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Vintage INTRIGUE

When a Stranger Calls

KATHLEEN LONG

Kathleen Long

When a Stranger Calls

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THE PHONE RINGS…He was the last person she vowed to go to for help, but the only person who believed she was being stalked. The late-night phone calls, the mysterious packages, the blow to the head all had Lindsey Tarlington fearing for her life. How could she not accept Matt Alessandro's help–even if it was his father who murdered her mother seventeen years ago?Matt knew his father died an innocent man, and he suspected Lindsey held the key to why. But spending time with the stubborn beauty made Matt wish their shared past wasn't clouded by tragedy. Would the truths they were slowly uncovering make a shared future just as unlikely?

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For the briefest of moments, Lindsey wondered what it would be like to let Matt Alessandro under her skin—into her life and into her heart.

He leaned toward her and she held her breath, releasing it sharply when the tea kettle squealed.

Suddenly, reality scattered her idiotic thoughts as she shut off the burner. Matt Alessandro's father was responsible for her mother's murder, her father's depression and death, and her shattered life. And here she stood, inches away from touching his son. Kissing his son. Or worse. What in the hell was wrong with her?

"Do you want me to stay with you tonight?" Matt asked.

Did she? "No." Lindsey stepped away then. "I'll be fine."

"What if you get another threatening call?"

"I'll call you." She caught herself. "Or I'll call my uncle."

Suddenly she needed Matt out of her house, before her resolve crumbled. "You know, I'm exhausted suddenly…."

"Okay, I'll go. Remember to lock up."

"Always," Lindsey said, relieved when he stepped outside and shut the door behind him.

But just as Matt's taillights disappeared, the phone rang….

When a Stranger Calls
Kathleen Long

www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Mom,
the most important heroine in my life.
I love you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After a career spent spinning words for clients ranging from corporate CEOs to talking fruits and vegetables, Kathleen Long now finds great joy spinning a world of fictional characters, places and plots. She shares her life with her husband and their neurotic Sheltie, dividing her time between suburban Philadelphia and the New Jersey seashore, where she can often be found—hands on keyboard, bare toes in the sand—spinning tales. After all, life doesn't get much better than that.

Please visit www.kathleenlong.com for the latest contests, appearances and upcoming releases.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Lindsey Tarlington—Daughter of Camille Tarlington and partner in Polaris, an agency dedicated to uncovering facts. When her mother's long lost identification appears, she begins an investigation into the past.

Matt Alessandro—Public defender and son of Tony Alessandro. He's vowed to prove his father's innocence and clear the family name. He convinces Lindsey to help him reopen her mother's case.

Frank Bell—Mayor of Haddontowne and Lindsey's uncle. He's on the fast track for the governor's mansion and doesn't want Matt revisiting the case that made his career.

Priscilla Bell—Mentally unstable and a recluse, she's Camille Tarlington's surviving sister and Lindsey's aunt. Does she know something about the night Camille vanished?

Doug Tarlington—Lindsey's father. He died in a suspicious one-car accident several years after Camille's disappearance. Was his death the result of a broken heart…or did he know the truth behind Camille's murder?

Lorraine Mickle—A former employee at Tony Alessandro's flower shop. She was the star witness for the prosecution of Matt's father, but was she telling the truth then? How about now?

Jimmy Freeman—A local handyman. He appears in Lindsey's neighborhood at the same time Camille's personal belongings begin to appear. Does he have a connection to the case?

Camille Tarlington—Lindsey's mother. She disappeared seventeen years earlier after an alleged lover's quarrel with Matt's father. Was her murder the result of an affair gone wrong? Or was the motive something altogether different?

Tony Alessandro—Matt's father. Prosecuted for the murder of Camille Tarlington, he died in jail six months later. Did he die an innocent man? Or was he guilty all along?

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Chapter One

Raindrops slapped the small glass panes of the bedroom's French doors, and lightning illuminated the room, splashing against the plaster walls like an unexpected searchlight.

Lindsey Tarlington pulled the quilt up over her ears, her heart dancing against her ribs. The move was a futile attempt to block the inevitable thunder—the thunder she'd hated for the past seventeen years. Irrationally. Childlike.

The loud rumbling followed. A series of booming, rolling explosions that set her teeth on edge. The storm was moving closer. Too close for her liking.

She rolled over onto her back and tossed off the quilt, staring up at the lazy rotation of the rattan ceiling fan. The smell of damp, spring rain eased around the windows and doors, finding its way into the old house.

Another flash. Lindsey squeezed her eyes shut but then snapped them open. She was twenty-nine years old. It was long past time to get over her fear of storms.

Thunder crashed again, and she fisted the sheet tightly in both hands. Longer. The time between the flash and the boom had taken longer. Perhaps the core of the storm would miss her—miss the house she'd lived in all her life.

Another bang sounded and she narrowed her eyes at the ceiling. A car door?

Moments later, a familiar squeak filled her mind's eye with the image of the screen door hinge she kept forgetting to oil. A sliver of fear shimmied down her spine, and her breath caught. Who could be at her front door in the middle of the night? In the middle of a raging storm?

Lindsey tossed off the covers and moved to the French doors, trying to peer over the balcony. Rain sheeted the old, thick glass, but even so, she could make out the silhouette of a car, its headlights slashing through the storm as it idled out front.

Flashes of another night seventeen years earlier played through her mind. It had been a storm just like this one. There had been a steady stream of people in and out of the same screen door that night. Family. Friends. Police.

The sounds of running footsteps jarred her from the unwanted memories, but the rain had intensified, obscuring her view. A door slammed and the headlights eased away from the curb.

What if someone had left information on one of her cases?

Lindsey plucked her robe from the back of the rocker and shrugged it on as she headed for the hallway, the wide pine planks cool and reassuring beneath her feet.

She stopped a few steps from the bottom of the staircase. No light glowed through the leaded windows on either side of the front door and her pulse kicked up a notch. Hadn't she just changed that bulb?

A low, anxious trembling hummed to life in her belly, and she concentrated for a moment. Concentrated on controlling the irrational fear—the quickening breaths.

She drew air in through her nose, holding her breath for several beats then releasing it slowly through tense lips.

"Get a grip, Tarlington."

Lightning flashed again as she reached for the doorknob. Thunder crashed at the precise moment she snapped open the inner door. She started, adrenaline zinging through her body.

Lord, she hated storms.

A second flash of lightning caught the small, white envelope tucked inside the storm door. She knelt quickly, pulling it free before it got soaking wet.

She slipped a finger beneath the flap as she turned, pushing the wooden door closed with her backside, glad to have its heavy thickness between her and the elements.

A single sheet of paper lay folded inside. Lindsey reached for the hall light switch, flipping it on with one hand as she shook open the sheet of paper with the other.

Her focus dropped instantly to the face centered on the paper. A face she hadn't seen in seventeen years and thought she'd never see again.

Sudden panic filled her. She sank to her knees, her gaze riveted to the photocopy.

The police had never found a purse—had never found personal effects. No clothing. No jewelry. No identification. Yet here Lindsey sat, staring into the face on a photocopied driver's license. The driver's license that had gone missing seventeen years before on a stormy night just like this one.

Tears welled in her eyes as the pain, the shock, the unfairness of it all came rushing back. The familiar crush of grief wrapped its fingers around her heart and squeezed.

She stared into the photocopy of her mother's face and let the tears fall. Blood evidence found in her mother's abandoned car and at the floral shop where she'd worked had been enough to prove her death and convict her killer. Unfortunately, the clues hadn't been enough to locate her mother's body, still missing after all these years.

She'd never doubted her mother had been murdered, but she'd always feared the horror of her mother's final moments might resurface someday.

Lindsey dropped the paper and hugged herself.

It appeared someday had just arrived.

MATT ALESSANDRO STARED AT the sign anchored to the cinder block wall. Polaris Group. He remembered reading a newspaper article that had spelled out the history behind the organization. The group of friends had all experienced some sort of loss in their lives. Each had vowed to help others in similar situations find the truth—whatever that might be.

