his soul. But then he decided he ought to get rid me, and save *all* the little children, not just his own. So, um, how long were Lucy and Carmen together?"

"Thirteen years," Barb said. "Breast cancer."

"What about that other boy that was killed?" Jerry asked, growing more outraged. "Did he do that too?"

"Danny? Yes, he--"

"Wait." Barb held up her hand like a crossing guard. "Before you go on, can I fix your hair?"

"My hair?"

"I'm sorry." She opened her purse and started digging around. "Call me shallow, but I just can't look at it any more. And people are staring."

I raised my good hand and felt the side of my head. My hair felt fine. I reached around my head, felt the other side, and gasped. A huge swath of hair was gone. In its place were shriveled and charred ends. Some of them crumbled in my fingers as I touched them. "My hair!"

"What happened to it?" Jerry asked.

"I shot Bunch with a welding torch," I said. "Like this." I showed him how I aimed it behind my head.

"Did you hit him?"

I nodded. "Right in the face."

He grinned. "Atta girl."

"I'm pretty good at it," Barb said, drawing a tiny pair of orange-handled scissors from her purse. "I've cut Lucy's hair lots of times. And you just can't leave it like that."

So Barb stood behind my chair, snipping at my hair while I cradled my bloody hand and described to a gleeful Jerry all the gruesome injuries I'd inflicted upon the man who'd hurt his daughter.

Just as Barb was making a last artistic snip by my right ear, Lucy showed up. We didn't notice her until the orderly pushing the wheelchair dropped her off beside us.

"Kim? What are you doing here?"

"Lucy." I dropped to my knees beside the wheelchair, placed my hand upon her knee, and gazed into her face. She was pale and her eyes were droopy, with heavy dark circles beneath them. A semicircle of black stitches cradled her right eyebrow. The skin immediately around the stitches was red and swollen, beyond that it was turning purple, and the hair beside it was matted and sticky where someone had tried, unsuccessfully, to wash out the blood. Her neck was bruised gray from Bunch's fingers. She looked terrible, but I'd never seen anything so precious in my life.

My chest pulsated and, just like the Grinch, I felt my heart grow three sizes. If I'd ever had any doubts, I knew now for sure. I was totally in love with Lucy.

"You let Mom cut your hair?" Lucy asked, before I could get too sentimental all over her lap.

I ran my fingers across my scalp, shocked at the feel. It was no more than an inch and a half long anywhere. "She said she cuts your hair all the time."

"Not since I was ten." Lucy shot a weak but accusing look at her mother, who was suddenly too busy putting her scissors away to meet Lucy's eyes.

I sat back on my heels and asked warily, "How does it look?"

Lucy studied me solemnly for a moment, gave a sleepy little smile, and said, "You're enchanting."

I grinned.

"Are you free to go?" Jerry asked.

"Yes." Lucy waved a sheaf of papers. "I have instructions."

Just then my name was called. I rose to my feet, and Lucy noticed my hand for the first time. "What happened to you?"

"I cut my hand." I patted her shoulder. "I just need a couple stitches. It's no big deal."

She glanced around the waiting room with a puzzled frown. "Who are you here with?"

"No one. It's okay," I assured her when a distressed look crossed her face. "The Rav's an automatic. I can drive it with one hand."

My name was called again, impatiently this time.

"I have to go. It was nice to meet you," I said to Barb and Jerry. "Thanks for the hair cut."

I leaned down and whispered in Lucy's ear, "I love you." Without waiting to see her reaction, I joined the nurse at the ER inner door.

Chapter Forty-Six

JERRY WAS WAITING for me when I emerged from the ER with nine stitches in my hand and a splitting exhaustion headache. He took my keys and drove me home in my own car, then picked me up the next morning and drove me to Lucy's townhouse. Barb was there already. Lucy had spent the night with them, and Barb had driven Lucy back to her place while Jerry came and got me.

Barb met us at the front door, her coat in her hand. "I got her settled in the living room." She seemed to assume I knew where that was. "She'll take nursing from you better than from me, I'm sure. Her head hurts, and her ribs. She just took some pain meds. Now she just needs rest. How are you?"

