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USA TODAY bestselling author

MARIE FERRARELLA

The only thing they have in common is a killer.

Sundays Are For Murder

Marie Ferrarella
Sundays Are for Murder

Аннотация

A serial killer who strikes on Sundays is back in business, and workaholic FBI agent Charlotte "Charly" Dow will do anything to catch him. For Charly, the investigation is personal. Her sister was one of the victims murdered during the psychopath's vicious killing spree. The tragedy destroyed Charly's family…even sending her mother into a mental institution.Now Charly has a new partner–agent Nick Marshall, who is just as reluctant as she is when it comes to trusting other people. Nick has his own problems. He's emotionally detached and has enough skeletons in his closet to keep him from sleeping at night. However, investigating the serial killer keeps him plenty occupied, and Charly herself is fast turning into a compelling distraction.But bodies keep showing up–and someone knows Nick has a secret….

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“THERE’S BEEN ANOTHER ONE.”

Charley froze. All the warmth within the room seemed to evaporate in an instant. She didn’t have to ask what “another one” meant.

And it sent a chill through her heart.

The voice on the other end of the receiver belonged to assistant director George Kelly’s secretary. The woman was calling on his behalf to inform the special agents assigned to the serial killer task force that another victim had been claimed by the monster who was laying siege to the southland.

Charley pushed back her hair from her forehead. Damn it, anyway. “When?”

“They found the body this morning. It’s believed she was killed sometime yesterday. Kelly wants to hold a meeting as soon as possible.”

Yesterday. Sunday. The same day her sister had been killed. The same day all the victims had been killed. She was beginning to hate Sundays.

Sundays are for Murder
Marie Ferrarella

www.millsandboon.co.uk

Dear Reader,

You know how you sometimes get a song, or more often, a lyric, stuck in your head and it follows you around for hours, sometimes days, teasing you, haunting you, giving you no peace? Well, that's how it was with Sundays Are for Murder. It began as a kernel of an idea, just a hint, and it refused to leave me alone. It begged for development and when I had no time to devote to it, it would just sit back, popping up to haunt me whenever I had a couple of moments to rub together. Unlike bits and pieces of an idea that usually fade when I try to remember them, this story wouldn't go away. It was there every December, my usual "downtime" when I try to catch up on the rest of my life, decorate a ten-foot tree and search for new recipes to try out on my unsuspecting family for Christmas. It became the white elephant in the room, except that no one could see it but me (in that respect, I suppose it was more like Harvey, the six-foot rabbit

only James Stewart could see in the movie of the same name). Yes, I've been carrying the story around that long. So, finally, through the grace of Patience Smith, my beloved editor, Marsha Zinberg, executive editor in charge of miracles, and the powers that be, here's the story that wouldn't go away. I hope you find it entertaining (at least there'll be one less place at the table for Christmas this year).

I wish you love,

To Patience Smith & Patricia Smith (no relation except for wonderfulness), for always believing in this, and to Marsha Zinberg, who let me do it.

You all have my greatest affection.

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PROLOGUE

IT WAS TIME.

He could feel it in the air, taste it on his tongue. Every fiber of his body told him that it was time, that it was Sunday. He knew without looking at the calendar, without hearing the thud of the Sunday paper as it landed on his rickety doorstep.

Because only on Sundays did the feeling come.

And it made his palms sweat, his fingers tingle, his loins tighten in anticipation. The need was getting too large to manage.

It was time again.

Sunday was his time to kill. Because only with death did salvation come.

It had to be quick. Before it was too late.

Each Sunday, the feeling grew until close to exploding within his veins. He was just the instrument.

He looked at his reflection and smiled. No one would ever suspect. No one would ever keep him from his work. He looked so kind, so harmless. There was a time when he had been all that. Oh, he hadn't looked like the reflection in the mirror—that had taken time and talent and patience to achieve. But he'd been kind, harmless. Eager even. Eager to do the right thing, to be loved.

But all that was before.

Before the betrayal.

Before the need to purge and purify had begun. Before the

deaths.

Before he had discovered that he liked it, the feeling of dispensing everlasting redemption. Because it was up to him to make it right. His father had seen to that. It was because of his father that the calling had come to him. The calling to set troubled souls free.

The calling came now.

He took a deep breath and began the ritual.

Because Sundays were for murder. And redemption.

CHAPTER ONE

STACY PEMBROKE WAS angry. Very angry at being shoved into second place.

Second place meant runner-up. Nobody ever remembered who came in second in anything. Second place was an insult. And lately, it was a position she was becoming all too familiar with. A position she had been forced to occupy much too often in the last few weeks. Maybe even the last few months if she was being honest with herself.

It was time for Robert to make up his damn mind.

"I don't need this kind of grief," she shouted into the telephone receiver, which she held in a death grip. She was squeezing so hard, if the receiver had had a pulse, it would have been erased by now. "Just who the hell do you think you are, canceling on me at the last minute this way? You think I have nothing better to do than sit around, waiting for you to show up on my door?"

The fact that she didn't have anything better to do didn't change her indignation. It was the principle of the whole thing. Robert was taking her for granted, something she had sworn would never happen to her. And if by some chance it did happen to her, she'd promised herself to take drastic measures. Like castrating the bastard who was guilty of the crime.

"I'll make it up to you, baby, honest I will."

Stacy fumed. He was whispering. Keeping his voice low so

that she wouldn't hear him. That harpy of a wife he supposedly hated. If she listened very closely, Stacy could almost hear Robert sweating. He had to be fidgeting, the way he did when he was caught in a lie.

Good. She hoped his damn blood pressure went through the roof, killing him. He deserved it. Nobody treated her like day-old trash and got away with it. For two cents, she'd pay a call to his precious Emily, tell her what her husband had been up to all those nights he'd told her he was working to provide a better future for them.

As she toyed with the thought, her full, freshly made-up lips peeled back into a smile. It would serve him right if she did just that.

"I am through rearranging my life for you, Robert." And she meant it. She was through serving up her heart only to have it carved into small, bite-size pieces. "Now you're obviously not going to leave that frozen Popsicle of a wife—"

On the other end of the line, Robert Pullman drew in a shallow breath. She could hear it. God, but he was a mouse. "I told you, the kids—"

"The kids. The kids. The kids!" Stacy shouted into the receiver, her face turning red, a stark contrast to her ash-blond hair and her all but alabaster skin. It was an effort for her to keep her temper from really breaking free. Her nerves were frayed and strained. These days, she reached the boiling point at lightning speed. But if she finally let go, she knew that she ran

the imminent danger of falling completely apart.

If that was going to happen, it would be because of someone who was a hell of a better catch than Robert Pullman.

But her dwindling opinion of him didn't stop her from verbally assaulting her lover for his transgression. "Don't you think that I want kids of my own?"

Frustration throbbed in his voice. "Stacy, I know. Look, I don't have much time to talk. Emily thinks I'm in the garage, working on a project."

Emily. She'd have thought by now that Emily Pullman, along with her bratty kids, would have been a thing of the past. Hadn't Robert promised her as much? When he couldn't make Christmas last year because he had to take his family on a trip to Lake Tahoe, he'd promised her that this year, they would be ringing in the New Year together. Well, it didn't look as if he was capable of ringing in a Sunday night, much less the New Year.

And she was sick of it.

"I hope to hell that it's a noose to hang yourself with!"

"Honey," Robert pleaded as loudly as a whisper would allow. "I know you're mad—"

"Mad?" Stacy scoffed. "Mad? I am way past mad, Robert. I rounded the corner at 'furious' a long time ago. But you know what? I just don't care anymore."

"You don't mean that."

"The hell I don't. You've stood me up for the last time. I'm having a cleansing bonfire tonight. I'm going to burn all the things

you gave me—and the clothes you left here," she added as the idea took on breadth and form. She knew how particular Robert was about his clothing, how everything had to be hung up just so. Well, she was going to take extra pleasure in stomping on all of it before she sent the articles to their final resting place. "As far as I'm concerned, you are just an unfortunate chapter of my life and I'm closing that chapter, Robert—"

"Stacy, please," he begged, "don't you think I'd rather be there with you?"

"If you wanted to be here, you would be here," she retorted flatly. "I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer, Robert, but even a dull knife can cut once in a while. This is my once in a while, Robert. This is my time to cut bait and run. So I'm cutting you off at the knees. Go back to your ice queen—"

"Stacy—" Robert began, only to stop as another voice echoed in the background, calling him. A female voice. "In a minute," he responded irritably.

Stacy's fingers tightened so hard around the receiver, it was in danger of snapping. She'd been such a jerk, such a hopeless, stupid, stupid jerk. But that was all going to be behind her very soon.

"Go, Robert. Your wife's calling," she ordered him coldly.

"No, Stacy, I want—"

She cut him off before he could get any further. "It's not about what you want, Robert. It's about what I want for a change."

With that, Stacy slammed the receiver back into its cradle.

Her tears began immediately. Tears of anger, of remorse and, most plentifully, of regret. Barrels of regret. Not for coming in between a husband and his wife, or even a father and his children. Regret that she had spent the past three years of her life, three of the most youthful-looking years at her disposal, sneaking around with a married man. In the beginning, she had been incredibly naive. Thrilled at the fleeting moments of attention he could spare her. Thrilled to have caught his eye to begin with. And he had been generous. Incredibly generous. Before Robert, there had only been costume jewelry. Now there were diamond earrings and gold bracelets.

Diamonds and gold. How the hell could she have sold herself so short? What was wrong with her, anyway?

Stacy stopped to look at herself in the oval hall mirror. What she saw was a still-gorgeous blonde in a filmy negligee. But for how much longer? God, she deserved better than to stand there, waiting for crumbs while Robert's wife got to eat at the banquet table, devouring whole portions.

"Okay," she addressed the woman in the mirror. "Okay, so we start over. We stay strong and we start over." She said it over and over again, until she felt as if she meant it.

What would help, she thought, would be getting rid of every single shred of evidence that Robert had ever been in her life. She took a deep breath. It would be like a caterpillar shedding its cocoon.

"There's still a butterfly in there," she promised herself. "A

butterfly that's going to do hell of a lot better than Robert Pullman when she's through." It amounted to a declaration of independence. She was through with that lying cheat. That she was the one who had made him such didn't trouble her in the least.

Crossing back to the bedroom, she went straight to the closet and began to pull Robert's garments off their hangers. Stacy made a point of stomping on each item she took out, grinding her heel into the fabric.

She'd just yanked off his sweater, the black one she loved so much on him, when she heard the doorbell ringing. Her revelry froze.

Robert.

He didn't live that far away from here. Only a few blocks. But there was always traffic to reckon with. Still. He must have gone through all the red lights to get here this fast.

A smug expression slipped over her lips. She knew he couldn't stay away. Knew he wanted her. But she wasn't won over that easily. Stacy intended on making him crawl for his supper. Or for his pleasure.

Maybe she'd take him back, maybe she wouldn't, but whatever way she was going to play this, she was determined that he was going to beg.

Confidence filled her veins. She checked herself over in the mirror, ran her fingers through her storm of ash-blond hair, then subtly adjusted the negligee she'd put on when she'd thought he

was coming over. Left on her own, she slept in the T-shirt that her first lover had left behind when he walked out on her. She'd spent the past eight years hating him.

Ready to knock him dead, Stacy made her way to the front door, the negligee she'd bought for Robert flapping in her wake as she moved.

"There's nothing you can say to make me change my mind," she announced, flipping the two locks the superintendent had recently placed on her door. "Because I—"

The second she yanked open the front door, she froze, stunned. Instead of the rugged physique of her lover, she was looking at a tall, thin, nervous-looking young man. He looked anywhere between his late twenties and early forties. He had the type of face that was impossible to place, although he did look vaguely familiar. But then, she waited on so many people during the course of the evening at Robert's restaurant, it was hard to remember a select number, much less everyone.

"Oh." Impatient, disappointed, Stacy gripped the doorknob. "Who are you?"

The man was dressed completely in brown. Brown shoes, brown slacks, brown pullover. He seemed to almost fade into the hallway. He cleared his throat before answering, as if he wasn't accustomed to speaking to anyone but himself. One of those nerd types who invented things the world suddenly couldn't do without, Stacy thought. She wondered if he'd done anything of importance and if he was worth a lot of money. Certainly he

didn't dress that way. But then, rich nerds never did.

"Jason, ma'am. Jason Parnell," he added after a beat. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I live just down the hall." Turning, he pointed vaguely toward the long hallway. "And my phone went out." Brown eyes looked into hers, imploring. "I was wondering if I could use yours to call the phone company."

She remained where she was, her hand still on the doorknob, ready to slam it shut. "It's Sunday."

He bobbed his head. "Yes, it is. But their customer service line is opened twenty-four/seven. You have to go through several menus, but you wind up with a live person eventually. I've been through this before," he added sheepishly. "Um, I knocked on some of the other doors." He turned again, nodding at the various apartment doors, behind which all sorts of lives were being led. "But you're the only one who answered."

"Look, I'm expecting someone—"

"I'll be quick," he promised. "My mother lives with me and she's not well. That phone is her only lifeline when I'm at work. If I leave tomorrow morning and the phone's down, she'll be helpless."

He looked pathetic, she thought. Exactly what she would have thought a man past the age of twenty and living with his mother would look like. She didn't remember seeing him in the building before, but then, he was one of those people she wouldn't have noticed unless he was lying on the pavement next to her feet.

She supposed there was something to be said about a man who

cared that much about his mother. At least he was better than a dirty, rotten, cheating husband who used his wife as an alibi every time he didn't want to bother coming over.

"Your mother, huh?"

"Yes, ma'am." His head bobbed again, like a subservient creature. "She's eighty-five and in a wheel-chair."

"All right, all right, you're breaking my heart." With a sigh, Stacy opened the door and stepped back. "Come on in. But make it quick," she added.

Turning away, she didn't see the smile that curved her neighbor's lips.

"As quick as I can. I promise."