He'd read news of Lindsey Tarlington's work countless times, but the thought of seeing her in person had kicked his state of alert to a frenzy. He usually experienced this sort of hyperawareness during the first day of court, not at the mere thought of meeting someone.

Of course, it wasn't every day you met the daughter of the woman your father had been convicted of murdering. Falsely convicted—but convicted just the same.

Old bitterness welled from deep inside Matt's gut. He swallowed it down, straightening as he jerked open the entry door.

A petite blonde sat just inside, her desk facing the door. "Can I help you?"

Matt's lips curved into a warm smile, the move belying the cold determination he felt inside. "Lindsey Tarlington, please." He forced his voice past the sudden tightness in his throat. He had to handle this visit carefully. Lindsey Tarlington might very well be the key to what had really happened all those years ago. He hadn't been able to turn up any additional information, hadn't uncovered a single new clue, not until her late night delivery.

The blonde frowned, obviously picking up on his hesitation. "Is she expecting you?"

Matt shook his head. "No. This will only take a minute." Truth was, he hoped it would take far longer. He hoped what he'd come to say would pique Lindsey Tarlington's interest enough to talk. Perhaps enough to share information.

Word of the photocopied license had buzzed quickly from the local police precinct to the public defender's office. After all, everyone knew he'd vowed to clear his dad's name—even after his old man had been killed on the inside.

His father might never have the chance to be set free, but his name did. Matt had dreamed of little else since his sixteenth birthday. The day they'd buried his father.

"May I tell her what it's about? She's on the phone." The blonde's pale brows arched, her green eyes widening.

Matt flashed his ID so fast she'd never be able to catch his name. "I'm with the Public Defender's office. It's in reference to a client of mine." A half-truth…sort of. "I thought she might be interested in the case."

Her expression morphed from suspicious to interested in the blink of an eye.

"Why don't you have a seat over there." She jerked her thumb toward the corner cubicle and a row of uncomfortable-looking chairs. "You can wait outside her door."

Matt glanced in the direction she'd indicated. The space consisted of three cubicles bordering a small central area. Pale grays and pinks adorned the walls and carpeting, no doubt chosen to soothe agency clients searching for answers, loved ones, closure. Simplistic artwork graced the outside of each cubicle.

Apparently the tenants were more focused on their work than on presenting a stylish image. He had to give them credit for that. He crossed the open area in four strides, stopping short when his gaze landed on the woman inside the corner office.

A lot had changed in seventeen years.

Her father may have kept her out of the courtroom, but Matt remembered the newspaper articles and the photos. Back then, Lindsey Tarlington had been a striking child.

She'd become a breathtaking woman.

Long, black hair draped loosely around her slender shoulders, falling like a waterfall of night sky. Her profile hinted at strong features, an aristocratic nose and full lips.

She sat perpendicular to him, her gaze focused on an open folder and a stack of photos. She fingered one as she talked. When she crossed her legs, several inches of creamy, smooth thigh peeked from beneath the hem of her black skirt.

Matt swallowed, more than enjoying the view. Heat warmed his neck, and he reached to loosen his tie, but caught himself, lowering his hand to his side. When Lindsey's slender fingers tugged at the hem of her skirt, he lifted his gaze to hers.

Ice-blue daggers made it clear his appreciation hadn't been welcomed. She hung up the phone and stood. Tall. Slender. Mesmerizing.

"Was there something I could help you with?"

Her palpable annoyance snapped Matt's attention from his inappropriate focus on Lindsey Tarlington, the woman, to Lindsey Tarlington, the daughter.

"I'm Matt Alessandro. Tony's son."

With just those few words, all color drained from her cheeks. She sank back onto her chair. "Did you send me the copy?"

"No." Matt entered the cubicle, stepping so close he could feel her body heat as she stared up at him, wide-eyed. "But I'd like to help you find out who did."

THE MAN MAY AS WELL have sucked the air out of Lindsey's lungs.

He bore a shocking resemblance to his father—the unkempt mahogany hair, the clean-shaven, angular jaw, the hazel eyes more brown than green.

She blinked, willing him to disappear like an unwanted apparition, but he remained. In the flesh. In her office.

"You have no business here." Anxious trembling built inside her. She fought to remain still, to hide the raw emotion that had threatened to smother her since her discovery the night before.

"My father didn't kill your mother."

His words reignited the familiar, aching loss. Memories assailed her. News vans covering every inch of the curb in front of her home. Reporters stalking her at school. Her father shoving her onto a plane to stay with family far away.

Her mother. Missing. Vanished as if she'd never existed at all.

Emotion welled in Lindsey's throat. She had to get Alessandro's son out of her office—out of her sight. "Please leave. I've turned the matter over to the police."

He stood his ground, unflinching. Determination flashed in his piercing glare, as if he saw right through her brave facade. "Don't you make a living helping people discover the truth?"

Lindsey's gaze locked with his. Two could play this game. "I do. But my services aren't needed in a case like this. We already know the truth."

A shadow passed across Matt Alessandro's face. A flicker of sympathy teased at her heart, but she shoved it away. He might have lost his father, but murderers deserved whatever they got—and his father had been a cold-blooded killer.

He stepped closer, now seriously invading her personal space. She pushed the chair back with her knees and stood, surprised to discover he stood a full half head taller than her five feet eight inches.

"I find it difficult to believe someone with your reputation for sniffing out the facts would believe your late-night delivery means nothing."

Lindsey shrugged, hoping the move belied the doubt simmering in her gut. "Maybe it's someone's sick idea of a joke. Maybe someone who knew your father in jail decided to drop off one of his souvenirs."

Matt winced, but quickly recovered, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

She continued. "The police are all the help I need in the matter, Mr. Alessandro. Thanks for stopping by."

She turned her back, concentrating on shuffling the folders on her credenza.

"Then I'd like to hire your firm."

Lindsey breathed in sharply. The man could not take a hint. She turned on her heel, leveling a look that had chased off many unwanted clients—and men—before him. "I'm not interested in your business. Thank you."

Her clipped tone wavered, and she mentally berated herself. She had no desire to let the man see he'd rattled her.

Alessandro pulled a business card from the inside pocket of his tweed sport coat. He pressed the card to her desk, not allowing her the option of refusing.

"When you're ready to talk, give me a call. I'm sure you're intelligent enough to question who sent you that copy. I'm also sure deep down you question the convenience of my father's stabbing."

His intense stare bore through every defensive wall she'd erected. Lindsey flattened one hand against the back of her chair to steady herself.

"The real killer's still out there, Ms. Tarlington. I'd think you'd be more than a little concerned about that."

She stood her ground as he spun on his heel, crossed the small office, and pushed open the exit door. When he had safely gone, she conceded to the trembling in her knees, sinking onto the worn leather seat of her chair.

Lindsey tentatively touched the edge of his card, dragging it to the center of her desk.

Matt Alessandro.

She squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed a hand across her weary face. As if the copy of her mother's identification hadn't been enough, now the killer's son had reached out.

She gathered the case files from the desktop and shoved them into her briefcase. She plucked Alessandro's card from where it lay then dropped it into her trash can.

Snapping off her desk lamp, she steeled herself, wanting nothing to do with the man's soapy scent still lingering in her small cubicle.

"Patty." Lindsey paused at the office manager's desk as she headed toward the door. "I'm going out. You can reach me on my cell if anyone needs me."

Lindsey cast a glance toward her two partners, heads bent low over their own case files, working the phones. She should be doing the same, but right now she needed to put space between herself, Matt Alessandro's visit and her memories. The more space, the better.

She pushed out into the fresh, spring air, shoving the lingering guilt from her mind.

Ten minutes later she turned her car onto the tree-lined street, sighing with relief as her family home eased into view. The cherry blossoms displayed their full blooms, and the heavy buds on her favorite, old dogwood hinted at additional flowering beauty to come.