"A little sore," I admitted. My neck and shoulders were strained from my wrestling match with Bunch, and my hand throbbed. "Nothing ibuprofen won't cure."

"Well, she's all yours now," Jerry said. He dropped my keys into my hand, and I wondered if he referred to Lucy or the Rav. "If you need anything, give us a call."

"They'll be fine." Barb picked up her purse and joined Jerry on the steps. "Love cures all."

I shut the door behind them, feeling a bit guilty about being in Lucy's home. They seemed to think I was a regular visitor. Did Lucy even know I was there?

I turned and examined my surroundings. I was in a tiled hallway painted sand, accented with red prints on one wall. A door on the other wall opened to a garage. Jerry had apparently brought us in the back way. I peeked inside. It was a one-car garage, with room for storage on both sides. The shelves were filled with boxes and Rubbermaid containers, all clearly marked with blue masking tape and Sharpie markers.

The tile ended and a carpeted flight of stairs rose to my left. Before I went up, I peeked into the remaining basement rooms. A bright red stacking washer and dryer set in a tidy laundry room continued the color theme. Tile in the bathroom matched the tile in the hallway. Sand colored towels hung neatly on the rack, and a matching shower curtain hung from red ceramic rings. I wondered if she'd done the decorating herself, or if it was Carmen who'd had the exquisite taste. A large room at the end of the basement was obviously used as an office, with books and papers piled over a computer desk, work table, book shelves, and chairs. After all that tidiness, I was relieved to see a little mess.

I returned to the stairs and crept up them, feeling like an intruder. On this level, the colors morphed to a dusky pink and dark brown. Left of the stairs was a spotless kitchen with a small eating area beside a bench window seat. A pink and white table edged up to the bench with two white ice-cream shop chairs next to it, their backs shaped like hearts. Cute.

Right of the stairs was a dining room, separated by a half wall from the room beyond, where I could see the flicker of a gas fire in the corner. The living room. I slipped past the dark cherry dining table, my sneakers silent on the bamboo floors, and stopped.

Lucy lay on a rose-colored couch pushed against the far wall. A white crocheted afghan was draped over her. Her eyes were closed, but she wasn't asleep. One hand stroked a gray tabby cat that lay on her stomach.

I loved her so much, I ached. I wanted do-overs for every time I'd hurt her with my thoughtlessness. I hated that she was in pain.

The room was so quiet, I could hear the purr from across the room. The cat blinked at me, daring me to come any closer. I defied the cat and inched forward. The carpet was dark chocolate, like Lucy's eyes, and thick, so I made no noise, but she sensed my presence anyway. She opened her eyes. Her eye, rather. One was purple and swollen shut, but the other widened in surprise when she saw me.

"Your parents let me in," I said quickly, lest she think I'd broken a window.

At my voice, the cat made a grumpy hiss and leapt to the back of the couch, pushing off from Lucy's stomach. She winced.

I dropped to my knees beside her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said tightly, but I know a liar when I see one. A line creased her brow, and one hand clutched the edge of the afghan as if it was all that kept her from spinning away.

I rested my good hand on her clenched fingers and was gratified when she relaxed her grip and turned her palm up to mine. I leaned forward and pressed my lips to her forehead where it creased.

She gazed up at me. "Your hair."

Oh, yeah. "You said you liked it, last night."

"I do like it. I just forgot." She frowned. "Your neck is bruised."

"So is yours, sweetheart."

She looked bewildered. "I can't remember much about last night."

I sat back on my heels and tried to read her face. Did she remember that I told her I loved her? Did she remember that she said she didn't want to live without me?

"What happened?" she asked. "How did you get away from Bunch?"

"I shot him with fire and caught him on my seaweed."

She blinked and looked worried, as if either I was crazy or she was. I guess it did sound a bit like a superhero comic book.

My phone chimed. I didn't want to let go of Lucy's hand, so I reached across myself and fished the phone from my pocket with my left hand. Lucy followed my bandaged hand with her good eye.

I read the message on the screen.

"It's Annie," I said. "Are you up for some company? Besides me, I mean? She met with Ron this morning. I'd like to find out what she learned."