CHAPTER TWO

THE INSTANT the apartment door slammed shut behind her, Charlotte Dow tossed down the dog leash and began stripping off her dripping clothes.

Taking this as a signal that a new game was afoot, her sixty-seven-pound jogging companion stopped shaking herself off and watering everything in sight. Instead, the German shepherd leaped up in front of her to catch one of the flying garments. Only sharp reflexes on Charley's part kept mistress and pet from tangling together and falling on the floor.

"Dakota, if you ever hope to see another table scrap, you'd better get your hairy little butt out of my way. Now. I'm running late," Charley said.

Ears down, a mournful look aimed directly at Charley's heart, the German shepherd retreated to her favorite sunken-in spot on the worn gray sofa, still dragging her leash with her.

Charley could all but hear the violins playing in the background. She frowned. Great, more guilt, just what she needed.

Hopping first on one foot, then the other, Charley yanked off her running shoes. She needed new ones, she noted. The heels were beginning to wear.

She heard Dakota sigh. "I know, I know, it's my own fault. I should have remembered you don't like running in the rain, not

unless it's after a cat."

Which was exactly what had appeared on the greenbelt that ran just behind her apartment complex. A golden-colored ball of fur had materialized to taunt Dakota before turning tail and flying down off the path.

In her eagerness to give chase, Dakota had nearly sent Charley sprawling into the freshly formed mud created by an unexpected shower on the city. Who knew it was going to rain? Certainly not the weatherman.

Charley rotated her right shoulder. She had no doubts that her efforts to hang on to the dog had lengthened her right arm by an inch, possibly two. The dog was far from a puppy, so why did she still feel she could chase after cats and catch them?

For the same reason you're always chasing after the bad guys, hell-bent to bring them all in, even with the odds against you.

Like dog, like master.

Charley tossed off the last of her wet clothes, grabbed the pile and hurried into the bathroom. Habit had her grabbing both her cell phone and the wireless phone that was perched on the table against the wall two steps shy of the entrance.

She was an FBI special agent attached to the Santa Ana field office. That meant on duty or off, she was on call twenty-four/seven. That meant everywhere, including the bathroom.

Charley closed the door behind her and set both phones on the window ledge in the shower stall before she slipped in. After angling the showerhead, she turned on the faucet. Warm water

turned to hot almost immediately. Steam formed, embracing her, leaving its imprint in the form of tears along the light blue tiles.

It would have taken Charley no effort at all to remain there for the next hour, just letting the heat penetrate, melting the tension from her body. But there was no room for indulgence this morning. Her alarm clock had failed in its effort to rouse her. When she finally had woken up, thanks to Dakota's cold nose pressed up against her spine, Charley had taken one glance at the clock and hit the ground running.

She was forty-five minutes behind schedule.

Another person would have foregone the four-mile jog that began each morning. But Charley was all about dedication and routine. Come six o'clock, she was out there, pounding along the thin ribbon of asphalt that threaded its way from one end of the greenbelt to the other. Rain or shine. Only the call of duty arriving in the middle of the night interfered with her schedule.

Charley shampooed her long blond hair while humming the chorus from the Rodgers and Hammer-stein song, "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair." There was no man to wash out, not from her hair or her life, but she liked the song. She'd always taken comfort in the familiar.

Not like her twin sister. Cristine had always been the risk-taker, the one who was willing to rush off into the unknown. The one who hadn't needed the familiar or the comforting. Charley had been the one who took things slow and easy.

And she'd been the one who'd survived.

Not now.

Charley shook thoughts of her sister away. Had to be the dank weather penetrating her soul. She liked the sunshine better.

She'd just started to work the lather out of her hair when the phone rang. The chimes identified it to be her cell, not the landline. The sound worked its way through the running water, through her humming.

Never a dull moment.

With a sigh, Charley wiped her eyes with her fingertips, shut the water and brought the cell phone down to her ear.

"Dow."

"There's been another one."

Charley froze. All the warmth within the stall seemed to instantly evaporate. She didn't have to ask another one what, she knew.

And it sent a chill through her heart.

The voice on the other end of the receiver belonged to Assistant Director George Kelly's secretary, Alice Sullivan. The woman was calling on his behalf to inform the special agents assigned to the serial-killer task force that another victim had been claimed by the monster who was laying siege to the Southland.

Charley pushed back her wet hair from her forehead. Damn it, anyway. "When?"

"A.D. Kelly said they found the body this morning. He believes she was killed sometime yesterday. He wants to hold a

meeting as soon as possible."

Yesterday. Sunday. The same day her sister had been killed. The same day all the victims had been killed. She was beginning to hate Sundays.

But maybe this time there'd be something they could work with, something that would help them finally catch this bastard.

"Tell him I'm on my way." Charley looked at her free hand. There were traces of foam on it. "Just got to get the soap out of my hair."

"You're in the shower?"

Charley could hear the apology hovering in Alice's throat, ready to leap out. She'd never met anyone so ready to apologize for absolutely everything. Given half a chance, Alice would have apologized that February only had twenty-eight days instead of thirty.

She cut the other woman off quickly. "We've all got to be somewhere, Alice. I'll see you in a few minutes."

Traffic allowing, Charley added silently as she pressed the off button.

With the speed of someone accustomed to living her life on the run, Charley rinsed the stiffening shampoo from her hair and toweled herself dry, all within two minutes of ending her conversation with Alice.

Wrapped in the damp towel, she opened the bathroom door and promptly tripped over Dakota, who had stretched herself before the threshold like a living, furry obstacle course. Charley

braced herself against the doorjamb at the last moment.

"Dog, this is not the morning to test me. We'll play when I get home, okay?"

As if giving her tentative approval to the bargain, Dakota trotted after Charley as she dashed into her small, untidy bedroom. Her next mission was to find something suitable to wear that wasn't badly in need of a visit to the laundry room. Not the easiest of missions.

Charley settled on a dark blue skirt and light blue pullover, both of which she yanked over her body. She grabbed her gray jacket, slipped on a pair of high heels, then went for the hardware.

First, the weapon she wore tucked into the back of her waistband, then the small one that this morning was strapped to her thigh rather than her ankle. No matter how much of a hurry Charley was in, this part of her ritual was precise, methodical. Slow. The fate of Dakota's next meal depended on it. If she was careless, if she hurried, there might be no one to give the dog her evening meal. And Dakota had been through enough in her lifetime. She had been Cris's dog first and the transition, after her sister's murder, had been a difficult one for both her and the animal.

Dakota followed her to the door, emitting a mournful noise that sounded very much like a whistling wind.

"Don't start," Charley warned.

She glanced toward the dog's water and food bowls. Both were

full. The teenager she paid to walk Dakota in the afternoon would be by at two o'clock. The dog was taken care of.

Time was short. Charley knew she should already be in her car. Still, she paused for half a second to squat down beside the German shepherd and give the animal a hug. She loved the contrary beast. They had something in common. They both missed Cris.

"I'll be back," she promised. "And then we'll laugh, we'll cry, and one of us will get a big treat."

Squaring her shoulders, Charley rose. It was time to leave the shelter of her small apartment and take down the bad guys.

The realization that they might very well be waiting to take her down never escaped her.

TRAFFIC WAS UNUSUALLY sluggish this morning, doubling the fifteen-minute trip from her apartment to the Federal Building where the Bureau field office was housed. The annoying deejays on the radio did nothing to lessen the tension that rode along with her in her four-year-old Honda. She kept switching back and forth between three stations with no luck. None played a song she liked.

Would they catch him this time?

Would the bastard who had cut short the lives of eleven unsuspecting women finally trip up and leave a clue behind so that they could put him out of everyone else's misery?

She wished she could believe that he would, but her customary optimism was in short supply this morning. Maybe it was the rain

that was responsible for her less-than-cheery outlook. It had been raining the night she had come back from the part-time job she'd taken only to find her sister dead in the off-campus apartment they shared. Cris, it turned out later, had been the Sunday Killer's first victim.

Or, at least, his first known victim, she amended. Who knew if there had been others? Just like who knew why it had been Cris and not she who had been the victim.

Maybe the killer had made a mistake. Maybe Cris was supposed to live and she was the one who was supposed to have died.

Don't go there, Charley. It's not going to help.

She could feel her nerves jangling, beginning to fray. If she let them unravel, she wouldn't be of use to anyone, not her sister, not to the latest victim. Not even to herself. Unraveling was selfish and indulgent, and she didn't have time for that. Solving this case was all that mattered. She owed it to Cris.

Charley's hands tightened on the wheel.

THE ROAD OPENED UP just as she took a turn for the cluster of modern buildings that made up the Civic Center in the heart of Santa Ana. In the middle, standing slightly taller than the rest, was the Federal Building.

Turning on her blinker, she merged to the right.

A car sped by her, cutting her off, splashing water all over her windshield and hopelessly obscuring her view for the length of a very long heartbeat.

“Bastard,” she muttered. The second her wipers cleared the windshield for her, she saw the offending vehicle’s D.C. plates. A tourist. It figured. Obviously the man behind the wheel had no idea how to handle slick roads out here.

She laughed shortly to herself. Californians barely remembered how to do it themselves from one rainy season to another.

As she drove into the bowels of the underground parking structure, she had a feeling it was going to be a very long day.

Dakota was not going to be happy with her when she finally got home.

CHAPTER THREE

AS A KID, Nickolas Brannigan never much cared for Mondays.

Mondays always meant regimentation. They meant getting back to the real world, whatever that might be. And First Mondays were the worst. They meant being thrown headlong into yet another new situation. Finding himself in yet another new location, with new names to remember, new faces to commit to memory.

And once there, those names remembered, those faces committed, they were immediately scheduled for future erasure, because as soon as his father's new orders came through, he and his family packed up, headed for another army camp, another part of the country or the world. With more faces, more names waiting for him.

One would have thought that with eighteen years of this under his belt, he could get through another First Monday with his eyes closed.

Maybe if his eyes were closed, it would be better.

But his eyes were wide-open, taking in every new thing. His need to observe and evaluate always made him feel like a duck in the desert, searching for an oasis. Or at least a decent puddle.

Not that anyone ever noticed he felt this way. He wouldn't let them notice. Nick prided himself on his ability to hide his true

feelings. People called him outgoing, even charming, without ever getting to know the real Nick Brannigan at all. They got to know the outer facade, the man he had to be.

So here he was, facing yet another First Monday. This time he was doing it three thousand miles away from the dot on the map that he had come to call home. Washington, D.C., where most of his family had settled down.

Even his wanderlust father. Retired Army Colonel Harlan Brannigan had decided to face the sunset of his life—though he never referred to it as that—as a teacher of all things. Much to his mother's relief, the family had finally come together to set down roots.

Until the Bureau had seen fit to transfer him to the other side of the country. A spot had suddenly opened up in the California Santa Ana field office and they needed an experienced man to fill it. He could have refused the assignment but you couldn't say no to the Bureau and expect to advance in the ranks. And he wanted to go far.

Now if he could only bring himself to unpack his things. He'd been living with moving-van boxes for companions these past few days. The boxes had arrived at his Bureau-chosen apartment at roughly the same time he had. Even his father would have approved of the Bureau's efficiency.

For this First Monday, Nick was set to report in at nine-thirty. A phone call from someone identifying herself as Alice Sullivan from A.D. Kelly's office had changed that. Because he was a

transfer, he needed to check in and get official clearance before he saw his new boss. Fun and games were to begin an hour and a half earlier than expected. Eight o'clock in the morning was not his favorite time.

Negotiating the unfamiliar streets in the rain only intensified the feeling of dread he couldn't quite hide from himself, even if he did manage to keep it from the public at large. But then, if he hadn't managed to get his persona in place at twenty-nine, he might as well have handed in all the marbles and gone home.

A horn blared behind him and he realized that he'd inadvertently cut someone off as he made his turn into the Civic Center.

He'd been told that no one used their horns out here in Orange County. That kind of quick-to-flare temper was something reserved for drivers in metropolitan areas, most notoriously in New York City. Although he had to admit that drivers in the Washington, D.C., area were by no means slouches in that department.

He glanced in his rearview mirror, but couldn't make out who had been at the wheel of the car now behind him. Hopefully some forgiving soul. He'd heard it was the season for road rage out here in normally sunny California.

Searching for a parking structure, Nick admitted that he missed Washington. More than that, he missed his family, his mother, his brother, his sister and her brood. Hell, he even missed his old man.

Nick smiled to himself. Never thought he'd own up to that.

But he and his father were finally making some headway, finally seeing each other as people. It had been a long time in coming. Harlan Brannigan didn't know how to relate to children. God knows the man was hardly around long enough to get the hang of it. But now that he and Jeff and Ashley were all grown, things were different.

Nick blew out a breath as he traveled into the underground parking structure. And now it was going to have to be different without him. At least for a while.

Spoils of war.

The ironic phrase had his mouth curving ever so slightly as he found a parking space and got out of his car. The clichéd phrase would have made his father proud.

PROCESSING WENT a great deal faster than Nick had anticipated. Within the hour he found himself on the seventh floor, standing before the A.D.'s office, looking at a woman who gave every appearance of having been lifted out of some 1940s farce and mercilessly transplanted into the twenty-first century.

It was hard to pin an age to Alice Sullivan, but she looked young. Possibly under thirty, although he couldn't be sure. Definitely not in her forties, even though she dressed like a schoolmarm. She wore wire-rimmed glasses perched on her sharp nose. She was thin, with light blond hair pulled back from her face into a tight knot at the nape of her neck. Her conservative clothes seemed designed to hide her. She definitely had body-

image issues, Nick mused. With a shy smile, she stood up to bring him into the A.D.'s office. Nick found himself feeling sorry for her. Despite her position, she made him think of a lost waif.

"He's looking forward to meeting you, Special Agent Brannigan." Her voice, high-pitched and reedy, was only a little higher than it had been over the telephone this morning.

She managed to knock on the A.D.'s door while standing behind him. When a deep voice from within ordered, "Come in," Alice turned the doorknob, then stepped back in order to allow Nick access to the inner office. She gave the impression of fading into the background.