Lindsey breathed deeply of the sweet air filtering through her lowered car window. Spring in South Jersey. This had been her favorite time of year as a child, but on that April night years before, her world had tilted on its axis and never quite righted itself. In time, she'd learned to welcome the warmer days, but she never got over the irrational dread that accompanied the change of season each year.

A lone figure walked down her center sidewalk and away from the house as she eased her Volkswagen into the drive. Lindsey's stomach tightened. She slammed the car into Park and scrambled from her driver's seat. "Can I help you?"

Her voice rang out surely, in direct opposition to the rapid beating of her heart. What was he doing? Could it be the man who'd left the envelope?

The figure tensed then waved, keeping his head low as he turned away from her. Close-cropped silver hair hugged the lower half of his skull, as if his baldness hadn't quite yet won the battle. His shoulders remained hunched, the result of either years of poor posture or the ravages of time.

Loose papers fluttered in his hand as he continued down the block, turning up the next-door neighbor's front walk.

A harmless, elderly man passing out flyers.

Embarrassment and relief flooded through Lindsey. She couldn't take any more excitement today. Thank goodness her case count was low right now. The agency had been hired to find a few birth parents and one long-lost heir. Nothing more. Surely she could clear her head enough to manage that.

She plucked her briefcase from the floor behind her seat then slammed the car door. A sheet of paper sat tucked in the screen door handle, catching her eye as she crossed the front yard. She yanked it free, letting her gaze drop to the simple wording touting affordable lawn care. Glancing around at her overgrown garden and shrubs, she could understand why he'd picked her house.

She folded the flyer in half and slipped it into her briefcase. Professional help wasn't such a bad idea, actually. Her mother had always loved working in the garden. Somehow, Lindsey could never quite muster the same enthusiasm.

She jammed the key in the lock, twisting the doorknob open. A small white envelope sat wedged against the door frame. She pushed the inner door open, yet her feet remained glued in place, her eyes locked on the mysterious object. Her pulse kicked up a notch.

Maybe it was from someone else—someone other than whoever had left the copy last night. She squatted, reaching for the envelope. Heavier than last night's, it appeared to be similar, a plain number ten, this one unsealed.

Lindsey stood, easing the flap of the envelope open by the edge, doing her best not to leave her own prints. Gold glimmered inside the envelope. A ring, delicate and old, small gems set in the shape of a heart. She flashed on an image of a family picnic, sitting holding hands with her mother, lovingly touching the heirloom ruby ring.

This ring.

Lindsey's heart squeezed. Someone knew. Somewhere out there, someone knew exactly what had happened to her mother and was reaching out. Perhaps that same someone knew where her body had been dumped.

Matt Alessandro had been correct. Lindsey had spent her entire adult life wondering why her mother had been murdered. The trial had yielded nothing but professions of innocence from Matt's father, even though the jury had found him guilty.

Lindsey needed more. She yearned to find out exactly what had happened, and why. To do that, she had to find out who had left this ring and the photocopied license last night.

She stepped through the door, determined to find a suitable plastic bag to protect the ring and any prints. Focused on the envelope in her hand and the glimmer of gold inside, she thought her mind was playing tricks when a shadow fell across her own on the threshold.

A pair of hands shoved her forward before she could react, before the reality of what was happening could register. She toppled over, striking the side of her skull against the marble top of a table. Pain exploded as she fell to the cool floor. Everything faded—sound, light, thought.

Lindsey's world turned to black.

Chapter Two

Matt had always had a bit of a temper. He could admit it. Hell, he came by it honestly, yet not from his dad. From his mother. The woman was a hothead the likes of which South Philly would probably never see again.

Be that as it may, right now every deep breathing trick he knew did nothing to calm the frustration ignited by his visit to Lindsey Tarlington.

How could she stare at him like an ice princess and pretend she didn't care about the package she'd been left? She had to care. Had to.

How could she not?

By all accounts, Lindsey had dedicated her life to helping others solve mysteries. Her mother's disappearance had been one of the biggest mysteries to ever hit the region.

Of course, Lindsey believed his father had been the murderer. Matt believed anything but. Now, he had only to convince her to listen to him.

The light at the intersection ahead changed from yellow to red. He slowed his SUV to a stop and glared at the notes tossed on the seat beside him.

He knew where the woman lived. That's probably where she'd gone. The little blond guard at the office hadn't offered any information when he'd called back other than that Lindsey had left shortly after their meeting.

He knew he'd gotten to her. The facts plain didn't add up. He was no detective, but he wasn't stupid. And, neither was Lindsey Tarlington.

He pulled a U-turn when the light turned green, headed back toward the other side of town.

Matt glanced down at the address scribbled on a scrap of paper. Fifty-two Elm. How very suburban.

His father's conviction had shattered his mother's dream of escaping the city to move across the river to New Jersey.

Bitter anger rekindled in Matt's gut, like a slow-burning ember he could never quite put out. He blinked, willing the heat to go away. It wasn't Lindsey Tarlington's fault he and his family had lost everything trying to defend his father. It was the system's fault. The system he now worked to keep fair.

Fifteen minutes later, he pulled to a stop in front of the house. A bright blue compact car sat in the drive.

He eased out of his truck, straightening to his full height. His father had not killed Camille Tarlington. The killer had gone free and, for some reason, had chosen to wait seventeen years to resurface. Matt intended to find out why—and who.

He climbed the center steps, rapping the brass knocker loudly against the weathered wooden door.

Something sounded inside, and he pressed his ear to the cool surface, trying to make out the noise.

Not a voice, but a moan. A whimper.

"Ms. Tarlington."

The noise sounded again, this time even more faint.

Matt tried the doorknob and it turned, unlocked. He pushed open the door, stepping inside as he did so.

Lindsey lay facedown, her black hair splayed across the marble foyer.

He dropped to his knees, sliding to a stop next to her motionless body. He checked for a pulse. Solid.

"Ms. Tarlington." He brushed several silken strands from her colorless face.

Matt's gut caught, twisting hard. Had the killer done this? He glanced around the foyer, from archway to archway, all leading to other areas of the large house where the attacker might still lurk.

He should search. He should get Lindsey out of the house. He should do more than just hold her, but at the moment, his instincts told him that's exactly what she needed. His instincts also told him whoever had done this was long gone.

Matt pulled his cell phone from his pocket, punching in 9-1-1 then quickly giving the address and details to the dispatcher. With his free hand, he reached for Lindsey's, intertwining her slender, soft fingers with his own.

Protectiveness hummed to life deep within him—a determination to find whoever had done this and make sure he never had the chance again.

Lindsey's lush black lashes fluttered against her pale cheeks and she moaned, the sound nothing more than a soft cry. Matt pressed his lips close to her ear, inhaling her soft floral scent. "Stay still. Help's coming."

"Shoved me." The words slipped over her lips, like the murmurings of a sleepwalker.

"Don't try to talk." Matt squeezed her hand tighter, willing her to hang on.

Her eyes flashed open like huge saucers of sky, frightened, slowly focusing on his face.

"It's Matt Alessandro. You're safe now."

"You shoved me."

Lindsey's accusation slammed him like an oncoming freight train. "No." He shook his head as he uttered the one-word response, stunned she could think him capable.

A shadow of doubt glazed her stare, and reality settled in, chilling Matt to the core.

Lindsey Tarlington eyed him as if he were a killer's son, but then, why wouldn't she?

In her eyes, he was.

LINDSEY WOKE TO THE sensation of someone squeezing her hand. Rugged male features flashed through her mind. Hazel eyes. Sharp jaw. Piercing gaze.

Matt Alessandro.

Fear seized her, and she jerked her arm, trying to free herself from his grip.

"Hey, hey." A soothing male voice slipped into her consciousness. Familiar. Gruff. "Who you fighting now, peanut?"

She forced open her eyes, relief coursing through her as she met the familiar, yet concerned, pale gray eyes. "Uncle Frank?"

He leaned to press a kiss to her temple.

"It must be bad if they dragged you away from city hall."