"Of course. What happened to your hand?"

"I cut it," I said, "when I sliced Bunch's face." I awkwardly texted Lucy's address to Annie and returned the phone to my pocket.

Lucy looked puzzled.

"You don't remember that?"

"No."

"Do you remember--?" Where to start? "Maybe I should wait and tell you and Annie both at the same time."

"Whatever," she said a bit grumpily. She held out her arm. "Help me up. I need to use the bathroom."

I helped her rise. She wore pink fleece pajamas decorated with chubby panda bears, and fuzzy socks with rubber grips on the soles. She shooed me away when I would have escorted her into the bathroom.

I took advantage of my time alone to finish my perusal of the living room. It was nicely decorated, of course, though there were a few bare patches on the walls that I thought could benefit from an original Kimberly Wayland. On the mantle above the fireplace was a photograph of a grinning Lucy, a few years younger than she was now, with her arm slung over the shoulder of a petite, laughing woman with spiky black hair and dark eyes. They wore parkas and snowshoes and seemed deliriously happy. Carmen. Why hadn't Lucy ever told me about her?

After she used the bathroom, Lucy decided she was hungry, so I made her some toast with apple butter. By the time the doorbell rang, the pain meds had kicked in and Lucy looked much better. She sat on the couch and sipped a cup of spice tea.

I opened the front door. Annie and Becca both stood there.

"You didn't tell me you were bringing *her*," I said.

Becca acted like she didn't remember our fight. "Oh my God, Kim, your *hair*."

"*Shhh*. Don't shout. Lucy has a concussion."

"Sorry," Becca whispered. "I love it." She swiped a hand across the top of my head and crossed the room on exaggerated tiptoes.

Lucy smiled. "Knock it off. I'm fine."

"Awesome stitches," Becca said, whispering still. "If that leaves a scar, it'll look like your eyes are always grinning."

"One of them, anyway," Lucy said.

"This is a nice place," Annie said politely. She perched on the edge of a long leather ottoman across from the couch. "Thanks for letting us come over."

"I'm glad you could," Lucy said. "Kim wouldn't tell me anything until you got here. I have a lot of questions."

"Me too," Becca said, joining Annie on the ottoman. "Like why Kim cut her hair."

"Actually, Lucy's mom cut it." I sat beside Lucy on the couch, careful not to jostle her, and rested my bandaged hand on her lap. "Last night at the hospital."

Lucy ran the tip of her finger lightly around the outline of the bandage. "I still can't believe you let her near you with scissors."

"Last night you said it made me look enchanting."

She pressed herself against me in a sideways hug. "You're always enchanting."

I couldn't help but giggle.

"Ick," Becca said. "Enough of that. Tell us what happened."

So I took a deep breath and told them about Calvin Bunch appearing in my shop, how he'd attacked me, how Lucy'd tried to save me, how he'd attacked *her*, and how he'd ultimately nearly castrated himself on my seaweed sculpture before the police rescued him. Lucy listened as intently as Annie and Becca, since she had been conscious for only part of the events of the evening, and she was fuzzy about the rest.

"I think I'm going to name my sculpture *God's Fingers*," I said. "Or maybe *Fingers of God*, because of the way those sea fronds reached out and grabbed Bunch by the balls and didn't let him go. It saved our lives."

"No, *you* saved our lives," Lucy said. "With your fancy torch."

"You're the one who attacked him with the ax and called the police. How did you do that, by the way? You were practically unconscious."

Lucy shrugged cautiously. "I don't remember."

"Would you really have chopped his head off?" Becca asked.

"I would do whatever I had to do," Lucy said, "to save Kim."

"*Lizzie Borden took an ax,*" Becca chanted, bouncing on the ottoman, "*and gave her mother forty whacks. When she saw--*"

Annie placed a calm hand on Becca's knee, like a parent settling an unruly child at church. Becca stopped bouncing.

"So Bunch is the one who killed Ricky?" Becca asked. "What about Danny?"

"Danny, too," I said.

"Darn." Becca nudged Annie with her shoulder. "I wanted it to be your perv."

"He's not my perv," Annie protested. "He's my neighbor."