In contrast to his secretary, Assistant Director George Kelly was larger than life. His face was florid and when he rose from behind his desk, he was on eye level with Nick's six-foot-three-inch frame. But while Nick was athletic, Kelly's days in that department were long over. Broad shouldered and heavyset, Kelly carried his mass strictly thanks to his wife's extraordinary cooking.

The man's handshake was firm, hardy. He looked at Nick from head to foot, his eyes passing over him evenly like a giant scanner.

"Get yourself squared away downstairs, Special Agent Brannigan?" were his first words of greeting.

"Just finished."

The nod of approval was short, as if the assistant director were stifling a sneeze that hadn't dared to come out. "Good. Then we can get right to it."

Nick hadn't been briefed by anyone from his old office as to the reason for his transfer other than someone had taken early retirement in the field office.

"'It,' sir?"

"You're part of the task force," Kelly announced without preamble, then realized that he'd gotten ahead of himself. "You've probably heard that we have ourselves a serial killer on the loose."

Nick inclined his head. He thought of the newspaper he'd read on the flight over. The story had been buried on page twenty-three of the first section, but it had caught his attention.

"I heard something about it," he said vaguely. Seven years with the Bureau had taught him never to give away anything unless pinned down and asked.

Kelly merely nodded his head. His thinning red hair was fading, evolving into the color of unripened strawberries. The florescent lighting managed to find all the sparser areas and reflect off them. Nick tried not to notice and kept his eyes on the A.D.'s flushed round face.

His new superior made no effort at more of an explanation. Instead, he rounded his desk and headed for the door.

"Come with me. You need to meet the others."

BILL CHAN WIPED AWAY traces of the raspberry jelly that had oozed out of his doughnut. His latest conquest worked at a bakery three blocks away from the building and he made a point of stopping there each morning for a double sugar hit.

Abby's lips were almost as sweet as the jelly was. He tossed the napkin into his basket just as Charley hurried in.

Turning, he gave her an appreciative look. Her navy skirt hugged curves he was the first to appreciate. "Hey Charley, you got legs this morning."

Charley dropped her purse into her bottom desk drawer, then shoved it closed with her foot. "I've got legs every morning."

Bill leaned back in his chair, deliberately eyeing her. "Yeah, but they're not usually out in plain view."

Not to be left out, Sam Daniels, Bill's partner and the other man in the room, added his two cents. "And a very nice view it is, too."

The relationship Charley had with the two partners was one deeply rooted in friendship and mutual respect. Which was why the hazing was generally good-natured, and at times relentless.

She grinned, leaning her face in close to the older man's. "Behave. Especially you, Daniels, or I'll call your wife and tell her you're trying to kick up your heels where you shouldn't."

In reply, Sam drained the last of his coffee and set down his less-than-sanitary mug.

"Seriously Charley, how come you've never gotten married, or at least heavily involved?" Sam asked.

She shrugged, deadpanning. "Just lucky, I guess."

Placing himself in her path as she went to get her own mug of coffee, Bill raised and lowered his dark eyebrows. "I'm just the man you've been waiting for."

She laughed shortly, moving around him. “In your dreams, Billy-boy.”

Bill sighed, covering his heart.

Charley poured inky-black coffee into a mug whose interior was only slightly lighter. “Anyone got any details yet?”

Sam shook his head. “We’re all sitting tight, waiting on the A.D.”

She sighed. The nature of the game. Hurry up and wait. “Might as well get some paperwork done,” she murmured half to herself.

At the coffeemaker for her second hit of caffeine in less than ten minutes, Charley felt her attention divert to the noise in the doorway. She turned around as the A.D. entered with someone she didn’t recognize. A very tall, good-looking someone.

A witness, she wondered hopefully.

THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR brought Nick into a room that was not much larger than Kelly’s had been. The main difference was that four desks had been crammed into the room. Lining the walls were bulletin boards perched above aging file cabinets. Photographs of the Sunday Killer’s victims ran across the boards. Each bright, young face had a column of facts directly beneath it.

Nick felt the energy in the room mingled with a sense of futility.

There were three people in front of him, two men and a woman. One less than the number of desks. Nick wondered who

the fourth desk belonged to.

And had a feeling he knew.

"That's Special Agent Bill Chan," Kelly said as he nodded toward the young Asian in a designer suit. In response, Bill smiled broadly at him. Not standing on ceremony, he crossed the room and extended his hand in welcome.

"Over there's Special Agent Sam Daniels," Kelly continued.

Prematurely middle-aged, Sam looked as comfortable as Bill was dapper. His clothes gave the appearance of being chosen for ease rather than for style. They might have even been slept in.

The man nodded in his direction, choosing to look him over from a distance. Sam's body language was deceptively lax. Nick had a feeling that was how the man operated and that not much got by the older veteran. Sam's thick mustache effectively covered his lips, hiding his expression.

Nick moved over toward him and shook his hand.

"And this," Kelly said, nodding at the remaining person in the room, "is Special Agent Charlotte Dow."

The woman moved toward him like fog encroaching the moors, telegraphing an inherent sexuality with every step. Her eyes washed over him. Nick felt something stir in his gut. He would have had to be dead not to have felt it.

"I'd say it was nice to meet you," she said in a voice that made him think of whiskey being poured into a glass, neat, "but the assistant director hasn't given us your name yet."

Her eyes were an intense Florida ocean blue. "I can give my

own name," he said.

She cocked her head. "And that is?"

"Nick Brannigan."

Kelly stepped into the arena. "Your new partner, Charley."

It took everything Charley had not to let her mouth drop open.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEXT MOMENT, Charley regained the use of her brain. “New partner?” she echoed, staring at the assistant director. “What do you mean, new partner?”

A.D. Kelly kept a tolerant expression on his face. “Temple’s gone, Dow,” he reminded her evenly. “He’s not coming back. Get used to it. Only I don’t have to be partnered with anyone. You do. Brannigan’s your new partner. Get used to that, too.”

That settled, Kelly turned to the four main people who headed up the task force formed expressly to apprehend the Sunday Killer. The nickname had come about in-house, because the killer seemed only to strike on the seventh day of the week.

“Our boy’s newest victim was Stacy Pembroke. Like the others, she’s young, single. This one was a food server at La Boheme.”

“That new trendy place on the Pacific Coast Highway in Newport Beach?” Bill asked. “Dinner for two over there’s at least a hundred dollars, without drinks.”

“Out of my league,” Sam commented.

“One and the same,” Kelly confirmed. “Her boss found the body after she didn’t come in to work last night.”

Charley was still chewing on the bombshell that Kelly had thrown her. She’d been secretly nurturing the hope that Ben Temple would change his mind and return to work, despite what

he'd told her. To know that he wasn't going to be part of her everyday life was going to take some getting used to.

But her current state of unrest didn't prevent her from listening to what the assistant director had to say.

She raised her hand now, stopping him before he continued. "Wait a minute, the owner of the restaurant came to her place when she didn't show up for work?"

"That's what the report said," Kelly confirmed.

Charley shook her head. "That doesn't sound very kosher to me." She looked at Kelly, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. "You wouldn't come looking for one of us if we didn't show up."

"Not unless Pembroke and her boss had some kind of personal relationship going," Nick interjected.

Standing beside Charley, Bill leaned toward her and whispered, "And the new guy scores a point."

Not with me, Charley thought. It would take more than a no-brainer guess before she gave the new man any points.

"That's what the detectives on the scene thought," Kelly told them.

"Detectives?" Charley echoed. "What have they got to do with it?"

"The latest victim lived in Tustin. The police who were called in thought it was just another homicide. One of the detectives noticed that the M.O. was the same as the other serial cases we've been working on so he called us. The investigation didn't go any further. Nobody questioned the owner."

“What’s the owner’s name?” Charley asked.

Kelly checked the report he’d been handed. “Robert Pullman.”

Charley made a notation in her worn notepad, taking care not to rip off the tattered cover. “Is the crime scene still intact?”

Kelly shrugged his wide shoulders in suppressed frustration. “It’s been walked over by the patrolmen who responded to the call and then the detectives they called in. I’m told that Pullman lost it when he saw the body. He threw up.”

“Terrific. Hope they didn’t preserve that,” Sam muttered.

“The body’s in the morgue,” Kelly volunteered. “Here’s the address to the apartment.” He handed it to Charley.

Charley glanced at the location. Tustin was a nice little city. Murders weren’t par for the course. I hope you slipped up, you bastard. I hope, this one time, you slipped up.

Ignoring the man that Kelly had brought in to be her new partner, Charley turned toward Sam and Bill. She held out the report that Kelly had given her. “You guys want to take the body or the crime scene?”

Except for Nick, everyone in the room knew how Charley felt about viewing dead bodies. Given a choice, she would just as soon work the case without seeing the victim. It wasn’t that she had a queasy stomach, but viewing the Sunday Killer’s victims vividly reminded her of the moment she’d walked into the apartment to find her sister lying on the sofa. Strangled.

But despite the fact that she had managed to get herself placed in charge of the task force before the details of her sister’s murder

caused the case to be connected to the Sunday Killer, Charley went the extra mile when it came to fair. She didn't believe in playing favorites, even if that "favorite" was her.

Especially if it was her.

Sam held up his hand. "We'll take the body, Charley," he said, speaking for himself and Bill. "You can deal with whatever the boys in blue stomped over." And then he stopped abruptly, an uneasy expression descending over his craggy face as his glance shifted to the newest member of their team. Some people were touchy about family and he'd just been less than tactful. "Your old man didn't walk the beat, did he?"

Nick smiled and shook his head. "Retired army colonel."

Sam pretended to breathe a sigh of relief. "Okay then. Cops tend to tread with a heavy foot. Half the time, they don't know what they're dealing with."

"Not like us," Charley commented drily.

Nick glanced at her to see if she was being sarcastic, but her expression told him nothing. Except that she avoided looking his way. He wondered if he had a prima donna on his hands. He'd never worked with a woman before, but he knew a couple of agents who had. One was currently involved in divorce proceedings.

Charley turned her attention toward Kelly. "Is there anything else, A.D. Kelly?"

"Yeah." Kelly paused for a beat. "Catch this son of a bitch for me, Dow," he said with feeling. "I want him so bad I can taste it."

Charley looked over at the posted photographs of the serial killer's victims. Eleven women who had not been allowed to live up to the promise of their lives. Stacy Pembroke would be the twelfth victim.

"Get in line," Charley replied solemnly. The next moment, she shook off her mood. Looking at Bill and Sam, she said, "We'll meet back here."

"You got it," Sam agreed.

As she began to walk toward the door, she glanced over her shoulder at her new partner, trying to contain her resentment that he was now in the position that Ben had once held.

"I'll drive." It wasn't an offer, it was a statement.

"Whatever rings your chimes, Special Agent Dow," Nick answered.

Charley stopped. "Was that supposed to be amusing, Special Agent Brannigan?"

"That was supposed to be an answer, Special Agent Dow."

This was turning out to be one of his more memorable First Mondays, Nick thought, not altogether certain he was happy about it. He figured there were two ways he could play this. He could either take offense or laugh it off. The latter seemed to be the better way to go.

His new partner said nothing as she led the way to the bank of elevator cars.

THEY RODE DOWN in the elevator and made their way through the basement of the parking structure without any

further exchange of words. The silence accompanied them as they got into her vehicle. It continued as Charley started up her Honda.

Nick kept his peace until after she'd pulled out of the structure and was on the road. The rain was still coming down in a fine, annoying mist. It coated the windshield just enough to demand intermittent swipes from the windshield wipers.

"Want to fill me in?" he finally said.

She'd retreated into the same thoughts she always had when dealing with one of the Sunday Killer's victims. Had the death been quick? Had the woman suffered? Had Cris suffered those last few moments of her life? What had gone on in her mind during that time? Had she known she was facing death, or was it just too improbable a situation to comprehend?

Charley realized the new man had asked her a question and waited for an answer. Belatedly, she replayed his words in her head.

"About?" she asked, taking a right turn.

Nick banked down a wave of impatience. Would it get any better or did he need to pass some magical test to prove himself to this woman?

"The serial killer," he said evenly, then added with a smile, "although feel free to fill me in about anything else you might want to throw in."

You're not being fair to him.

It was Ben's voice, not her own, that she heard in her head.

Ben, her teacher, her mentor, her surrogate father. No, more than a father, she thought. Her own father had never treated her with the kindness and understanding that Ben Temple did. And she was going to miss Ben. Miss having him by her side, teaching her things even at this stage of her career. She knew it was better for Ben to finally take the retirement that the Bureau had been waving before him. As for her, she'd always hoped the day would never come.

She spared Nick a glance. Man has a profile like Mount Rushmore. "It's going to take me some time to adjust."

He looked at her. "To…?"

She could have easily made it through the yellow light, but for once she eased back on the gas pedal, slowing down enough so that the light slipped into red before she was at the crosswalk. She looked at the man beside her.

"You."

Nick wasn't sure if he was supposed to take offense at that or not. "Most people don't find me that difficult to get along with."

The man was young, good-looking and in excellent shape. His jacket hugged his muscles. Probably had to have his jackets altered to fit, she mused.

"I liked my old partner," she informed him flatly.

He slipped in through the opening she'd offered. "What happened to him?"

The light turned green, and she pushed down on the accelerator.

“He took a bullet. One meant for me.” Her heart had stopped in that one minute. Curbing fury and fear, she’d fired at the gunman, mortally wounding him. The time between when she’d placed the call and the ambulance’s arrival seemed interminable. She’d stopped the flow of Ben’s blood with her shirt and her hands. Charley glanced at the new man’s face. It annoyed her that she couldn’t read his expression. “Don’t worry, that’s not part of the requirement. I don’t expect you to do the same.”

“Is your ex-partner—”

“Dead? No, thank God. But he took his retirement straight out of the hospital. Said he was too old to walk into dark rooms with his gun drawn.” Charley bit back a sigh. “Ben Temple was a great partner.”