His warm laughter rumbled through the small room. "At least that wit of yours is still intact."

Pain pulsed through Lindsey's skull. She could remember the moment of impact but nothing after. She scanned the room, taking in the small, sterile details. Chrome, tile, plastic. The walls and floor a bland mixture of teal and cream. "Where am I?"

"Cooper Hospital." Her uncle's voice had gone uncharacteristically gentle. "Doctor says you'll be fine. They're going to keep you overnight, but there's nothing to worry about."

"What happened?"

Her uncle shook his head, his features falling slack. "Matt Alessandro found you, Lindsey. He took care of you until help got there. You really took a fall."

Alessandro? A fall? Lindsey's pulse quickened. "He shoved me from behind."

"Why on earth would you think that?"

"I felt him."

"Did you see him?"

Lindsey rankled at the disbelief palpable in her uncle's voice. "I saw a shadow."

"You were unconscious when Alessandro found you. Maybe you simply blacked out. Only thought you saw a shadow."

Incredulity flooded through her. “You can’t believe that.”

He nodded, his pale gaze narrowing in an obvious attempt at sympathy.

“What about the ring?”

Her uncle frowned, tiny creases framing his surprised stare. “Ring?”

“Mommy’s ring? I found it right before I was attacked.”

The lines of his face deepened. “There was no ring. No evidence that anyone had been in your house. We had our best team out there just to be sure. You fell, peanut.”

She shook her head, wincing as a fresh band of pain wrapped its fingers around the side of her skull. “You missed it then. Her ring was there in an envelope.”

“No.” His tone dropped to the low, all-business timbre she’d dreaded ever since he’d married into the family. “No ring, honey.”

Lindsey swallowed, unable to believe her uncle would doubt her word. “Then someone took it.” She struggled to sit up, but had to settle for merely shifting against the pillows, too sore to do anything more. “Whoever shoved me took it.”

Anger flashed across his now stern features. “Tony Alessandro took your mother’s ring seventeen years ago.” He squeezed her hand. “I’d like to find the monster who left you that copy last night. It’s brought back your old nightmares.”

Frustration mixed with the fear churning in Lindsey’s stomach. The nightmares had started the night her mother disappeared. The blackouts had begun a few weeks later. What had happened today had been neither. “This wasn’t a nightmare.”

Her uncle’s forced smile crinkled the lines framing his eyes. “I’ll go get Aunt Pris. She’s been waiting outside.”

He stood to leave, but Lindsey tightened her fingers around his, determination filling her with strength. “I saw Mommy’s ring.”

Her uncle extracted his hand then pushed away from the hospital bed. “You’ve had a shock. You only thought you saw it.”

Lindsey stared at his back in disbelief. She had no doubt about what had happened. She’d been attacked. The only question was by whom? And what had happened to her mother’s ring?

If Uncle Frank wasn’t going to help her find the answers, she’d find them on her own.

MATT SHIFTED AGAINST THE stiff back of the waiting room chair, doing his best to ignore the nonstop glare Lindsey Tarlington’s aunt, Priscilla Bell, had been channeling in his direction.

The mayor’s wife had always kept a low profile, but she hadn’t been seen in public in months. Based on her appearance, the rumors about her health might be true. She looked like hell. Thin, frail, sickly. Perhaps being married to the mighty Frank Bell had taken a toll.

When Mayor Bell emerged from Lindsey’s room and huddled with his wife, Matt discreetly stared at the floor. He did his best to pick up scraps of their conversation, but they kept their voices too low for him to make out their words.

Frank Bell. Matt fought the urge to snarl at the man.

Bell had been a hotshot in the district attorney’s office at the time Lindsey’s mother, the D.A.’s younger daughter, had disappeared. Convicting Matt’s father had catapulted Bell’s career onto the fast track. Of course, the fact he’d been married to the D.A.’s older daughter, Priscilla, hadn’t hurt, either. And now political rumblings had Bell setting his sights on a quick trip from mayor of Haddontowne to governor of New Jersey.

As a public defender, Matt had butted heads with the man on more than one occasion. One thing was for certain—Frank Bell had the tenacity of a pit bull terrier. If he wanted the governor’s mansion, he’d let nothing get in his way—including any doubts about the conviction that had made his career.

“Thought you would have left by now.” Bell’s voice carried across the small waiting room from where he stood next to the chair his wife had vacated.

Matt stood, fully aware he'd adopted an antagonistic stance. He'd learned a long time ago that head-on was the smartest way to address the mighty Mayor Bell. "Wanted to make sure your niece was all right."

"She'll be a lot better off if she doesn't see you here." Bell turned away, but barked out over his shoulder. "Maybe you should be paying attention to your clients and leaving my niece alone."

"She deserves to know her mother's killer got away scot-free."

Bell pivoted, unchecked hatred seething from his battleship-gray glare. Bitterness swirled in Matt's gut. No wonder his father's defense had never had a chance. If Frank Bell had managed half of the fury he was projecting now, the jury would have been terrified to do anything but return a guilty verdict.

"My niece sleeps just fine at night knowing the man who killed her mother met his just end in jail."

"But you never found the body. How can you be so sure?"

"Evidence doesn't lie."

"No, but it can be conveniently interpreted for a quick conviction." Matt fought to hold his anger in check. "You and I both know this topic isn't closed, Mayor. Whoever sent that copy and attacked your niece is determined to reopen old wounds."

He turned sharply on one heel, stepping toward the elevator, determined to have the last word. For once.

"My niece fell, Mr. Alessandro." Bell's words stopped Matt cold. "The shock of seeing her mother's ID was too much for her. If I find out you're behind any of this, you'll pay."

"How can you—" Matt spun to argue, but Bell had disappeared back into the treatment room.

Fell. Could the man honestly believe that? Lindsey Tarlington had been certain she'd been shoved when Matt found her, and he saw no reason to doubt her story.

So why did Frank Bell? Maybe believing his niece complicated Bell's plans for the governor's mansion.

Matt punched the elevator button, hot emotion rolling through his veins. He believed Lindsey's story, and he planned to tell her so—in person.

Her attack might present just the opportunity he needed to begin earning the woman's trust.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, LINDSEY stood in the middle of the attic studio, deserted since the night her mother had vanished. She closed her eyes, trying to sense her mother's presence, wishing fervently for a sign or a clue as to what had happened all those years ago.

Lindsey had been discharged from the hospital just a few hours earlier, sent on her way with a mild concussion, nothing more. The doctor had agreed with the police that her pounding head was consistent with an accidental fall.

A disbelieving laugh burst from her lips. Fall, her foot. There was no way she'd confuse being shoved with falling.

Even more discouraging had been Uncle Frank's phone call. The photocopy of her mother's license had been made on paper found in any office supply store. There had been nothing distinguishing to provide a clue. Nothing. Not a single fingerprint or fiber.

The house below her creaked, and she flinched, even though she'd checked and double-checked every door and window before she'd pulled down the old attic steps and made the climb up to what had been her mother's sanctuary.

Lindsey hadn't been up here in recent years. Any time the urge had sneaked into her mind, she'd ignored it, choosing instead to pretend the space didn't exist. Sometimes avoidance was easier to face than the truth.

She opened her eyes to take in the sight. The attic remained as it had always been, a small art studio, lovingly filled with her mother's work and favorite things.

Lindsey stepped gingerly toward the easel that stood off to one corner. She fingered the wooden shape, draped in an old sheet, then stood back, watching dust particles dance in the beam of sunlight forcing its way through the streaked attic window.

One thing had never made sense to her, even as a child. If, as the prosecution had claimed, her mother had been in love with Tony Alessandro and her murder the result of a lover's quarrel gone horribly wrong, wouldn't there have been some trace of the affair here in her mother's retreat? Wouldn't there have been a letter? A photo? Something. Anything.

Lindsey sank to the plank wood flooring. She'd searched this space relentlessly as a teen, until her father had begged her to stop. The pain of her mother's death and supposed infidelity had been more than the once-vibrant man could endure.