"Bunch caught Danny and Ricky kissing," I said. "He killed Ricky to keep him from 'sinning' with a boy, so he wouldn't go to hell. He killed Danny because he was going to go to the police, after the heart was found. Danny suspected it was Ricky's, and would have told them about Bunch catching them kissing."

"Ron said Randy's talking now," Annie said. "Ron told me this morning. Now that Bunch is behind bars, he's not so afraid. According to Randy, Bunch caught the boys kissing in the woods behind their house. He chased Danny away, killed Ricky, and cut out his heart. He gave the heart to Randy to get rid of."

"Eew," I said. "Poor Randy."

"So he threw it in a *dumpster*?" Becca asked.

"Well, he's only thirteen," Annie said. "He probably thought the middle school dumpster was the end of the line for trash. When Kim found the heart, he was already terrified. Then he got the idea that Kim suspected him."

"Me? Why? I never had a clue."

"Well, he thought you did. Something you said to him at school one day?"

I thought back. "I only talked to him once. I asked him where Ricky was, and I told him I'd been talking to Ryan about him."

"That was probably enough," Annie said. "He was already jumpy. So he decided he had to scare you. He told Bodey to put a heart where you would find it. Bodey knew Randy meant a real heart, an animal heart, but he just couldn't do that. So when he saw his mom making Jell-O that morning with his little sisters, he grabbed a cookie cutter and--"

"Bodey put the heart in my mailbox?"

"Yep. He said that way he could swear truthfully to Randy that he'd put a heart in your mailbox. But when nothing ever came of it, and you didn't even seem scared, that's when Randy told Bodey to shoot you."

"What a little shit," Becca said.

"Maybe," Annie said, "but put yourself in his shoes. His stepfather killed his brother, cut out his heart, and forced Randy to dispose of it. For all he knew, his stepfather would do the same thing to him. He was terrified."

"No, Becca's right," Lucy said softly. "Randy was a Hitlerwrath kid even before Ricky was killed. Trying to have Kim killed was a pretty cold-blooded solution, even for a scared kid."

"What'll happen to him?" I asked. "And Bodey? He's the one I really feel sorry for."

"Ron thought the charges against Bodey might be dropped," Annie said. "Or they might just put him on supervision for a while. Randy's a different story. He did try to have you killed, Kim."

"They'll probably charge him as a juvenile," Lucy said. "He'll spend some time in kiddie prison, but he'll be out by the time he's twenty-one."

"What about Danny?" Becca asked. "Are you *sure* the perv didn't kill him?"

"Sorry," I said. "Bunch admitted it to me."

"It's just a coincidence that the perv's into teenage boy porn?" Becca asked, clearly disappointed.

"Sorry, Becca." Annie gave Becca's knee another chummy pat. "Maybe you can come over some time and stalk him-- catch him doing something else nefarious."

That made Becca smile.

"Coincidences happen," I said. "Like Dale. It turns out she didn't really do anything. We got that restraining order for nothing."

"She *was* stalking you, Kim," Lucy said.

"Yeah, but what did she really do?" I asked. "She thumped her hand over her heart in the restaurant that day to try to scare me, and she warned my lawyer not to sleep with me. For all the good that did."

Lucy smiled.

"And she came over to check on me after Bodey shot at me. What else?"

"She *outed* you," Becca said in a waspish voice. "I thought that practically ruined your career."

I remembered that I was mad at Becca. "How's your new girlfriend?" I asked in a voice equally snide.

Becca's eyes flashed quickly to Annie, who flushed and sat up straight.

I sucked in my breath. I looked from Annie to Becca and back again, and puzzling bits of the visit suddenly became clear. Their coming over together, the cozy sitting arrangement on the ottoman, the knee pats that really weren't chummy at all. "*Annie? But Annie's straight!*"

"*Shhh*," Becca said. "Quiet, Kim. Lucy has a concussion."

That made Lucy laugh, then wince. "Ow. Don't make me laugh."

"I think I might be bisexual, actually," Annie said.

"Are you kidding me?" I asked, astonished. "What about Ken?"

Annie looked surprised. "What about him?"