“I’ll try to live up to that.”

“Don’t. You’ll fail.”

He was too much his father’s son not to rise to a challenge when one was issued.

“Don’t count on it, Special Agent Dow. Want to tell me what you know about this serial killer we’re after?”

All he knew was what he’d read in the paper. He’d done that with half an eye, never thinking he’d be assigned to this particular force. Now he wished he’d paid more attention, even though half of it was undoubtedly media hype.

“What I know about the serial killer,” she repeated. “I know that he’s a son of a bitch, no slur intended on female dogs everywhere. I know he rips families apart. That he probably

watches his victims, getting their routines down pat before he strikes. I know I want to pin his hands and feet down and vivisect him."

Something in her voice commanded his attention. "You sound like you really hate this guy."

"I do. I should," she added. "He killed my sister."

CHAPTER FIVE

IT TOOK NICK a minute to process what she'd just said. He thought his new partner was either pulling his leg or speaking figuratively. But the woman's profile was rigid. If she was kidding, Special Agent Charlotte Dow held the world's record for a deadpan.

"You're serious," he said.

"Yes."

"Hold it. Back up a minute," he said. "Isn't that considered a conflict of interest?"

On the team less than an hour and already the new guy was pointing out protocol to her. She couldn't say she was exactly warming up to him. Charley spared him one cutting glance. "If it doesn't bother the A.D., I don't see why it should bother you."

He'd just been put in his place. Nick felt his even temper become a little less even. His new partner obviously had a stick pushed up in regions that did not entertain the rays of the morning sun. But if what she'd just said about her sister was true, he supposed she could be afforded a little slack.

And, he reminded himself, he was the new kid on the block. That meant he had to go along with things, had to roll with the punches until he got the lay of the land and could block the blows.

"I only meant…" His voice trailed off.

Squeaking through a left turn and plowing through a

particularly large puddle that shot plumes of water out on either side of the front of the vehicle, Charley sighed. She was being waspish. What was worse, she was taking it out on the new guy.

She spared him another glance. The man didn't look any the worse for her sharp tongue, she'd give him that. "Sorry. I didn't mean to snap your head off. I'm a little testy this morning."

Brannigan pretended to wipe his brow. "Well, that's certainly a relief. I'd hate to think you were like this every day."

Nick knew he'd just taken a gamble. It was one of those lines that could go either way. It could make her laugh or climb up on her high horse and read him the riot act about affording her respect. He was hoping for the former and held his breath until there was some kind of response.

After a beat, a hint of a smile made an appearance on her lips.

"Fortunately for you, I'm a pussycat most of the time. And, to answer your question about conflict of interest—not that I have to," she told him pointedly, "neither A.D. Kelly nor I realized that there was a tie-in until certain data was fed into the Bureau's in-house database program. By that time I was already on the task force." Her smile widened slightly. "And I'm not without my charm."

"Where did you leave it today?"

The remark had just slipped out. He decided to leave it there. He'd never been comfortable pretending to be something he wasn't and what he wasn't was someone who allowed a person to walk all over him. As a kid, it had earned him more than one

black eye and more than a few disciplinary sessions administered by his father, sometimes months after the fact because the Colonel was away so much.

Special Agent Dow's expression was unfathomable. "Good one," she said with no emotion. "You're entitled to one zinger."

"A day?"

A sea of red taillights lined up in front of her vehicle. By all indications, there'd been an accident up ahead. The police had shut off the stoplights and were directing traffic, none of which was presently moving. Stuck, Charley took the opportunity to turn toward the new man.

"Ever," she informed him crisply. "And that was it. I'm afraid you've used up your three wishes, Aladdin."

He wondered if that was an example of her sense of humor, or if he'd just been put on notice. Rather than make a guess, Nick decided to shift the conversation. "So what was it?"

They were moving again. Good thing. Her leg felt as if it was cramping up. "What was what?"

"The certain 'thing' which made you realize your sister—"

"Cris," Charley supplied.

"Cris," he repeated, "was the serial killer's first victim?"

That was taking something for granted and she wasn't altogether sure they could, given the nature of their killer. "Alleged first victim," she corrected.

Nick stopped, slightly annoyed at the second interruption. "Don't you let someone get a question out without interjecting

footnotes?"

"If that someone gets it right, no," she answered simply. And then, because she didn't really feel like butting heads this morning, entertaining though it might be, she decided to explain why she'd just corrected him. "Call it a gut feeling, but I don't think we have found all of the victims. It's a big country, Special Agent Brannigan. There might be graves in places we haven't even thought to look. As of now, we know of three states where the Sunday Killer has struck. They were all California natives, but he obviously targeted them and followed them out of state. Given that, there might be more victims that, for one reason or another, we don't know about yet." She frowned. "There's no real common thread to link the women or give us a reason why he chose them and not some other women to kill."

Traffic was picking up again, and she shifted in her seat. "The only thing the victims have in common is the way they died."

Charley detailed the similarities that connected the deaths to one another. "He kills on a Sunday. Always. He doesn't abuse them sexually. No penetration in any manner, no clothes even moved out of place. Every body is found in what could be described as a ladylike pose. The killer strangles them with his bare hands. That means, through the magic of science, we have an approximate idea of how big a man he is—"

"Unless he has freakishly large hands," Nick interjected. When she shot him a look, he tagged on, "Sorry, the footnote thing is catching."

Charley made no comment. She didn't know if she'd been partnered with a wiseass or someone whose dry sense of humor she was going to like. For the time being, she continued. "The women are under forty and are all reasonably attractive. That is, they were before he branded them."

This was the first he'd heard of any disfigurement. "Branded them?"

Charley moved the windshield wipers to the last position. They began to slide back and forth across the glass in double time, maintaining clear visibility for half a cycle.

"It might have something to do with Sundays," she guessed. "Maybe the killer's some kind of religious fanatic—we haven't determined that yet. But he lightly carves a tiny cross in the middle of all his victims' foreheads."

"A cross," he repeated. A vision of Rasputin from an old Russian history textbook materialized in his mind. A mad monk, or someone in that vein. Nick shrugged. "Maybe the killer thinks he's saving them somehow."

"Saving them from what?" Charley demanded. "From breathing?" She shook her head, dismissing the notion. "Your theory might hold water if these women were all prostitutes, or each in her own way had committed some kind of heinous crime, but as far as we can see, the victims are just a group of average middle-class women. We've got a waitress—" she referred to the latest victim "—a supermarket checker, a teacher, a would-be actress, an insurance clerk, an airline stewardess, a bank teller,

a private in the army, a girl who worked in a stationery store, a nurse, a paralegal and a grad student." The last was her sister. "Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing to tie them together. They didn't belong to the same club, see the same doctor, like the same movies."

Charley pressed her lips together. She could taste her frustration rising like bile in her throat. There were days she was hopeful and days, like today, when she thought they were never going to get Cris's killer. Maybe it was the rain, she reasoned. The rain always made her think of Cris. And that she'd lost half of her soul.

"They didn't even have the same things in their medicine cabinets," she said in frustration. Every angle had been checked and rechecked. But obviously, they were going to have to check again.

"And yet there has to be some kind of link," Nick pointed out, saying out loud what she was thinking. "At least in the killer's mind."

"Which could be totally psychotic and delusional. For all we know, he thinks he sees the same person over and over again when he kills his victims."

And when he saw Cris, did the killer think he was seeing her instead? Charley wondered. It was something that continued to haunt her. She and Cris had been identical, right down to the tiny white crescent birthmark on their left hips. There'd been times when their own mother hadn't been able to tell them apart. It

was their personalities, not their features that enabled people to distinguish between them. Asleep, which was the way the killer had found Cris, they could easily be mistaken for each other.

No, you're not going to do this to yourself, Charley silently insisted. Getting bogged down in endless self-questioning wasn't going to get Cris's killer. Wasn't going to find him before he could kill another girl.

She stepped on the gas and made the light before it turned red. Barely.

"You always drive like that?" Nick asked.

"Like what?"

"Like you're running a race with the traffic light to see who makes it to the finish line first."

"I don't like to dawdle."

"No, but some of us might want to live to see our thirtieth birthday."

She raised her eyes to his as she turned into a parking lot. "Then you picked the wrong profession, Special Agent Brannigan. You want a long life expectancy, become an insurance investigator."

As she pulled into the first available spot, rain began to fall as if someone had upended a barrel. Pausing only to pull up the hood of her jacket, Charley got out of the vehicle. She waited for her partner to emerge on his side before she hit the security button.

Nick turned up his collar. Not that it did much to protect him

from the rain. He glanced in her direction as he made a run for the apartment building.

"No umbrella?"

She hated having to carry anything. Everything she felt she needed was stuffed into one small shoulder bag she resented having to drag along. An umbrella would have been too much.

"Too inconvenient. Besides, haven't you heard? It never rains in California."

Reaching the doorway, he turned his collar down again and wiped the rain from his hair with his hand. "Isn't the rest of that line 'but it pours?'"

Throwing open the door that led into the building's foyer, she looked over her shoulder. A spark of mild interest rose within her. "An oldies fan?"

He'd never cared for labels, preferring to go from one thing to another. "My taste's eccentric. I like most music. Helps while the time away."

Stacy Pembroke's apartment was on the first floor, in the rear of the building. Since she was the only one of them who knew that, Charley led the way. "Time hang heavily on your hands, Special Agent Brannigan?"

He kept pace with her in the narrow hallway, refusing to follow her like an underpaid servant. "It did when I was a kid, sitting between my brother and sister in the back seat of my father's station wagon, traveling from Texas to New Jersey."

She made the connection instantly. "Army brat?"

“Army.” Nick allowed part of her label. “But I was never a brat.” His mouth curved slightly. “Just ask my mother.”

“Maybe I will.”

The moment Charley walked across the apartment threshold, she sobered. Someone had died here, had the life squeezed out of her by the hands that belonged to a maniac. No matter what that woman’s offenses might have been, the victim deserved some sort of dignity.

Just like Cris had deserved.

CHAPTER SIX

A SINGLE LINE of yellow tape separated the apartment from its brethren. That, and the aura of death.

Only one man was stationed inside the confines of the late Stacy Pembroke's one-bedroom apartment. The man was shifting his weight from foot to foot like a bird marooned on a tiny slab of ice, floating down a river and nervously trying to decide which foot would keep him steadiest.

From his short-cropped haircut to his crisp white shirt down to his neatly pressed brown trousers, the man reeked of newness. Not new to the scene like Brannigan, but new altogether. New to the Bureau. New to the sharp reality of murder. He had the smell of someone who had just graduated from the academy and had drawn the Santa Ana office as his first assignment.

Because he was thin, he appeared taller than he was. And nervous. Throwing off his restlessness, the special agent came to attention the moment she and Brannigan walked into the small, tastefully furnished apartment.

In a beat, he was going to go for his weapon, Charley thought. She judged that he was more likely to shoot his own foot than get a bead on either one of them.

Something made her doubt that the man behind her had ever been that nervous, that raw. Brannigan exuded confidence with every move he made.

Charley raised her hand, as if she was gentling an overanxious poodle that fancied himself a guard dog. “Relax, newbie. I’m Special Agent Dow, this is Special Agent Brannigan. We’re on the task force that’s investigating this murder.”

To back up her claim, Charley withdrew her wallet and showed the young man her ID. His eyes moved from line to line, then looked at her photograph carefully before stepping back. Only then did relief relax his features.

“Newbie,” the man repeated, digesting the term. A tinge of color rose up on his cheeks. He had the kind of face that would always be boyish. “Does it show?”

“Only when we look,” Charley told him. “Don’t worry about it. Even God had a first day. What’s your name?”

“Jack Andrews, ma’am.”

Nick noted that Charley winced ever so slightly at the polite salutation. His sister hated to be addressed that way. It made her feel old, she’d confided. Probably did the same for Dow.

“Special Agent Dow will do, Special Agent Andrews,” Charley addressed the younger man. And then she surprised Nick as well as the new recruit by smiling and adding, “If we solve this case, you get to call me Charley.”

The look on Jack Andrews’s face said that he would never presume to call her by anything so familiar.

Nick turned to look at her, puzzled. “Charley? How did you get Charley out of Charlotte?”

But even as he asked, Nick decided that the nickname

probably suited her a great deal better than the name she'd been given at birth. Charlottes did not carry concealed weapons or relentlessly pursue serial killers. They served tea to their friends at a country club and made sure they stayed out of the sun so that their fair complexions wouldn't freckle.

"I didn't. My sister did." For a precious moment, she allowed herself to remember when she'd felt a part of something greater than just herself, and yet was very much an extension of who and what she was. "Cris couldn't wrap her tongue around the name 'Charlotte' when we were little. All she could get out was 'Charley.'" Her mouth curved as she raised one shoulder in a careless shrug. "I like that name better. 'Charlotte' belongs to a woman on a verandah who has vapors. Like my father's mother."

Whom, judging by that slight frown, she didn't much care for, Nick thought. "Let me guess, you're named after her."

Charley snorted. "See if you can put that finely honed guessing talent to work here." And then she turned toward the newly minted special agent. "Did the police leave us any information?"

Obviously happy to be of some use, Jack rattled off the particulars of the discovery. Nothing new.

"Any of the neighbors hear anything suspicious?"

Jack shook his head. "They haven't been canvassed yet."

She didn't hold out much hope, but all ground had to be covered. And sometimes they got lucky. "Why don't you nose around, see what you can find out?" she suggested.

The words were no sooner out of her mouth than Jack

vanished from the apartment, eager to do her bidding.

Nick watched him leave, amused. Chronologically, probably only five years separated him from Andrews, but he couldn't recall ever being that young. "Well, you made him feel useful."

"It's a gift." She stopped when she saw that Nick was heading for the door. She hadn't meant for both agents to canvass the neighbors. "Are you planning on going with him?"

Nick stopped just shy of the door. If she thought that he was going to clear every move with her before he made it, this partnership wasn't going to work out.