He'd never been the same after that stormy night.

When he died four years later in a one-car crash, during a late spring thunderstorm, the residents of Haddontowne had murmured suicide.

Emotional pain engulfed her, threatening to squeeze the air from her lungs. How could her father have made that choice? How could he have left her alone?

The doorbell rang, and Lindsey swore softly under her breath. She stood quickly and her vision swam, an unwanted reminder of the blow she'd taken to her head. She glared at the attic steps.

Climbing up the unsteady staircase had been a challenge. Climbing down in time to catch the door would probably be the death of her. A chill tap-danced up her spine, and she shuddered.

She had to stop expecting the worst.

Carefully, she set one foot and then the other on the ancient rungs, the springs and hinges squeaking and groaning as she descended. When she hit the hallway floor, she hurried toward the downstairs, ignoring the pounding in her skull and leaving the attic stairs down behind her.

It would be easier to leave them unfolded than to wrestle them up and down each time she went searching. And she had every intention of searching her mother's studio again.

Just as it had when she'd been younger, her gut told her something lay hidden in that space—something that would unlock the mystery of exactly how her mother had died.

"Who is it?" she called out as she hit the foyer.

"Matt Alessandro."

Lindsey's breath caught. She stopped in her tracks, unsure whether or not to open the door and unable to coax additional words from her mouth.

"I came to see how you were." Matt's deep voice rumbled through the heavy old wood. "I was worried about you."

Disbelief fired in her belly as she reached for the knob. "You were worried about—" The sight of him froze her last word on her lips.

Genuine concern painted his features. His gaze bore through her, kicking an unwanted curiosity to life. Soft creases lined his forehead as he raked one strong hand through his too-long hair. He straightened from where he'd been leaning against the doorjamb.

"Took you a while to answer. You okay?"

The soft timbre of his question reached inside her, testing emotional walls that hadn't been breached in years. The man seemed sincere. Was it possible?

"You could have called." Lindsey stood in the doorway, unable to will her feet to step aside to let him in. Perhaps it was best to keep him outside on the step, where a stranger belonged.

"How's your head?" He stepped toward her, and Lindsey instinctively backed up.

"They think I fell."

His eyes narrowed, now appearing more brown than green. "I think you believe that as much as I do."

Lindsey swallowed, forcing her focus away from the expression that made him appear human rather than a monster's son.

"May I come in?" His tone dropped low, sending a ripple of trepidation across her shoulders.

She hesitated, zeroing in on the folder he hugged between his elbow and side. "What's that?"

"Something you need to see."

"Listen, if you still want to hire me—"

Alessandro shook his head. "I want to help you."

Confusion swirled in the pit of Lindsey's stomach. She raised her gaze to his, only to find herself pinned by the intensity of his stare. "Can I trust you, Mr. Alessandro?"

"Yes." He answered without hesitation.

The protective lock deep inside her eased ever so slightly. She took a step backward, pulling the door wide and tipping her head toward the foyer. Alessandro followed the nonverbal invitation, stepping over the threshold.

"Thanks for your help yesterday." The hesitant tone of Lindsey's voice surprised her.

Yet, it wasn't intimidation Matt's presence had sparked to life, but rather alertness. The sounds and scents surrounding Lindsey had become more vibrant, more vital. Perhaps the sensation could be attributed to her defense mechanisms kicking into high gear. Surely that explained the way his nearness made her feel.

Matt held out the folder, the flap secured by a worn rubber band. "I'm just glad you're all right." He studied her then, as if memorizing each detail of her face. He lifted his hand toward the bruise that marred the side of her face. "You were lucky."

Heat flushed Lindsey's neck, and she pointed to the folder to deflect his focus. "What's this?"

"Case file." He dropped his hand. "Buddy of mine made copies for me a while back. Not exactly on the up-and-up, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't say anything to your uncle."

Excitement swelled in her core. "My mother's case file?"

Matt nodded, pressing the folder into her hands.

She let it sit on top of her palms momentarily, before curling her fingers around the edges. "I've asked for this, but my uncle told me it had disappeared."

Matt's tone softened. "He probably wanted to spare you, but I thought you deserved to see it."

She lifted her focus to his, again jolted by the intensity of his scrutiny. "Why?"

"Because the clue to whatever really happened to your mother is somewhere in here. I've been over this too many times to count, but you…" He looked down at the folder then retrained his stare on Lindsey.

Her stomach somersaulted, dread and anticipation tangling. The documentation represented the thing she wanted—yet feared—the most. The full story behind that awful night.

"You may be able to spot something here that no one else has. And someone's waited until now to pull you in." Matt shrugged again. "Maybe together we can make some sense of this."

Lindsey swallowed, battling her desire to trust him and the reality of his identity. She had no doubt Matt's father had killed her mother, but she'd never understood why. She'd never believed her mother had been involved with Tony Alessandro as anything other than a coworker.

"A jury convicted your father, Mr. Alessandro. I can understand your interest in trying to find a way to prove him innocent, but I harbor no doubts. I know my mother's killer went to prison and died there."

Pain flashed across Matt's features as he patted the folder. "Evaluate this. Then make your decision. That's all I ask." He turned toward the door, hesitating before he headed outside. "My family was destroyed unjustly, Ms. Tarlington. Someone out there knows something. You know it, and I know it. I intend to find out what that something is."

Lindsey fought down the anguish clawing its way out from the recesses of her mind. "Your father murdered my mother." She spoke the words softly, flatly, as if the slightest exertion might cause more pain than she could handle. She straightened, the strength of her certainty flooding through her. "I don't lie awake at night worrying about how that might have affected your family."

Matt pressed his lips tightly together before speaking. “I don’t expect you to believe me now, but I know your reputation. You like the whole story. You evaluate each of your cases from every possible angle. Am I right?”

Lindsey nodded, her pulse pounding in her ears.

Matt pointed toward the folder. “Your mother deserves that same attention. Her real killer’s still out there.”

Lindsey said nothing as he stepped from the brick steps to the center walk. His suit jacket fit trim across his broad shoulders, narrowing down to his slender hips. Confidence emanated from each solid footstep he took, shoulders squared, head held high. He looked nothing like she imagined the son of a murderer would.

She tightened her grip on the folder. Did she want to know what lay inside? A calm resignation whispered through her. She did, and Matt Alesssandro knew it.

She felt compelled to believe him when she wanted to do anything but. The reality was that his doubts and questions tapped into her own need to know the truth.

“Did you see the ring?” she called out suddenly, her voice contrasting sharply against the quiet of the neighborhood.

Matt stopped partway down the walk, turning to face her. The play of the late-day sun against the angles of his face momentarily stole her breath. His chestnut hair fluttered in the breeze. “What ring?”

“I found it before I was hit.” Hope coursed through her. “It was in a plain, white envelope. My mother’s ring.”

He narrowed his stare, frowning. “The only thing I found was you. No envelope.” He shook his head. “No ring. I’m sorry.” He nodded toward the folder in her arms. “Was it the ring she was wearing that night?”

Lindsey nodded. “She never took it off.”

“All the more reason for you to review that. I’ll stop by your office tomorrow. We’ll go forward from there.”

As she watched his SUV ease away from the curb, anxiety and doubt coiled deep inside her.

We’ll go forward from there.

No matter what her instincts told her, Matt Alessandro was the son of the monster who had murdered her mother.

She must be insane.

Chapter Three

Matt pulled his SUV into the parking lot outside the Polaris Group office and gripped the steering wheel, shooting up one last prayer Lindsey Tarlington would see things his way.

She had to.

He scrubbed a hand across his face, sighing at the feel of wiry stubble beneath his fingers. Damn, he'd forgotten to shave. Again.

He'd been up all night laying the groundwork for a case pending against a local gang member. The kid might not be an honor roll candidate, but Matt had no doubt he'd been set up to take the rap in a burglary charge. He had no intention of letting his obsession with clearing his father's name affect the representation of his clients.