"Are you nuts? You're married, Annie. You can't hide something like this from your husband. This is a little bigger than hiding your tarot cards and dog napping."

"I don't see why," Annie said serenely.

"Oh, my God." I threw my hands up and rolled my eyes at Lucy. "And they won't let *us* get married."

Lucy arched her unbruised brow at me.

I froze. "Not that--I mean, I wasn't--that wasn't--"

Lucy laughed out loud, then raised her hands to her head. "Ow. Oh, Kim, your face! Oh, don't make me laugh, it hurts."

I felt myself redden, which made Annie and Becca laugh too.

I decided it was time to have Lucy to myself. "You two need to go now," I said abruptly. "Lucy's tired, she needs her rest."

"Yeah, yeah," Becca said, "we have to go anyway. We have plans."

"I don't want to hear about it," I said firmly.

"Making me laugh," Lucy warned.

"See you later, Lucy Borden," Becca called.

"Get well soon, Lucy," Annie said. "Maybe we can double date some time."

"Oh, for God's sake." I hustled them out the door.

Chapter Forty-Seven

I STOOD BEFORE Lucy and studied her. She was pale, but smiling. Their visit had done her good. "Do you mind?" she asked. "About Becca and Annie? No, not really. Well, it's gross to picture them together that way, but--" Lucy chuckled. "Don't picture it." She held her hand out to me. I took it but remained standing. "Lucy--" I hesitated, uncertain how to formulate my question. Her smile faded, and she looked at me warily, as if waiting for me to drop an anvil on her head. "Do you remember what I said to you at the hospital last night?"

I asked. "The last thing I said to you? I whispered it in your ear." She looked uncertain. "I'm not sure." I dropped to my knees before her and looked up into her face.

"Do you remember what you said to me, when Bunch was about to kill us both?" She frowned, clearly frustrated. "I don't remember." "I told you I loved you," I said. Her eyes flickered with what looked an awful lot like hope. "And you said you didn't want to live without me." She bit her lip and looked at her lap. "Did you mean it?" I asked.

"Did you?" she whispered.

"I meant it. I mean it." I put my hand on her knee. "I love you, Lucy. I'm in love with you. I don't want to live without you either." She watched me solemnly and said nothing. "Do you believe me?" I asked. "I believe that you believe it." "I mean it." "I know you do." I frowned. "You're not going to make this easy on me, are you?" A helpless look crossed her face. "I've fallen in love with you,

Kim. I couldn't help it. Now I'm scared. I don't--" *Trust you.* That's what she was thinking. And she had no reason to trust me, not with my track record. But this was different. I needed to convince her of that.

"You are the bravest person I've ever known," I said. She looked astounded. "Me? I'm scared of everything." "I know. That's just it. You were scared of Dale, but you stood up to her. Twice. For me. Even though it made you sick." She nodded.

"And you were scared of Bunch, but you took him on anyway. You risked your life. For me."

She watched me warily.

"I know you're scared I'm going to hurt you," I said, "but being scared never stopped you before. Don't let it stop you now."

Her lips trembled.

"I never understood before," I said. "About love. I didn't get it. For whatever reason, I didn't understand how it worked. But last night, when you walked in the shop, I was never so afraid in my life. I was terrified. And it wasn't about me, Lucy, it was about *you*. I get it now. I've never told any woman I loved her before. Only you. But you don't have to believe me, yet. Because I'm going to prove it to you every minute of every day for as long as you'll let me."

A gleam showed in Lucy's one visible eye and a smile curved her lips. "That sounds like fun."

I was pleased with the gleam. I'd put it there, and I vowed I would keep it there.

"That'll do," I said. "For now."

I sat back on my heels and took a deep breath. There was one more matter to take care of. If I wanted Lucy to trust me, I was going to have to start with a clean slate. "I have something to confess."

She slumped back. "Already?"

I spoke quickly, to get it behind me as fast as I could. "I never gathered the documents you asked me to gather, not until yesterday. I just told you I did because I didn't want to disappoint you, and it was easier just to tell you I had them. I always *meant* to have them." I licked my lips. "The thing is, I lied to you about it."

I braced myself for her reaction, hoping I hadn't just destroyed my chances before we even started.