"No. Just wanted to check something out." Crouching, he carefully examined the lock on the door and the area around it. "No sign of forced entry." He rose again. "Looks like she knew her killer."

"Maybe." This was a first-floor apartment. Which meant there was possible access through one of the windows. But they all appeared to be locked from the inside from what she could see. "Or maybe she just opened the door."

Where he came from, people were a lot more cautious. "To a stranger?"

Charley smiled. "Why not? Had an aunt once. She opened the door to anyone who knocked or rang. Thought it rude not to."

"She get mugged?" he guessed.

"Not so far." She didn't add that she'd finally persuaded the woman to put a chain on her door so she could open her door and still have a semblance of protection in place.

According to the police report, Stacy Pembroke's body had been found in the living room. Nick walked into the bedroom. "You want to come here and look at this?"

"Can't wait," Charley murmured under her breath. She stepped away from the small desk and walked into the bedroom.

Nick was squatting over a pile of men's clothing that had been unceremoniously dumped in the middle of the room. He lifted the jacket that was on top of the heap and examined it.

"Forty-two tall." He closed the jacket and replaced it on the pile, then rose to his feet again. "You know, maybe we're dealing with a jilted lover." He threw a theory out for her to mull over. "Maybe to draw suspicion away from himself, Mr. Forty-two Tall killed her and staged it to look like the Sunday Killer."

But Charley shook her head. "According to the preliminary findings, the victim had a tiny cross carved on her forehead. That's a detail we never released to the press."

He looked at her. Maybe the woman wasn't quite as sharp as she seemed to believe she was.

"And you think that kept it a secret?" Nick laughed shortly, shaking his head. People talked. Even those with good intentions. It was the nature of the beast. "How many people have been involved in the Sunday Killer case since the beginning? Twenty?" he asked, then doubled the figure. "Forty?" It was still a conservative estimate. If they counted all the peripheral people involved, including forensics, that brought the count up to over a hundred. "Think about it. There have been M.E.s and civilians

who've stumbled across the bodies. Not to mention the family members who had to bury the killer's victims. You honestly think no one said anything about that little branding fetish the killer's got? You think that nobody had a few too many while sharing some quality time with his buddies or his best girl and let that little spine-chilling detail slip without realizing it?"

He had a point. But she had another one. "Okay, maybe that happened. Maybe more than once. But what are the odds that they'd let that slip within the earshot of the possibly ticked-off lover who belongs to that pile of clothes on the floor?"

Nick believed in picking his fights and this one didn't seem to be important enough to do battle over. So he shrugged and continued working his way through the otherwise neat blue-and-white bedroom. "Guess you've got a point."

She hadn't finished with the living room. Turning on her heel, she went back. "I always have a point, Special Agent Brannigan."

Opening up a bureau, Nick discovered the dead woman's underwear drawer. The garments seemed rather pricey for a woman living on a waitress's salary. He assumed they were gifts from Mr. Forty-two Tall.

"You know," he called out to her, "with all these special agents floating around, the label tends to lose some of its specialness, don't you agree? How about you just call me Brannigan. Or Nick if that's too much of a mouthful."

"I'll take that under advisement, Special Agent," Charley promised.

Nick leaned over to get a better view of the other room and her. He couldn't make out if she was smiling, but he thought he detected as much in her voice.

One step at a time, Nicky, one step at a time, he counseled silently.

The bottom drawer had negligees and the scent of expensive perfume. He paused a moment to inhale and appreciate, then another moment to mourn the waste of a human being before he gingerly rifled through the soft, filmy garments. And found a prize. A small four-by-six beige leather-bound book.

He took it out and thumbed through it. Delicate handwriting marked every page.

"Found a diary," he announced, holding it aloft.

"I'll see your diary and raise you an address book." Crossing back to him, she displayed the volume she'd unearthed in the desk. "Maybe by reading that and calling some of the people in here, we can reconstruct her week."

"Week? Don't you mean day?"

Charley shook her head. "I always say what I mean," she informed him crisply.

He was feeling her out, she thought. Circling her and looking for a weakness like a new buck entering an established herd. She was accustomed to doing things her own way. Ben had been a mentor and a guide, but he'd always given her her own lead. Early on, he had told her to trust her instincts and then he'd proved it by showing her that he trusted them. She had a strong hunch that

Brannigan just wanted to be leader of the pack.

Not gonna work that way, Special Agent.

"This bastard stalks them. One of the victims' brothers came forward and told us that his sister had confided to him that she thought she was losing her mind because she felt someone was watching her all the time. I don't doubt that she was right. The Sunday Killer follows them around, gets their routines down, then waits for just the right moment to take them out."

"As long as it's on a Sunday."

"As long as it's on a Sunday," she echoed.

"But why?"

There was frustration in Charley's voice as she said, "That is the million-dollar question, Special Agent Brannigan. We get the answer to that, maybe we can get the son of a bitch."

A noise in the other room told her that the rookie had returned. She crossed back to the living room. Brannigan was right behind her.

Jack looked eager to share what he'd managed to discover. "One of the neighbors on the floor said she thought she heard yelling coming from this apartment around noon yesterday."

"What kind of yelling?" Nick asked. "Screams for help? An argument?"

Jack shook his head. "She just said yelling. But she said it was a man. And she thought it was the TV. You know, one of those daytime cable channel crime series that's always being rerun. The woman said she was just about to go knock on Stacy Pembroke's

door when the yelling stopped."

Nick exchanged looks with Charley. "Bad luck for Stacy," he commented.

"Yeah," Charley agreed sadly—if something as heinous as what had transpired in this apartment could be described with such sanitary words.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHARLEY PUSHED the key into the lock. Turning it took effort. She felt bushed, really bushed. Worn-out from the inside clear to the outside.

This was probably the way someone with their foot caught in a stirrup felt after they'd been dragged for three miles by a wild horse. Going around in wide, fruitless, unproductive circles always did that to her.

With a sigh almost as big as she was, Charley pushed down on the door handle and walked into her apartment. She was instantly greeted by Dakota, who moments earlier, if the warm spot that met her feet when she kicked off her shoes was any indication, had been lying on the floor directly in front of the door.

Tail wagging like a metronome on caffeine, the German shepherd ran back and forth as if she couldn't make up her mind what to do or where to go first.

Charley laughed softly. "You and me both, Dakota."

The dog returned to angle her head beneath her mistress's hand. It was almost as if the animal was petting her instead of the other way around. Charley smiled to herself. Dakota had her trained well.

She could barely place one foot in front of the other and make her way to the living room where the sofa beckoned to her. Sinking into the cushion was like sinking into an old friend. The

slightly worn gray upholstery embraced her.

A beat later, Dakota joined her.

Charley closed her eyes, petting the animal again. She'd long since given up trying to keep the dog off the furniture. The sofa was her favorite spot. But Dakota listened to her most of the time, which was more than she could say for the rest of the world.

After a moment, Charley forced herself to open her eyes again. It was either that or fall asleep sitting up. Turning in Dakota's direction, she noticed that the telephone on the table beside the sofa was rhythmically blinking at her like a red-eyed, menstruating Cyclops.

Three quick blinks, then a long one. That meant three calls.

Charley frowned.

She didn't have to listen to the messages. Experience told her who had called. He must have heard it on the news, she thought grimly. She had to psych herself up before she tackled returning the calls.

Better yet, she needed to hear a friendly voice first. Charley picked up the cordless receiver and pressed a single button on the keypad, the one connecting her to the only person she could turn to at a moment like this.

It took several rings before she heard the phone being picked up. The moment she heard the deep, rumbly voice honed by years of devoted Scotch-and-soda imbibing, she smiled.

"Hello?"

Charley didn't bother with a greeting. She didn't need to.

Slipping into a conversation with Ben Temple was as easy as breathing.

"They gave me a new partner today." She couldn't help making it sound like an accusation.

She heard the voice on the other end chuckle. "About time."

She could envision Ben leaning back in that chair he always favored, the one his late wife had begged him to get rid of. Worn, shapeless and faded in a multitude of places, the once-hunter-green recliner matched nothing in the house except for Ben. "I kept hoping you'd change your mind and come back."

The shoulder that had caught the bullet still hurt when he moved it a certain way. It probably always would. At sixty-three, he didn't heal the way he had at twenty.

"If I do, it's going to be to sit behind a desk and puzzle things out, Charley. Don't forget, I'm not the man I used to be."

She knew Ben was only baiting her, but she hated it anyway. "You will always be the man you used to be."

Ben chuckled again, clearly warmed by her loyalty. Childless, he thought of Charley as the daughter he would have liked to have had if Ruth could have had children. "Saying it doesn't make it so, kid. Saddest thing in the world to watch is a player who doesn't know when to leave the field."

"Just because a pitcher loses his arm doesn't mean he can't be used for another position in the game." She was only half kidding even though she knew that Ben had made up his mind. Had known it even when she'd gone to the hospital to visit him

right after his operation. Ben's disability leave had swiftly taken on signs of a more permanent nature. "You wouldn't have to leap over any tall buildings in a single bound. I could do that for you."

"Charley—"

"I know, I know." She tried to sound upbeat, but the truth was, she missed him. He'd been gone only six weeks and she'd visited him as often as she could, but she missed him. Missed seeing his rumpled, lived-in face looking at her from across their desks every day. "But you can't like just sitting around the house, doing nothing. I know you better than that, Ben."

"I'm not sitting around, getting bored," he protested good-naturedly. "I signed up for a night class. I'm finally learning Spanish the way you always kept telling me to. And I've got twenty-eight years of TV programs and books to catch up on. Got a whole bunch of tapes and DVDs," he added to back up his claim. "So give me a few years to get bored. I've earned it, kid."

"I know you have."

He heard the sadness in her voice and felt the prick of nostalgia. But that part of his life was behind him now, just as being part of a marriage was behind him. "So, tell me. How's this new guy working out for you?"

Dakota had moved her chin onto her lap. Charley began to stroke the dog's head. It soothed her. "He's not you."

Humor echoed in his tone. "Ugly, huh?" When his former partner didn't immediately respond, Ben knew what that meant. He'd intended his gibe as a joke, but he'd managed to stumble

on a little bit of truth in the process. “Not so ugly, I take it.”

Charley paused before answering. She wanted to be fair. Special Agent Nick Brannigan might have struck her as being a lot of things, none of which she particularly liked, but ugly was not one of them.

“No,” she finally allowed, “not so ugly.”

What she didn’t say spoke volumes to Ben. He’d tried to pair her off with one of his nephews once, but it hadn’t gone too well. That didn’t change his opinion that Charley needed someone in her life. Someone to go home to. Or with.

“So tell me about him,” he coaxed.

“Not much to tell.” She tried to remember what Alice had told her when the woman had stopped by her desk that afternoon. The A.D.’s secretary had managed to just catch her in between trips out of the office. She and Brannigan had canvassed the entire neighborhood, spoken to a good portion of the people listed in Stacy Pembroke’s address book and met with a very broken up Robert Pullman at his restaurant. The man spent most of the interview fighting tears even as he attempted to deny that he and Stacy had been romantically involved. “His name’s Nick Brannigan. He’s just transferred from Washington, D.C. Been with the Bureau for about as long as I have. Maybe longer.”

Ben picked up on the obvious. “Then you must have trained together.”

It gave her pause. For some reason, she hadn’t thought of that. She tried to recall the people in her class at Quantico. As best

she could remember, Brannigan's face hadn't been among them. "Not that I recall. And I'm pretty sure I would have remembered him."

Ben had spent five years learning to pick up subtle nuances in her voice. "Are you butting heads with him yet?"

"I never butt heads."

Ben laughed. "Yeah, you do. With everything and everyone who gets in your way." His tone grew a little more serious. He worried about her. "You don't have me around to smooth things out anymore, Charley. You're going to have to mind your ps and qs."

She loved his quaint sayings. "Ps and qs I can mind, Ben. It's orders from people when they're clearly wrong that I've got trouble with."

"Try not to have trouble with them," Ben advised. And then he paused before saying, "I hear he's surfaced again."

Ben had been on the task force with her. She'd only taken over as primary after he went on disability. "Yeah. He's crawled out of the woodwork. But this time we're going to get him, Ben."

He knew what it meant to her. "Just don't get hurt doing it."

Charley smiled. She liked her independence, liked having no restrictions except the rules of the Bureau. But she had to admit she liked to know that someone worried about her.

"I'll do my best." Call waiting sent a pulse through the receiver. She was tempted to ignore it, just as she was ignoring the blinking answering machine. But eventually, she was going to have to face

him. It might as well be now. “Ben, I’m getting another call.”

“Maybe it’s your new partner.”

They both knew it wasn’t. She’d told Ben all about her father. About how Cristine had always been his favorite and how he hadn’t forgiven her for not being there that night to save her sister. Charley was certain her father blamed her as much as he blamed the man who had strangled Cristine.

“I doubt that.”

“Ask this Nick out for a drink, Charley,” Ben advised. “Get to know him. Your partner’s all that stands between you and the crazies.”

She knew that. The message had never been brought home as clearly as the day Ben had shielded her with his own body. She wished it had been her to catch the bullet. Then Ben would still be on the job. “They don’t make them like you anymore.”

“You never know.”

The line beeped again. She knew the more her father had to call, the more agitated he became. “I’ve gotta go, Ben. Talk to you later.”

“Anytime, kid,” he told her.

“Thanks.”

She knew he meant it. Knew that she could call on him at any hour of the day or night and he would be there for her. During the time they had worked together, Ben Temple had not only been her partner, but her best friend and her surrogate father as well. A surrogate father who had been better than the one she’d been

given at birth, Charley mused as she pressed the button on the telephone that would connect her to the incoming call.

The smile on her lips faded the moment she did. Despite her best efforts to remain calm, Charley could feel her shoulders bracing even before she heard her father's voice. "Hello?"

"Where the hell have you been?"

Nice to hear from you, too, Dad. "Out fighting crime, Dad."