After he'd finished the necessary paperwork, he'd spent the early morning hours poring over the extra copy he'd made of Camille Tarlington's file. Everything seemed in order—had always seemed in order—except he knew his father was no killer. More so, his father had never been unfaithful to his mother. The prosecution had used the alleged love affair between Camille and Tony Alessandro to provide motive and intent. The theory wasn't possible.

Matt shook his head. Tony had been a gentle man who had turned his love of the outdoors into a thriving floral business with shops in Philadelphia and New Jersey. Matt struggled to remember a single night his father had come home without a bouquet of handpicked flowers for his mother. He couldn't think of one.

Yet Tony Alessandro had been convicted of a violent murder. A murder in which the body had never been found. His conviction had been based on blood spatter found in Camille's station wagon and on the murder weapon found inside the shop. That, combined with testimony about the alleged affair, had been enough to send Matt's father away, where a fellow inmate had fatally stabbed him six months later.

Matt's chest ached. It seemed like yesterday, and yet it seemed a lifetime ago.

He pushed open the driver's door and unfurled himself from his vehicle, heading straight for Lindsey Tarlington's office. Common courtesy dictated Matt should have phoned before dropping by, but he'd never been one to worry much about common courtesy.

Look how far it had gotten his dad.

No. Matt had been well served by the element of surprise during his time in the public defender's office. He could see no reason to treat Lindsey Tarlington any differently than he treated any other client or source.

Her pale gaze flashed through his mind's eye, and his gut tightened. He shoved down the unwanted protective urge.

Whoever had left Camille Tarlington's photocopied driver's license was obviously privy to her personal effects, and perhaps much, much more. The possibility of clearing his father's name loomed more closely on the horizon than it ever had. Matt wasn't about to go soft just because of Lindsey's vulnerable expression.

If she'd reviewed the contents of the file he'd given her, Lindsey would have to agree something seemed off, because while the case against his father appeared to be neat and tidy, it reeked of convenience. There was no way Matt would sacrifice his father's memory and good name for someone else's benefit.

LINDSEY SWALLOWED DOWN another mouthful of burnt coffee then rolled her shoulders. She'd been up all night staring at the horrific words and images captured in her mother's case file.

It would be a miracle if she ever slept again. If the cold, hard facts didn't bring back her nightmares, nothing would.

She looked across at her partners, Tally Cooke and Regina Payne, who sat, along with their office manager, Patty Jones, intently staring at the notes, reports and photos spread across the office's conference table.

Each had a full plate right now, clients who needed help with cold cases or ongoing investigations, but Lindsey knew her partners' input would be invaluable in talking out her mother's case.

Tally was a whiz at logic—possessing an uncanny ability to analyze a puzzle or series of clues. Regina had a nose for the law and saw the world in black and white. Lindsey had always been the taskmaster, keeping the group on schedule and on track. How ironic that she now pulled their focus from their paying case work to her personal crusade.

"I never believed she was having an affair." Lindsey shrugged. "I can't accept that."

"Why not?" Tally's sharp tone jolted Lindsey from her fog of exhaustion.

Lindsey shrugged. "She loved my father." Her chest tightened. "She wasn't the type to cheat."

Tally raised an auburn brow. "You were twelve years old. You'd have no idea if your mother was cheating."

"She loved us." Hadn't she?

Doubt pooled in Lindsey's stomach. She'd searched her mother's art studio again in the early morning hours, after reading testimony detailing her mother's adulterous liaison with Tony Alessandro. Her intuition screamed her mother hadn't cheated on her father. She just wasn't sure if that intuition came from Lindsey the daughter, the woman or the truth-seeker. She only knew it came—hard and sure.

Her voice grew more determined. "She never cheated on my father." And if she hadn't been involved with Tony Alessandro, why had he killed her? If he had killed her.

Lindsey shoved down the doubt. She wasn't ready to follow that train of thought—to imagine her mother's killer had gone free.

Silence beat for several seconds among the four women.

"Did your parents ever argue?" Regina's gaze had narrowed, now matching the disbelieving expression Tally wore.

Lindsey shook her head. "Never." She caught herself. "I mean, no more than any other married couple."

While she hated the sympathy painted across her friends' faces, she'd learned to ignore the pity a long time ago. She flashed on the memory of her father, taking her back to church for the first time after her mother had disappeared. "Keep your chin up, Lindsey. Don't ever let them think you're weak."

She hoisted her chin now. "They had regrets, but doesn't every couple? You have to believe me on this. She wouldn't have cheated on my father. She loved him."

"Why did the investigation focus on that?" Tally's tone had gone all business, her specialty.

Lindsey ran her hand across the copies, wishing they'd yielded more than they had. "One of my mother's coworkers claimed it was true." She moved her hand from the papers to her face. She blinked back the fatigue that had seeped into her every bone many hours ago. "Her name was Lorraine Mickle. She came forward voluntarily, and the prosecution latched on to a crime of passion theory as the basis for their case."

Tally's eyes had narrowed, as had Regina's. "There's no proof other than her word?"

Lindsey blew out a frustrated breath. "No proof of their affair. No letters. No phone messages. No gifts. I've never found anything in her studio, either." She frowned. "It's like my uncle's office built the case on the strength of one witness plus the circumstantial evidence and ran it in for a touchdown." The touchdown that had shot Frank Bell's political star into the stratosphere and sent Tony Alessandro to his death. Again, Lindsey swallowed down the doubt that nagged at her.

"Sometimes that's all it takes." Regina shrugged.

"What's the hard evidence?" Tally gestured toward the folder.

Lindsey flipped through the papers until she found the crime scene report. "Large quantity of blood in the car, blood spatter consistent with that from a major artery, matching blood type found on a pair of floral shears in the shop with Alessandro's fingerprints on it."

"The shears could have been planted." Patty's serious gaze widened.

"You've been watching too much television," Tally mumbled.

"Maybe you shouldn't be questioning this at all," Regina offered. "You have to admit the physical evidence is compelling. Don't let the son convince you to stir this up if you don't want to."

Lindsey sighed. Seventy-two hours earlier her mother's death had been nothing more than a horrible part of her past. Now it had pushed front and center in her every waking thought. Much of that had to do with Matt Alessandro, the case file he'd given her and his unflinching determination. Her stomach flip-flopped at the remembered intensity of his gaze.

Yet, truth was, the horror of her mother's death had come back to life because of the photocopied license someone had left in her door. And the ring. The ring that had disappeared during a broad daylight attack everyone seemed to doubt.

Everyone except Matt Alessandro.

"What about the driver's license?" She lifted her focus to her partners' faces, deciding to leave the ring out of the discussion for now. Tally and Regina both blew out sighs and sat back against their chairs.

"Damn," Tally muttered.

"Someone's got information that's not in these files." Lindsey squeezed her eyes shut then snapped them open, straightening in her seat. "I need to find out what that is, even if the conclusion remains the same."

"It does all seem fairly circumstantial." Regina's features had tightened and she nodded, meeting Lindsey's stare head on.

"Okay." Tally jumped to her feet, pacing a tight pattern behind Regina's chair. "So where do we start?" She gestured into the empty air above her head. "Let's try to forget this is your mother we're talking about. What would we do first? What puzzle piece would we go after?"

"We'd question how thorough the searches were. If Alessandro was guilty, why was nothing found at his house? What other explanations could be given for the evidence found at the store?" Lindsey straightened. "And why give so much weight to the testimony of Lorraine Mickle?"

Regina leaned forward across the table. Tally had stopped pacing. Both stared intently at Lindsey.

"So?" Regina prodded.

"First, I'll find Mickle and talk to her." Lindsey sucked in a deep breath, determination edging out the doubt that had filled her moments earlier. "Then, I'll question my uncle about how they conducted this investigation." She looked from Tally, to Regina, to Patty, who had dropped into Tally's vacant chair. "I'm going to find out exactly what happened to my mother."

"I never doubted you would."