She smiled, a smile with a tinge of humor mixed in with tolerant understanding. "Honey," she said gently, "do you think I didn't know that?"

"You--you knew?"

"Of course I knew," she said, trying not to laugh. "Why do you think I kept reminding you about it?"

The weight of the world lifted off my shoulders, and I laughed too, in relief. Lucy knew I lied to her and it was okay. It was bewildering, but wonderful.

I rose from my knees and sat on the couch beside her.

"Now it's your turn," I said gently.

"My turn?"

"To confess."

She looked genuinely puzzled, as if she'd never had a thing to confess in her entire life.

I let my eyes slide from Lucy to the photograph on the mantle and then back to Lucy.

She understood immediately. "Carmen?"

I nodded. "Carmen. Your parents told me about her."

She nibbled her lip, thought a moment, and nodded. "You're right. I should have told you. I was going to tell you, and I will. But first." She turned on the couch so that she was facing me, one leg curled up in front of her, and took my good hand in both of hers. "I love you Kim. I loved Carmen too, but not the way I love you. When I saw Bunch coming after you last night, I was scared half to death. I do remember that. I would have done anything, anything at all, to stop him from hurting you. I would have died for you or killed for you, whatever it took. You are precious to me, sweetheart. Do you get that? You're precious to me just the way you are."

Tears leaked from my eyes. I felt my chin wobble, and I nodded. I got it.

She raised a thumb and wiped a tear from my cheek. I grabbed it and pressed it to my lips.

"I still can't believe you tried to chop his head off with an ax," I said.

"Actually," Lucy looked chagrined, "I didn't know it was an ax. It was the first thing I grabbed, and I swung it at him. I would have died if I'd really chopped his head off."

I laughed. That was so like my sweet Lucy.

Like magnetic salt and pepper shakers, we leaned toward each other and locked lips, unerring as an old married couple, as perfect as ever. I felt Lucy's lips smile against mine, drawing a smile from me as well, and Gilly, the goldfish, proved he had a few more good flips left in him.

About the Author

Kate McLachlan is the author of the RIP time-travel series, including the award winning *Rip Van Dyke* and *Rescue at Inspiration Point*. Kate lives in Eastern Washington with her wife, two dogs, and two cats. After teaching in the public schools for fourteen years, she developed a case of temporary insanity and entered law school. All she really wanted to do was write stories but, despite the common misperception, legal briefs are not fiction, and Kate's creative urge was not satisfied by her day job. She writes novels for the joy it brings to her and for the joy she hopes it will bring to others.

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More Books by Kate McLachlan

Rip Van Dyke

When Van is suddenly transported twenty years into the future, she is dumfounded-and furious. Jill's silly time-travel experiment wasn't supposed to actually work. But it did, and now Van is stuck in the future. 2008, that is. A future in which Van's friends and lover have all aged twenty years, but Van has not. Jill, an old woman now, promises to recreate her time-travel machine and send Van back, but Van is skeptical and decides instead to try to make a life for herself in 2008.

It isn't easy. Patsy, her lover, never recovered from Van's sudden disappearance in 1988 and is now a deeply troubled old woman, in no condition to offer Van any help. Van has no home, no job, no money, not even a driver's license. But help and hope arrive in the form of Bennie, the steamy young woman whose intriguing overtures were off limits in the past. Van wrestles with herself. Does she remain faithful to Patsy despite the sudden chasm between their ages, or does she let herself accept the life, love and laughter that Bennie offers?

But when secret agents learn of Van's leap through time, Van faces an even tougher decision. This time one of life or death.

Rescue At Inspiration Point

Rescue at Inspiration Point is the second book in the *Rip Van Dyke* time-travel series. Van is taken hostage at a local prison, and Patsy is stuck in the role of hostage negotiator. Jill sends Bennie back to 1974 to learn more about the hostage taker and his crime. "Do nothing," Jill warns. "Just observe and report back." But the instant Bennie lands, she breaks Jill's # 1 rule. As Bennie pursues her own agenda in 1974, the hostage crisis in 1988 escalates. Can Bennie rescue Van from fourteen years away? Or will her actions only make things worse?

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