"Why didn't you return my calls?"

"I told you, I was out, working." And I wish I was out there now, so I could miss this one. "I didn't get them."

Christopher Dow had never been known for his good humor or his patience. He displayed none now toward his remaining daughter. "You've got one of those remote things to get your messages, don't you?"

She was twenty-eight years old and had been on her own for almost the past ten years. Why did he always insist on treating her like a little girl who'd misbehaved? "I didn't have time to access them, Dad. I've been pretty busy today."

She heard her father make an indistinguishable guttural sound. "That son of a bitch struck again."

"Yes, I know."

"You going to get him this time?" It was almost an accusation.

Charley worked her lower lip with her teeth. She stroked Dakota harder. "I'm going to do my best."

"Your best hasn't been good enough yet," he reminded her coldly.

She closed her eyes. “Yes, I know.”

“He killed your sister. You can’t let him go free.”

“I don’t intend to, Dad.”

“So what are you doing about it?”

She felt even more weary than she had when she’d walked in through the door. Talking to her father always drained her. “It’s an ongoing case, Dad. I can’t talk about it.”

Anger filled his voice. “I’m your father.”

“And I’m a federal agent. There are rules. I’ve got a call coming in, Dad. I have to go.” She disconnected before he had a chance to protest. Leaving the receiver on the sofa, Charley leaned her head against Dakota and forced herself to think about nothing.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHILE JUGGLING his pizza box, Nick managed to insert his key into the lock. Because the key was new and the lock was not, there was an awkward dance between the two, a moment of inflexibility before the tumbler finally gave way and turned, allowing him into his newly rented garden apartment.

His palm had grown uncomfortably warm where it was making contact with the bottom of the pizza box. The small mom-and-pop store directly behind his apartment complex took pride in serving their food hot. Very hot. He was going to have to curb his hunger if he didn't want to burn the hell out of the roof of his mouth, Nick thought.

He closed the door with his shoulder, then flipped the lock. This stretch of Santa Ana, where he'd chosen to live, was away from the high-crime area that marked the center of the old city. Located across the street from Costa Mesa and South Coast Plaza, touted to be the largest shopping mall west of the Mississippi, the area was almost safe enough for him to leave his door unlocked during the day.

Almost being the operative word, Nick mused as he slid the box holding his dinner onto the tiny table in his breakfast nook. Nook was a perfect word to describe the area. Nook could also aptly describe just about every part of the apartment. There was a nook where his sofa and TV set resided, a nook for his bed and

battered bureau.

Maneuvering between the nooks was a challenge because, in addition to the furniture, the moving company had delivered a myriad of boxes. Within the boxes was the product of his twenty-nine years on earth. The boxes had been here, largely untampered with, for the past six days. He didn't see a grand opening in any of their near futures.

Nick paused to remove his holster and weapon and place them on the table beside the pizza. He'd then crossed to the refrigerator and took out a can of soda.

You'd think that someone who'd moved and lived in six different states before his fifteenth birthday would be able to unpack everything and get things in their rightful place in a reasonable amount of time. The trouble was, every other time he'd moved, and this included when he'd gone to his own bachelor digs in D.C., his mother and his sister were the ones who did the unpacking for him because he just never got around to it.

It wasn't his strong point. He knew how to work a case, had a knack for mining the hidden nuggets that could eventually lead to solving it. The gift his mother and sister possessed was that they knew how to make order out of chaos. Something he definitely was not good at.

Popping the lid on the can, he shrugged. There was no sense in unpacking what he didn't immediately need. And, since dinner tonight had come courtesy of Salvatore and Selena's Pizzeria, he didn't need to unearth anything. Certainly not plates or utensils.

The pizza represented the ultimate in finger food. He always drank his soda right out of the can, so no need to dirty a glass.

Taking a long sip from his soda, Nick rotated his shoulders before picking up a slice of pizza. Man, he was tired.

His body hadn't adjusted to the time difference yet. His internal clock was still on East Coast time. It was ten o'clock in the evening back in D.C. right now and, although he'd never been one of those souls who turned in early, the day he'd spent with his new partner, coupled with the time difference, had all but wiped him out.

Catching a serial-killer case his first time up at bat in the new office threw him headfirst into the deep end of the pool.

He was going to have to find a gym and get himself back into shape. Special Agent Charley Dow struck him as a long-distance swimmer. He didn't want her showing him up. His pride wouldn't allow it. Not that he had anything against working with a woman. But there was just something about this woman that forbade him to look bad.

There was no doubt in his mind that Dow had a chip on her shoulder. Whether she had something against him in particular or men in general he didn't know, but it made things difficult. He had the feeling that she was waiting for him to screw up somehow. He was going to have to stay on his toes, not let down his guard. And he was going to have to learn how to get along with her, at least for a while. It wouldn't look right asking for a transfer his first week on the job. Especially since he wanted in

on this case.

He'd gone alone to the morgue to see about Stacy Pembroke. The M.E. was in the middle of his evaluation. Stacy Pembroke was only twenty-five. Ashley's age. Hell, under different circumstances, that could have been Ashley on the table.

The Sunday Killer's victims were all someone's sister, someone's daughter. The bastard had to be stopped and put away if not put down. And he wanted to be there when it happened.

That meant staying partnered with Dow.

He thought of Gerald, the partner he had before coming out west. Gerald and he had hit a rhythm. So much so that they didn't even have to talk much. They each seemed to know what the other guy was thinking. He doubted he'd get to that level with Dow. If today was any indication, he had no idea where her mind was going.

Thinking the slice had had enough time to cool off, Nick took a bite. He chewed slowly, evaluating the flavors that came to meet his tongue.

As far as pizzas went, he had to admit that this sampling wasn't bad. But Salvatore and Selena didn't hold a candle to the pizzas he'd had in New York City. Cheese there tended to be one long, continuous strand from first bite to last. Sloppy, sure, but tasty as hell. A love affair with the palate.

He couldn't help wondering how else California would fail to measure up.

Nick went over and turned the TV on, switching to the all-

news cable channel he'd discovered earlier in the week. He adjusted the volume, then sat down on the freshly cleaned beige rug.

The blond, perfectly made-up woman behind the news desk looked grim as she announced: "The top story in the Southland tonight is a grisly one. The serial killer has claimed another victim. Stacy Pembroke was discovered early this morning by a friend who was concerned when the twenty-five-year-old restaurant hostess failed to appear at work last night. This makes the young woman the twelfth victim in six years. Our reporters tried to get a statement from the family."

Nick cringed. Why was there always some reporter looking for a sound bite of attention, willing to shove a microphone into the face of a grieving soul? He reached for the remote to change the channel.

The doorbell rang.

Nick swallowed a curse. "Wouldn't you know it? Murphy's law."

Leaning back, he could just about see around the boxes to make out the front door from his position on the floor. He took another bite, debating whether or not to ignore whoever was at the door or answer it.

Most likely some kid was selling something. He'd already been subjected to that on his first day here and wound up buying wrapping paper he didn't need in support of some elementary school he'd never heard of. He'd chalked it up to forging good

community relations.

But he wasn't in the mood for wrapping paper. Or interruptions for that matter.

Whoever was at the door rang again. Apparently they weren't about to give up easily. Persistent, he thought darkly. Which immediately brought his new partner to mind.

Maybe that was Dow at the door. He frowned, taking another bite of his dinner as the woman on the cable channel faded into a commercial.

Likely as not, Dow had probably thought of something after he'd left the office and was here to bust his manhood. He hadn't told her where he lived, but he had no doubts that she had ways of finding out.

With a sigh, Nick got up, leaving the TV on. He thought of putting his pizza slice back in the box before answering the door, but hunger proved to be greater than his desire for neatness.

After pausing to wipe his fingers on a napkin, Nick opened the door.

No one was there.

He should have remained where he was, he thought. About to retreat, he glanced down at the mat the complex superintendent had given him as a "welcome to Sunflower Creek Apartments" gift.

The body of a small, brown rabbit had been placed right in the middle of it. The rabbit's throat had been slit.

CHAPTER NINE

NICK REACTED instantly, ducking back into the apartment. He grabbed his sheathed weapon from the table.

When he crossed the threshold, stepping just outside of his apartment, his movements were precise as if in slow motion. No one needed to remind him of the value of caution. One misstep could cost him his life, or at the very least, turn him into a target.

There was no one in the immediate vicinity.

Gun cocked, he scanned from left to right, then out into the parking lot that faced the door of his first-floor garden apartment.

Nothing.

The rain had receded to a fine mist. Just annoying enough to keep evening strollers from venturing out of their dry apartments. The streetlights were on. Nick squinted, trying to make out a solitary figure hiding within one of the carports. There was no one. Whoever had rung his doorbell was as fleet as the rabbit they'd left on his doormat had once been.

A noise caught his attention. In the distance he thought he heard the sound of a car pulling away. But that could have just as easily been one of the complex's residents going out for the evening. It made no sense to attempt to give chase. Especially when he'd only heard the vehicle, not seen it. He had no idea what direction the driver had taken.

Nick lowered his weapon. His adrenaline was another matter.

Pity wafted through him as he looked down at the dead animal on his doorstep. There was no blood, so it had been killed somewhere else and then transported here. He hoped the animal hadn't been tortured. Something told him that it hadn't been, that killing the rabbit wasn't the object. Leaving a message was.

Though a good three thousand miles separated him from his old life, Nick had an uneasy feeling he knew exactly who'd left the dead rabbit on his doorstep.

How the hell had he known where to find him? Granted, Nick's transfer to the West Coast wasn't a secret. His superiors knew and his family. But the information wasn't exactly posted on the Internet.

Apparently Sean Dixon had hidden talents he didn't know about. The thought did not fill him with joy.

Shaking his head, Nick went back into his apartment to fetch a plastic grocery bag and a pair of plastic gloves. The rabbit was evidence. Nick carefully slipped the animal inside the plastic bag, then tied off the top, making a secure knot.

The rabbit was going to have to spend the night in his refrigerator, he thought grimly. Luckily, it was pretty much empty, except for a few cans of soda and three bottles of beer.

He deposited the rabbit on top of the lettuce crisper. Under the circumstances, it seemed an appropriate temporary resting place.

That done, he crossed back to the table and glanced at the

pizza still in the box. For a split second, his stomach threatened to cohabitate with his windpipe.

A man had to keep up his strength, he argued silently. His not eating wasn't going to matter to the deceased rabbit. With far less enthusiasm than he'd experienced only minutes earlier, Nick picked up another slice of pizza and returned to the living room. The program he had switched on had finished a round of commercials.

Nick sat down in front of the set.

THE FORENSIC LABS used by FBI special agents were located in the basement of the Federal Building that the Bureau occupied. The A.D.'s secretary, Alice something-or-other, had mentioned it to him yesterday in an effort to give him a thumbnail sketch of the area. At the time her description hadn't been important to him, but he was glad now that he'd paid attention to the woman, even though she had a voice guaranteed to put insomniacs to sleep.

Nick stepped off the elevator. As the doors closed behind him, he became conscious of the stillness. The office was quieter than a tomb. He wondered if anyone was in so early.

Only one way to find out, he thought.

The overhead fluorescent lights seemed to be using up their last wattage of energy. The hallway appeared almost unnaturally dim, enhancing the emptiness. It was just before eight o'clock.

Nick could hear the sound made by his shoes as his soles made contact with the floor. Upstairs, rugs throughout the area muffled

the sound of approach. In the basement, the acoustics seemed almost incredibly amplified.

The floor covering here appeared to be some kind of man-made tile. The pattern was speckled and monotonous. He hoped that didn't say something about the nature of the work being done in this area.

Not knowing exactly where he was going, Nick made his way down the winding corridor until he came across an open door. As he looked into the room, he saw a tall, thin male technician in a white lab coat.

Headphones on his head, the technician seemed to be in his own little world as he sat on a stool next to a long counter that ran half the length of the room. Holding a large eyedropper, the man was depositing a single drop of liquid into each of the test tubes lined up in front of him.

Nick walked into the room and attempted to place himself where the lab technician would be able to see him. The name tag just over his breast pocket identified him as one Hank Garcia. Caught up in his work, Hank Garcia continued humming and dispensing drops of opaque liquid, completely oblivious to Nick's entrance.

Trying again, Nick leaned over until he was directly in Hank's line of vision.

Startled, Hank drew in a quick breath. Putting the eyedropper down, he took off his headphones, sliding them down around his neck. The headphones hung there like an incomplete necklace,

audible music coming from both earpieces. Hank looked at him, suspicion and annoyance washing over his face.

"Hey man, don't sneak up on me like that."

Nick nodded toward the dangling earphones. "Listening to music at that level will make you deaf."

The next moment, he wondered how his father's voice had managed to emerge from his mouth. That was the kind of caution his father had been guilty of voicing. He'd always viewed it as the Colonel's constant attempts to curtail his freedom and control him.

"Hey, Snakepit's gotta be heard loud in order to be appreciated," Hank protested. And then he frowned slightly. "Should you be down here?"

Shifting the bag with its carcass to his other hand, Nick fished out his wallet and held it up for the tech's benefit.

"Special Agent Nick Brannigan," Nick introduced himself. Tucking his wallet back into his pocket, Nick placed the plastic grocery bag on the counter. He nodded at it. "What can you tell me about this?"

Hank leaned over and took apart the bag's knot. Very carefully, he exposed what was inside. If he was surprised to find the dead rabbit, he didn't show it. Nick got the impression that the young tech viewed surprises as uncool. The only indication that Hank found the bag's contents less than appealing was the slight flaring of his nostrils.

Hank replaced the sides of the bag and looked at his visitor.

“Right off the top of my head, I’d say it’s dead.”

“Brilliant deduction,” Nick replied drily. “What else can you tell me?”

A shade of confusion highlighted the young face. “Like?”

Good question, Nick thought. He didn’t really know what he was looking for, except he was pretty certain you couldn’t get prints off fur. But there might be traces of other things, things that might turn his suspicions into certainties.