The rich, male rumble sent the hairs at the nape of Lindsey's neck tingling to attention. She knew the source before she turned. Sheer, unmasked appreciation glimmered in her friends' eyes.

Matt Alessandro stood just inside the door. They'd been so engrossed in their conversation that not one of them had heard him enter. Lindsey held her breath, amazed by the impact the man had on her senses. The now familiar and unwanted edginess slid through her system at the mere sight of him.

He crossed the room, snagging a spare chair from Tally's cubicle and positioning it between Regina and Lindsey at the small table. His gaze never left Lindsey's. Not for a moment.

"So." One dark brow arched. "When do we start?"

"I'M RELIEVED TO HEAR you agree with me."

Matt stole a glance at Lindsey Tarlington's profile and body language as she perched on the passenger seat of his SUV. She'd been as anxious to speak with Lorraine Mickle as he had been, and now she sat next to him as he drove toward Mickle's home.

If he didn't know better, he'd think the leather seat had given her a shock. The woman was obviously ill at ease as his passenger.

"I never said I agreed with you, Mr. Alessandro."

"Matt." He turned to face her.

She returned his look, her dark brows lifting, as if he'd surprised her. "Matt," she repeated softly.

The sound of his name on her lips sent a spiral of appreciation coiling tight inside his gut. Not good. He had no time to become interested in anything about Lindsey Tarlington other than her investigative brain. From what he'd heard over the years, her intellect was her best feature.

He bit back a grin as she tugged the hem of her skirt over her shapely knees. Whoever had made the intellect observation obviously hadn't been a red-blooded male.

Matt retrained his attention on the road, focusing on what she'd just said. "I heard you say you don't believe the file contents are conclusive."

"No." She tapped a hand along the passenger door. "You heard me say I wanted to investigate further. I still believe your father killed my mother."

He drew in a steady breath, doing his best to avoid losing his temper. "That's insane."

"Really?"

Out of the corner of his eye he could see her watching him, scrutinizing his reaction.

"The physical evidence points to your father. The jury obviously agreed. The thing I can't accept is the affair between your father and my mother." She made a snapping noise with her tongue. "No way."

He narrowed his gaze, hoping he hadn't been wrong about Lindsey's nose for the truth. "At least we agree on one thing. That's a start."

"So you don't believe they were involved?"

Her voice had suddenly lost its edge, and Matt felt himself softening. "I never did."

They drove the next few moments in uncomfortable silence. He broke the void first. "We need to have a goal for this visit. I'm a big believer in all parties being on the same page."

"And what page are you on, Mr. Aless—Matt?"

"I'm on the page that thinks Mickle was a convenient witness—a convenient witness with a tidy little story your uncle never questioned." He shot her a glance. Color fired in her cheeks. So, he'd hit a nerve. "What page are you on, Ms. Tarlington?"

The light ahead turned yellow and he slowed the truck to a stop, turning to focus fully on the woman beside him.

"Call me Lindsey."

He nodded.

She frowned then spoke. "I'm on the page that agrees Mickle's testimony seemed a bit convenient, and had no evidentiary proof of any kind."

Matt widened his gaze and nodded. "Very good." The light shifted to green, and he pressed the truck forward. "Maybe we're not so far apart in our thinking after all."

"What's your goal for our visit?"

"My goal…" He mulled the question, taking his time before he answered. His goal was to have Lindsey realize reasonable doubt existed about his father's guilt, but as far as she needed to know…? "My goal is to find the crack in Mickle's story. Fair enough?"

Lindsey nodded. "Fair enough."

NERVOUS ANTICIPATION FLUTTERED to life in Lindsey's chest as Matt pulled the SUV to a stop at the entrance to a gated neighborhood. An elderly guard leaned forward through the casement window of the small guardhouse. "Name?"

"Matt Alessandro."

"Here to see?"

"Lorraine Mickle. Forty-two Hemingway."

"She expecting you?"

"Yes."

Lindsey held her tongue as the gate lifted.

The guard tipped his cap. "Have a good visit."

"Thank you." Smile lines creased Matt's cheeks as he grinned. "We plan to."

"Very smooth," Lindsey said softly as the SUV cleared the gate.

"Please." Matt's grin deepened. "I'm quite certain you didn't earn your reputation without bending the rules a time or two."

"Reputation?" Lindsey smiled, unable to resist the teasing tone of Matt's voice.

"It never ceases to amaze me how people will welcome you simply because you act like you know what you're doing." Matt cast a quick glance in her direction and her stomach caught.

She nodded in agreement, saying nothing, not trusting her voice to be steady at that moment. After all, hadn't she done that very thing when she'd opened her front door to this man just yesterday? She'd welcomed him into her home because he'd been so self-assured.

"Amazing," Matt repeated, holding her gaze for another second before refocusing on the road.

Lindsey turned her own attention to Hemingway Lane as he eased the truck into the turn. Lorraine Mickle. The woman on whom the motive portion of the case against Matt's father had hinged. The woman who had seen Tony Alessandro and Camille Tarlington in a lover's argument.

Allegedly.

Matt pulled the truck into a driveway, and Lindsey fought the shiver that slithered its way up her spine. Her gaze landed on a gaudy mailbox painted to resemble a pink flamingo. Number forty-two.

"Ready?"

His voice broke her trance.

"Ready." She gripped her briefcase and climbed from the truck, headed toward what she hoped would be answers to the questions that had come back to life after seventeen years of silence.

Composed was the only word Lindsey could think of to describe the look painted on Lorraine Mickle's face as she opened the door. If she didn't know better, Lindsey would swear Mickle had been expecting them. The woman showed not an ounce of surprise as they introduced themselves.

Mickle's blond hair had been twisted artfully into a bun at the nape of her neck. Her ivory skin showed subtle lines of age, but she was a lovely woman. Lindsey's best guess would put Mickle's age somewhere around forty. A smattering of fine lines framed her pale green eyes, but her features remained sharp, her jaw and neck flawless, like those of a much younger woman.

"I've just put on a pot of coffee, can I get you both a cup?"

Matt and Lindsey exchanged a quick glance. "Thank you," Lindsey answered. Matt nodded his agreement.

The small ranch, though cozy, could only be described as immaculate. Lindsey had the sense she'd stepped into a decorating magazine photo spread, surrounded by carefully selected furnishings and decorations.

Mickle disappeared through a doorway into the kitchen and returned a few moments later, a coffee cup in each hand. "I apologize for my appearance." She nodded to the emerald-green velour robe she wore. "You caught me getting ready to take a shower."

"We apologize for not calling first," Matt said.

Lindsey couldn't help but be impressed by the sincere expression he wore.

"No problem. I'm always happy to have company." Mickle's expression remained welcoming. "Would you like to take a seat?"

Matt shook his head. Lindsey mirrored the move. Both remained where they stood, each now holding a steaming cup. "We don't plan to stay long, Ms. Mickle," Matt said. "We appreciate you seeing us."

"No problem." The woman's face broke into a gracious smile. "What can I do for you?"

"I wonder if I could ask you a few questions about the night Camille Tarlington disappeared? We understand you and she worked together at my father's floral shop."

Lorraine's smile tightened as she nodded. "Yes. We did. Horrible tragedy."

"Why were you so quick to suggest my father and Mrs. Tarlington's alleged affair?"

The suddenness of Matt's question shocked Lindsey. She could only imagine how Lorraine Mickle must feel.

Yet the woman didn't bat an eye. "There was nothing alleged about it. Anyone who knew them knew they shared something intimate. When the police questioned me about anyone Camille had argued with, Tony…your father…immediately came to mind."

Lindsey's pulse quickened. According to the notes she'd read, Mickle had come forward. She hadn't been asked about a possible motive because she'd offered the information first.

Matt closed the gap between him and Mickle. His features tensed. "I'm confused. You were questioned regarding the argument?"

Mickle frowned but stood her ground. "I thought you asked me about what I told them."

"I did." Matt nodded. He said nothing additional. Lindsey realized he was giving the woman just enough rope to hang herself.

Mickle glanced from Matt to Lindsey. Lindsey sipped her coffee and smiled, waiting patiently for the answer.

"I misspoke." Mickle's confident smile returned and she chuckled softly. "It's been a long time, you need to remember I'm not as young as I used to be." She nodded as if the memory had suddenly come into focus. "I did tell the police about the argument. I thought the information might help."

She focused her attention on Matt. "Your father had a quick temper. I heard him arguing in the back room with Camille. He left the shop shortly after she went out on a late delivery." She shook her head. "Camille never returned, and the police came to see me the next day after your father," she said, nodding in Lindsey's direction, "reported she'd never come home."

The acid taste of coffee burned Lindsey's throat. She'd never forget that night, or the way her father had paced from room to room, from window to window, after he'd returned from his weekly bowling league and found Camille not at home.

"So you offered the information about the argument, correct?" Matt asked, his tone intent and stern.

Mickle nodded. "Just as I said."

Matt narrowed his eyes. "You may have heard some new evidence has come forward. Ms. Tarlington and I had questions and thought it best to seek you out. We apologize for any inconvenience."

He shot a glance at Lindsey, his expression softening as their gazes met. She nodded then smiled at Mickle.

"I just can't imagine why you'd want to dredge up the past." Mickle clucked her tongue. "It was a horrible time for both of your families."

"Yes, but I've always wondered what they argued about." Matt's features had grown serious.

Mickle glanced at the front door, probably wondering why she'd opened her home to them in the first place. "I remember exactly. Your father wanted to go public with the affair and Camille refused."

Lindsey had enough experience with lying spouses, parents and children to read the nonverbal cues, yet Mickle's cues were yielding nothing. The woman seemed to be unreadable. Was it because

Lindsey was too close to the case? Or was Mickle actually telling the truth? Had her mother been involved with Alessandro?

"You had no doubt they were lovers?" Matt stepped closer to where Lorraine stood. The woman shook her head, backed up one step, then held her place.

Apparently Matt's thoughts had followed the same progression as Lindsey's.

"More coffee?" Mickle's voice climbed perceptibly.

"No, thank you." Matt smiled. He nodded in Lindsey's direction. "Ms. Tarlington? More coffee?"

Lindsey shook her head. "None for me thanks." She glanced down into her half-full cup. "Matter of fact, I'll put these in the sink." She held out a hand for Matt's cup, wrapping her fingers tightly around the porcelain as he handed it to her. "We should probably get going."

Matt nodded, holding out a hand toward Mickle. "Right. We should let you get back to what you were doing. You've been most helpful."

As the woman shook hands with Matt, Lindsey stepped into the kitchen, but froze at the sight of an ornament hanging in the window over the sink. An angel. Handmade.

Her heart stuttered to a momentary stop before it began to race.

The last time she'd seen the angel it had been hanging from the rearview mirror of her mother's station wagon.

An icy chill built inside Lindsey, spreading to her arms and hands. Mickle appeared at her side, reaching for the cups, her expression full of concern. "Let me get those for you."

"You okay?" Lindsey sensed Matt's nearness behind her. His hand brushed against her shoulder, the sudden warmth a steadying force in the small, spinning room.

She handed the cups to Lorraine without taking her eyes from the ornament. "That was my mother's."

Mickle pivoted, following the direction of Lindsey's gaze. "I'm sure there must be a million like it. You must be mistaken."

Lindsey crossed to the sink, stepping free of Matt's touch. She fingered the object, the sequins faded after all these years. She could still remember meticulously applying every single one—for her mother.

"I made it." The words escaped her in barely more than a whisper.

She lifted her focus to Mickle, who now stood next to her at the sink. The woman bobbled one coffee cup as she set it in the sink, the loud clatter filling the otherwise silent space. She nodded suddenly then tapped one finger to her chin. "You know that's right. I remember now. She gave it to me one day at work." Mickle shook her head, a sympathetic expression plastered across her face. "You take it, honey. She'd want you to have it."

Lindsey didn't hesitate. She plucked the ornament from its hanger, nodding her thanks to Mickle as she beelined for the front door.

"Thanks again for your time." Matt's words cut through the frenzied thoughts crowding Lindsey's mind. He cupped her elbow as they hurried toward his truck, steering her as if she were a lost child.

"My mother loved this. She would have never given it away." Her voice was unrecognizable with pent-up anger and frustration. "What's going on?"

"I'm not sure." Matt whirled Lindsey to face him, confidence flashing in his eyes. "But, we're going to find out."

"Her story was almost too smooth."

"Practiced." Matt nodded.

Or was it? Part of Lindsey believed Matt was right. If Mickle had been coached, there was a chance Tony Alessandro had been falsely accused. She'd clung to his guilt as gospel for the past seventeen years. Was she ready to consider another possibility?

The nagging questions at the base of her brain hammered relentlessly. Was Mickle lying? Or was she merely reciting the truth as she'd seen it seventeen years earlier? And who had left the photocopy—and the ring? And why?

Lindsey looked at Matt as his dark gaze bore into hers. Was his the determination of a killer's son, intent on clearing the family name no matter what the evidence showed? Or was his the face of a good man, secure in the knowledge of his father's innocence?

She swallowed down her growing turmoil. Only time would tell.

Chapter Four

Matt sat in front of what had once been his family's floral shop and sipped on a cup of stale coffee. He'd dropped Lindsey back at her office, having agreed to meet her later that evening to pore through the case file together.

While he'd wanted some time to analyze their conversation with Lorraine Mickle, he'd also wanted some time apart from Lindsey. When she'd first spotted her mother's ornament hanging from the kitchen window, his instinct had been to offer comfort. He'd had to hold himself back from pulling the woman into his arms—as if she'd let him.

Hell, the woman had spent the majority of her life certain his father had murdered her mother. Of all the women to inspire a sense of protectiveness, why her? Why now?

He didn't need a distraction, and he certainly didn't need one as lovely as Lindsey Tarlington. Maybe he should go forward alone, working through each piece of the puzzle, from Mickle's words to the old evidence. Checking and rechecking.

Certainty eased through him. A certainty that he needed Lindsey's help. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he knew she was the key to unlocking the truth about what had happened that night. Whoever had reached out to her with the photocopy of her mother's license had done so for a reason. Someone wanted the truth known, and had chosen Lindsey as the starting point.

Perhaps whoever had left the clue was someone with a bone to pick with Frank Bell.

Matt laughed, unable to hold in his sudden burst of breath. Who didn't have a bone to pick with Frank Bell? The man hadn't made many friends on his way from the D.A.'s office to the mayor's office. He'd never hesitated to step over or on top of anyone who got in his way.

Bell also seemed to be the master of putting people in the position of owing him a favor, and he never hesitated to call in those favors when he needed something done.

Matt gave a quick shake of his head then took another sip of coffee.

He needed to soften his obsession with Bell, no matter what his gut told him. If he'd learned nothing else during his time at the public defender's office, he'd learned to approach each case with an open mind and clean slate. Preconceived notions achieved nothing more than muddying the waters.

All he needed to do now was step back and look at Camille Tarlington's murder with a fresh perspective. He needed to start over.

From scratch.

With Lindsey's help.

Even though he'd been certain for seventeen years that Bell had played the leading role in railroading his father, he'd be wise to open his mind to the possibility of a different scenario. As long as he cleared his father's name, he didn't care who took the blame.

Matt drained the last of his coffee and peered again at the building that had once housed his father's pride and joy. His father's beautiful shop had become a pizza parlor, as if there wasn't already a pizza shop on every corner in this neck of South Jersey.

He checked the side mirror then eased his SUV away from the curb. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten, but suddenly he'd lost his appetite.

LINDSEY WATCHED FOR MATT to pull out of the lot before she turned away from her office door and climbed into her car. She had no plan to wait until she and Matt reviewed the evidence together. She needed a face-to-face with her uncle now.

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