He left it open to interpretation. Garcia was the forensic tech, not him. “Anything.”

Hank pressed his lips into a tight line. “That’s going to take some time. I’m a little backed up here.” And then Hank laughed under his breath. “But then, I’m always a little backed up here. How fast do you need this?”

That was easy. Yesterday. “As fast as you can get it to me.”

Cocking his head, Hank took another peek at the grocery bag’s contents. His brows knit together, as if he was trying to connect invisible dots in his head. “This part of a case you’re working?”

Nick didn’t believe in lying. Stretching the truth, however, was something else. He knew that, as a rule, the Bureau frowned on using its facilities for personal matters. But then, he argued, maybe he was wrong about the rabbit’s origin. Maybe it was a message from the serial killer. It was a well-known theory that most serial killers started out killing small animals.

But the Sunday Killer wasn’t just starting out.

“In a manner of speaking,” Nick said.

“In other words,” Hank said knowingly, “you’d like to keep this just between us.”

Nick nodded. “I’d appreciate that.” He paused, then added honestly, “I’d consider it a favor.”

When Hank smiled, he looked more like a mischievous boy than a young man who had graduated from Polytech with honors.

“Never know when that might come in handy,” he murmured. “Okay, Special Agent Brannigan, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.” His mission accomplished, Nick began to leave.

Hank called out, stopping him. “If I find anything, where can I reach you?”

“Seventh floor,” Nick told him. “I’m on the Sunday Killer’s task force.”

Hank looked duly impressed. The next moment, he retreated to his task and his earphones. Nick noted that he hadn’t bothered to adjust the volume level.

CHAPTER TEN

TO MAKE UP FOR HER later-than-usual entrance the day before, Charley came to work the following morning approximately forty-five minutes earlier than her customary starting time. No one would have said anything about the missing minutes, but doing this evened out some inner balance sheet she kept in her head.

Besides, she wanted some time to herself to think about the case. She found the atmosphere at work more conducive to steady and constructive thought. Home provided too many distractions. And home was where her father called her, wanting to be kept abreast of her progress. As if she could somehow magically bring the case to a close if she just applied herself enough.

At least, that seemed to be her father's opinion. She'd told him that he couldn't call her at the office, saying it was against company rules. Her father had no idea she owned a cell phone. If he did, she'd really have no peace. But, mercifully, her father wasn't one to keep up with the times so she was safe for now.

Time had stopped for Christopher Dow and for his wife the night Cris was murdered. The only difference being, of the two, her father had continued to function. To get up each morning and go to work, to put the sorrow that haunted his soul on hold until he returned home at night.

There were times, when she visited, that she'd catch her father looking at her and she knew what he was thinking. Why hadn't she been the one? Why hadn't she been the one to have stayed home that night when the killer had struck? Then she would be dead and Cris would still be alive. It was no secret that Cris had always been his favorite. As far back as she could remember, Cris had gotten their father's attention. Cris had been able to make him smile. It was as if she and her older brother, David, didn't even exist.

Her mother had played no such favorites. But her mother had been utterly devastated by Cris's murder. Within six months, she had fallen completely apart, withdrawing into herself where the world couldn't get at her. These days, her mother resided in a psychiatric hospital. Part of every paycheck she earned went to pay for the facility. Her father couldn't handle the burden on his own and she couldn't bear the idea of her mother living in a state institution.

She hadn't gone to visit her mother in several days. Maybe she'd swing by tonight on her way home, Charley thought as she got off the elevator. Not that her mother knew one way or another whether or not she came by. Claire Dow just sat in her chair, staring off into space, existing somewhere in a place devoid of pain. Charley supposed that somewhere in her heart she nursed the hope that if she could catch the killer, if she could bring Cris's murderer to justice, her mother would come back from her dark place.

It made her try twice as hard. Gave her twice the stake.

At eight o'clock in the morning, the seventh floor was still rather empty and quiet. Even though Charley liked the energy generated by agents going at full throttle, she had to admit a fondness for the aura of tranquillity that embraced the various offices before the day began.

The task force's room was located in the middle of the floor. Walking in, an extra-tall container of ordinary black coffee in her hand, Charley had fully expected to find herself alone for at least half an hour, if not more. Both Bill and Sam usually arrived at the start of the workday, sometimes a little later if Sam's new baby had kept him and his wife up, or Bill had had a particularly adventurous and exhausting night with his date of the month. The various other people attached to the task force trickled in around the same time.

Aside from A.D. Kelly and, on occasion, his secretary, Charley was the only one who came in early on a regular basis.

So it went without saying that she was surprised to see her new partner at his desk, absorbed in his computer screen.

So much for solitude.

Charley put her container on her desk. "Playing solitaire?"

He'd been aware of her entrance. It was soundless, but she wore a scent that lightly rode the air currents, announcing her presence. He found the perfume appealing, even if the woman's personality really wasn't.

Nick glanced up at her for a moment before looking back at

the screen. “Going over the evidence.”

She pried the lid off her container, tossing it into the empty wastepaper basket beneath her desk. “Very commendable.”

He couldn’t make out if she was being sarcastic and couldn’t decide if she irritated him or just intrigued him. She was damn attractive, but that didn’t tip the scales one way or another. He’d always been a personality man. Except for once, when he’d miscalculated.

“I was going for practical,” he told her. On the Internet, he was scrolling through old newspaper stories about the serial killer. “A fresh set of eyes, that kind of thing.”

So, he was a go-getter, despite his easy manner. Or was he only interested in brownie points? It wouldn’t have taken much for him to find out that the A.D. came in early most mornings. “And what did your ‘fresh set of eyes’ come up with?”

The stories he’d read were just a rehashing of the data he’d already familiarized himself with. “Nothing new,” he admitted. And then he raised his eyes to hers. “So far.”

Her lips twisted in a patient smile. Because she had to get along with him, she gave her new partner the benefit of the doubt. “Hope springs eternal.”

Charley dropped her purse into its usual hiding place, the bottom drawer of her desk, then pushed it closed again with her foot. Picking up her coffee container, she made her way over to the back wall. To the photographs of the dead women impatiently waiting for closure.

The photograph of her sister drew her to that side the way it always did. Cris was smiling, captured in a moment of pure joy. She remembered when the photograph was taken. Cris has just hinted that there might be someone special in her life. Charley had known by the way her sister talked that she was in love.

Cris never got the chance to introduce her to him. She was killed the following Sunday.

Charley stifled a sigh. She felt that same leap inside her throat, that same tightening of her stomach. It occurred each time she found herself standing here looking at Cris. Wondering for what amounted to the thousandth time if her sister had actually been the serial killer's intended victim, or if he had made a mistake. If he'd actually intended on killing her and had gotten the wrong twin.

And just like all the other times, frustration overtook her, because she had no way of knowing the answer.

Not until she had the serial killer in front of her.

"I don't know how I missed that."

Her partner's voice penetrated her thoughts, bringing her back to the present. She turned, a surge of hope surfacing. Had Brannigan actually found something, the clue that was continuing to elude them? As sure as one day followed the other, she was confident there had to be one. It was there, probably out in plain sight, taunting them.

"Missed what?"

Instead of calling her over and pointing to something he'd

found on the screen, Brannigan had abandoned his desk and was making his way over toward her.

He indicated her sister's photograph. "That she looked like you."

She felt deflated. It was all she could do not to snap at him for having raised her hopes, however unintentionally.

When this case is over, I'm taking a very long vacation.

"That's because all blondes tend to look alike," she answered sarcastically, "or so I'm told."

"By who?" he asked mildly. "A jealous brunette?"

The response had caught her off guard. Charley laughed. "If you're trying to get on my good side—"

Nick raised a brow. "Yes?"

A clever put-down rose to her lips. Charley shrugged, letting it die unspoken. She'd resolved to be less hard-nosed when it came to dealing with Nick Brannigan. To try to make the best of the situation and sheathe her resentment. It wasn't his fault that Ben had retired.

So she smiled and said, "I'd say you made a nice start."

Nick moved until he could see both Charley and her late sister's photograph at the same time. The girl in the photograph looked as if she didn't have a care in the world. The woman he was partnered with seemed to be shouldering the weight of that same world. The difference had thrown him.

"Damn, she does look like you."

The smile on her lips turned sad. "She should. She was my

twin. Older by two minutes."

"You or her?"

"Her. We were identical twins." And I miss her every day. Miss her as much as Dad does. "You couldn't see the difference between us," she told him. "You had to be there for it."

Nick's dark eyes narrowed slightly in confusion. "Meaning?"

"Meaning Cris was the one who was always full of life. Full of energy." And she had been content to hang back in Cris's shadow.

"I've only been around you for a day, but you don't exactly strike me as a slacker."

No, she wasn't. Now she went full steam ahead—until she dropped. "That came after Cris was murdered. I felt I owed it to her. Kind of like living for two," she murmured, taking another sip from her container, her eyes on the photograph.

"Is that why you joined the Bureau?"

"Part of it." The biggest part, she thought. If Cris hadn't died, she probably would have gone on to join the local police force. To keep things on a small scale instead of joining a national organization. "I was always interested in criminology, in getting the bad guys." She wasn't aware of the sigh until it escaped. "Just never thought it was going to feel so personal."

Charley stopped abruptly and looked at the man at her side. She had no idea why she hadn't realized it before, but the new guy had a definite sexy aura about him. Was that going to be a problem? Did he have a need to charm every woman he came across? If he thought that applied to her, he'd picked the wrong

woman.

"Are you pumping me, Special Agent Brannigan?"

His expression was unreadable. She didn't know if he was being sarcastic or genuine. "Wouldn't dream of it. Just making conversation with my new partner."

She studied him for a moment over the rim of her swiftly cooling container of coffee. "You'd rather be working with a man, wouldn't you?"

The question had come out of the blue. As far as he knew, he'd done nothing to give her that impression. Maybe she was speaking from experience. "All things being equal, I just want to work with a good agent. Male, female or pollywog, doesn't matter to me."

His response amused her. "The recruitment for pollywogs is drastically down this year," she deadpanned. "Something about a height requirement."

Nick matched her, tone for tone. To anyone listening, they could have been engaged in a serious conversation. "Oh really? I would have thought it might have something to do with the fact that they have trouble hitting the mark on the target range."

She nodded, this time using the container to hide the smile that was curving her mouth. "No opposable thumbs."

"No hands to put them on," he countered.

"That, too." She lowered the container. The smile remained. "Maybe we'll get along after all, Special Agent Brannigan."

It would go a long way to making things easier. "Then maybe

you'll call me Nick."

"Maybe," Charley allowed as she returned to her desk. She added, "We'll see," and then got to work.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE MOMENT Robert Pullman saw them enter his restaurant and head straight toward him, he looked uncomfortable. Rounding the reservations desk, he waved to one of the hostesses, indicating that she should take his place.

It was obvious that the handsome owner didn't want them to be overheard.

"We have a few questions we'd like to ask you, Mr. Pullman," Charley told the man.

The restaurant owner stood about six-two, and right now every inch of him seemed to sweat.

"Of course. Anything I can do to help," he murmured. "If we could just go into my office."

"Your office is fine," Charley agreed obligingly.

As she followed Pullman to the rear of the restaurant, she was aware of the fact that her new partner wasn't trying to take over the interview. She appreciated that. At the same time she couldn't help wondering why. In her experience, men Brannigan's age usually engaged in some sort of jockeying for position. So far, he hadn't. She didn't know whether to relax or remain on her guard. He could be counting on her relaxing that guard.

Only time would tell, she supposed.

The moment the door was closed, she appraised Pullman. Mr. Forty-two Tall, she thought. She was willing to bet a month's

salary that the clothes in Stacy Pembroke's bedroom belonged to him.

"What size are you, Mr. Pullman?" she asked mildly.

Pullman seemed in danger of swallowing his own tongue. "Excuse me?"

"What size are you?" Charley repeated. "Specifically in jackets." Charley glanced over toward her left where Nick was standing. "I'd guess a forty-two tall." She turned her head toward Nick. "How about you, Special Agent Brannigan?"

Nick backed her up. "That would be my guess."

Pullman's intake of breath was audible. It told them everything they needed to know.

"We found clothes in Stacy Pembroke's bedroom, Mr. Pullman," Charley told the man. "Men's clothes."

"Piled up on the floor," Nick interjected in a low-key voice. "Like she was dumping someone."

Charley straightened slightly. The look in Pullman's eyes was that of a cornered animal. "That wouldn't have been you, would it, Mr. Pullman?"

"Was Stacy dumping you?" Nick pressed.

Pullman looked nervously from one FBI agent to another. She was willing to wager that ordinarily Pullman was probably a smooth operator. But the layers were being peeled away, leaving a frightened man beneath. A frightened, married man who didn't want his wife to know about his affair. Graying at the temples and more than twenty years Stacy's senior, Pullman had probably

seen the young waitress as a fantasy come true.

"No!" he cried with emphasis, then realized what he had just admitted to. "I mean—" Desperate, he appealed to Nick in an apparent man-to-man play for sympathy. "Look, if my wife finds out that I was having an affair, she's going to leave me."

"I think, right at this moment, having your wife walk out on you might be the least of your problems," Nick said.

Pullman's brown eyes grew huge as the words registered. "You think I did this?" His head almost swiveled as he glanced from one agent to the other. His voice fairly squeaked. "You think that I killed Stacy?"

Charley exchanged looks with Nick before answering. "The thought did cross our minds."

"No. Hell no." Pullman's voice rose with each word of denial. "I can't even kill a roach. Ask anyone." He pointed wildly toward the outer room. "I get one of the busboys to stomp on it."

"So who did you get to stomp on Stacy?" Charley asked, moving in a little closer to the man.

Pullman squirmed. "It's not like that."

Quietly Nick had moved to his other side. "Tell me what it is like, Mr. Pullman," he urged evenly.

"Stacy was fun. She made me feel young again. The way I hadn't felt in years."

Same old story, Charley thought. Older man needing affirmation, younger woman needing trinkets. But she wanted Pullman to spell it out for them. "And what did you make her

feel like, Mr. Pullman?"

Pullman gave a helpless shrug of his shoulders. "I don't know. I—I gave her things."

The owner looked from one to the other again uncertainly. Was he trying to guess if he'd given the right answer? Charley wondered. Was this the guilt of a cheating husband they were witnessing, or of a murderer? Everybody was a suspect. Until they had their man.

"Like promises?" Nick guessed.

"No," Pullman cried.

Charley was quick to push the advantage. If Pullman was going to be pressured into telling the truth, it would be now. "Maybe you promised to marry her and she found out you were lying."

"No!"

Charley continued as if the man hadn't made the protest. "Stacy threatened to tell your wife about the two of you. You saw your business going south, losing everything you'd worked for. You tried to talk Stacy out of it, she refused. You lost your head. You grabbed her by the throat and squeezed, trying to get her to say she wouldn't ruin your life. You squeezed a little too hard." Charley lifted a shoulder casually. "These things happen."

"No, no." Panic was rising in Pullman's voice. "That's insane." He was visibly shaking now. Charley raised her eyes to Nick. Her partner kept a solemn expression in place as he listened to the restaurant owner. "Look, I never laid a hand on her. Ever," he

emphasized. “I really liked her. A lot. I wouldn’t have hurt her. I swear,” he repeated, his eyes pleading with them to believe him.

“You were the last one she talked to. We checked the phone records,” Charley interjected before the man could protest.

The breath Pullman released was shaky. He was a man on a tightrope, knowing he couldn’t remain in place but afraid of falling if he took a step. “I did call her on Sunday. But it was to tell her that I couldn’t make it. She got really angry at me and hung up. It was the last time I talked to her.”

The significance of his own words seemed to penetrate. Pullman pressed his lips together, struggling with tears. The tears won. They slid down his cheeks. He brushed them away angrily.

“The last time,” he repeated in a voice choked with emotion. He looked directly at Charlie and added, “I swear.”

“You swear a lot, Mr. Pullman.” A tolerant sigh escaped her lips. After a beat, Charley nodded. “All right, Mr. Pullman. That’s all for now. We’ll be in touch.”

THEY LEFT HIM standing in his office, visibly shaken. Not by the threat of incarceration, Nick thought, but because the death of his mistress had finally registered.

Walking out of the building, Nick automatically held the door open for his partner. He was mildly surprised that Charley didn’t say something about being able to get her own door. Maybe she wasn’t all that militant after all.

“You believe him?” she asked as they approached her vehicle.

Nick didn’t have to think about it. He’d formed an opinion

during the questioning.

"Yeah, I do." Then, because he knew she wanted reasons, he added, "Pullman really looks broken up about the girl's murder."

After deactivating the security alarm, Charley opened the white Honda's door and got in behind the wheel. "Could just be acting."

After getting in on the passenger side, Nick buckled up. "I don't think so."

Instead of starting the car, she turned to him, curious. The beginning of a working relationship was like a dance with a stranger. You had to feel him out, make sure you didn't wind up with flat, crushed feet. "And you base this on what, gut instinct?"

Nick shrugged. "For lack of a better word, yes."

Key in the ignition, Charley started the car. She kept her profile to him so he wouldn't notice her amused smile. "How often has your gut been right?"

"More than not." He shifted in his seat as she peeled out. The woman had an Indianapolis 500 complex, but he was determined not to show her that her driving rattled him. "Besides, aren't we operating under the assumption that the girl was murdered by the Sunday Killer?"

She glanced in her rearview mirror. Traffic was almost nonexistent. Just the way she liked it. She opened up a little more. "Just ruling out a copycat murder."

"I thought the tiny cross on her forehead did that," he reminded her.

For the most part, he was right. But she liked to cover all contingencies, just in case. “Just crossing my ts and dotting my is.”

He knew law-enforcement agents who needed only a hint before they ran with something. She was more meticulous than he would have thought.

“You always so thorough?”

“Always,” she answered with finality. “If you want a case that’ll stand up in court, you have to make sure you don’t leave anything for the other side to pick up on.”

“Makes sense,” Nick allowed. “So we’re back to looking for the Sunday Killer.”

“Yeah.” And she wanted the man so bad she could taste it. She realized that she was holding on to the wheel with enough strength that her knuckles were turning white. With effort, she forced herself to relax her grip. “Let’s hope forensics has come up with something for us. Fibers, hairs, something.”

The people in the crime-scene-investigation department had taken an incredible number of items from the scene. Undoubtedly, most would lead them to a dead end.

Nick glanced at her rigid profile. The case meant a lot to her. Considering her connection, he didn’t wonder. “You feeling lucky?”

Charley stared straight ahead as she drove. She hadn’t felt lucky in a long, long time. “No.”

“Me, neither.” He sank back in his seat, crossing his arms

before him. He figured whatever luck he had was being used up right now, as he sat here, watching the scenery whiz by. So far, the woman hadn't crashed them. "Let's hope anyway."

NATASHYA KOVAL WAS bent over her work when they entered the lab twenty minutes later. She glanced in their direction, then smiled.

"Found a hair." She held up a hand, forestalling any comment from either of them. "Before you get all excited, it's a cat hair."

Nick thought back to their examination of the apartment. "The victim didn't have any cats."

Another piece of the puzzle, Charley thought, however minor. She was grateful. "Which means that the killer does."

"Or has friends that do," Nick said.

But Charley shook her head. "I don't see this person as having friends."

They had differing opinions on the profile, Nick surmised. "Maybe our boy's not a weirdo twenty-four/seven," he countered. "Ted Bundy was thought to be a friendly guy. And the guy who confessed to being the BTK killer had a prominent place in society. Was even the president of his church group. This guy doesn't have to be the type to sit and talk to his wallpaper, working himself up until he's ready to kill again. Besides, until just lately, it's been a long time in between victims for him. In the meantime, the guy has had to earn a living in order to eat, has had to interact with people—"

"Just because he works with people doesn't mean he has to

be friends with them," she pointed out. "And most people don't bring their cats to work."

Nick wasn't ready to let the point drop. "Ever hear of transfer, Special Agent?"

She sighed. This wasn't getting them anywhere; it was only serving to amuse the lab tech. "I'll keep an open mind."

"Nice to hear," Nick commented.

They had begun to leave when Natashya called after him. "By the way, Special Agent Brannigan." Nick turned around, waiting. "Hank wanted me to tell you something if I saw you."

"I'll just—"

Before he had a chance to cut her off and say he'd swing by Garcia's station, Natashya gave him the message, in front of Charley. Exactly what he hadn't wanted.

"He said the report on the rabbit is ready. And that you might be interested to know that the rabbit was pregnant."

The enigmatic message caught Charley's attention immediately. Just as he knew it would. She stopped and glared at her new partner. "You get a rabbit into trouble, Special Agent Brannigan?"

Instead of laughing her question off, he shrugged carelessly as he continued walking out the door. "In a manner of speaking, I guess I probably did."

CHAPTER TWELVE

HE WAS STRIDING ahead of her. Charley quickened her pace, caught him by the arm and refused to let go until he turned to her.

"Okay, you're not going anywhere until you explain that one," Charley informed him tersely. Her question to him about the rabbit's plight had been a joke. His response apparently hadn't been.

Nick didn't want to discuss it. He wished the technician had kept his mouth shut.

"Just something I need to look into."

"Regarding the case?"

Nick stretched the truth. And credibility. "Possibly."

"And possibly not," Charley concluded. The way she said it let Nick know on which side of "not" she thought it stood.

He had too much on his mind to play games. "Look, Special Agent Dow, if you want to put me on report with A.D. Kelly—"

Charley stared at him, puzzled. "Why would I want to do that?"

Nick threw up his hands. Depending on policy enforcement here, she had the ammunition to get another partner. "For abusing the facilities."

Her expression told him that she didn't quite see it that way, nor did she want to play it like that.

“I just heard a ‘possibly,’” she informed him lightly. “That’s good enough for me—if you tell me just how a pregnant rabbit figures in your life.”

Not wanting the conversation to carry throughout the entire floor, Nick ducked into an alcove. Charley went right along with him. “That’s what I was trying to find out.”

The alcove, she realized, was just a fraction too small. And she was standing more than a fraction too close to Brannigan. She moved back as far as she could, creating a whisper of a space between them. She found the need for air urgent and immediate.

“I need a little more information than that,” she told him. “Did you find one on your doorstep?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes widened at the response. “I was just kidding.” Charley turned the situation over in her head. “You’re new to the neighborhood, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” He gave the answer guardedly, not knowing where she was headed with this.

“Maybe the rabbit was intended for someone else. The tenant who lived in the apartment before you,” Charley suggested. “Or maybe someone got their apartments mixed up.”

“Could be,” he allowed in a voice that said he didn’t really buy into either theory.

Charley was quick to pick up his tone. “But you don’t think so.”

Nick had never cared for being questioned, second-guessed or

probed. “Trying to get into my head, Special Agent Dow?”

“Wouldn’t have to, if you volunteered a little.”

Nick shrugged, looking over her head. Hoping she’d get the message without his having to tell her to butt out. “Nothing to volunteer yet.”

To his surprise, she caught him by the lapels and forced him to look at her. “Partners are supposed to have each other’s backs, Brannigan. I can’t cover your back if I don’t know what to expect.”

She had beautiful eyes, he thought suddenly. Eyes that went right through a man, clear to his spine.

Nick mentally pulled himself back. Those weren’t the kind of reactions a man had about his partner. Not if he intended to remain part of a successful team. “It’s just a hunch.”

She released his lapels but made no effort to step out of his way. If he wanted to get out of the alcove, he was going to have to physically move her. Or give her an answer she accepted.

“What kind of a hunch?”

He shrugged. “Maybe I’m being paranoid.” It was meant to get her to back away.

It failed. Charley rolled along with the comment. “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you.”

She wasn’t going to back off until she had what she wanted, he thought in exasperation. “It’s a long story, Special Agent Dow.”

Charley smiled sweetly. “Fine, I love long stories. We’re due for a lunch break. You can entertain me.”

He gave her a long, significant look. One that went along the length of her before it returned to rest on her eyes. “Telling stories is not the way I usually entertain a lady.”

It took Charley a second to recover, and do it without swallowing. Not that she could. Her mouth had suddenly turned bone-dry. She was aware that the terms of their future partnership depended on her not showing her reaction. She liked to think that when the chips were down she could bluff her way out of anything.

“Think of it as broadening your repertoire,” she instructed flippantly.

With reluctance, he agreed to give her at least a partial explanation over lunch. After he got the report.

NICK STOPPED BY the lab to get the report from Hank. Not that there was much to add to what he’d already been told. The rabbit had been pregnant when it died.

But that was enough. It told Nick everything he needed to know.

He muttered his thanks and left. There was no point in saying anything about the fact that Garcia was less tight-lipped than he would have liked. At least he’d gotten to the rabbit quickly.

“You okay?” Charley asked when he came out of the glass-enclosed lab.

“Let’s go eat,” Nick said.

The fact that he didn’t answer the question was not lost on Charley.

SHE TOOK HIM to a nearby taco restaurant, one she frequented. When it came to placing his order, Nick told her to pick for him, then added that he'd never had anything on the menu so he was going to have to trust her. She'd looked at him as if he'd just admitted to hopping the ten-fifteen shuttle from Mars, then ordered two beef-and-cheese burritos.

"I can't believe you've never had a burrito," she said when they received their order several minutes later.

"Missed that in my education," he responded.

Charley waited until he'd taken a second bite, then asked, "Well, what do you think?"

He enjoyed it. As far as fast food went, this was preferable to a hot dog. "It's a theme and variation on a crepe."

As good an assessment as any, Charley thought. She also estimated that she'd given him enough time to frame the answer she was waiting for. Unwrapping her own burrito, she looked at him before digging in. "Okay, so much for the gourmet portion of our program. You were going to entertain me with a story."

Nick regretted not lying to her. He wasn't comfortable with lies, but he wasn't exactly comfortable with the truth in this case, either. It wasn't that he felt guilty. He couldn't have played his hand any other way. But he did have regrets about how things had ended up.

He shrugged and gave it one more try. "Not much to tell."

The hell there wasn't, she thought. "It went from a long story to a summary? All right, give me whatever you want to give me.

But give me something." Their eyes met and she added, "We're partners."

"Right, the bonding thing," he muttered, taking another bite. He slid the paper that was wrapped around the burrito down further. "Can't we just make a slit in our thumbs and mingle our blood?"

He wasn't wiggling out of it that easily. This was something that was eating away at him, and might have some maniac camping out on Brannigan's doorstep. She needed to know what she was up against if she was going to be there for him.

"Talk," Charley ordered. Her expression grew serious. "Are you in some kind of trouble, Brannigan?" She headed him off, in case he was going to offer a flippant remark. "And before you staunchly deny it, most people don't open their door to find dead rabbits lying on their doorstep, not unless there's something else going on in their lives."

He frowned, lowering his eyes to his meal. "It's personal."

"So am I. Stop stalling, Brannigan," she insisted. This wasn't something she was going to back away from. It was in her nature to get involved. Not to merely test the waters but to jump in with both feet. For better or worse, the man was her partner and if that was going to work, trust had to be involved. He had to give her his. And then maybe she'd give him hers.

The slightest hint of humor surfaced around his mouth. "Anyone ever tell you that you're a pushy broad, Special Agent Dow?"

Her mouth curved. “Part of my charm. Talk,” she repeated.

He took a long breath, then finally said, “There was this woman back in D.C.”

When he paused, she pushed. If she had to crawl down his throat with forceps to get this story out, one piece at a time, she was determined to get it. “Yes?”

“Her name was Linda.” He tried not to remember her face. Tried not to remember anything at all. He just wanted this behind him, although he was beginning to doubt that it ever would be. “Linda Dixon.” He studied the paper cup that held his soda. “She was a little intense, but we had a good time. At first.”

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