



Chapter One

What the hell did I get myself into?

Clawed by wind thick enough to slice with her tongue, and quickly turning into a human Popsicle, Leigh Blake pulled the collar of her camel wool coat up over her ears and huddled against the entrance to her condo.

Her enthusiasm for the rushed hard news assignment had dimmed with each minute she waited for her ride. I write a society column, not hard news. She regretted now that she'd picked up the phone. Mr. Edwards' call had dragged her out of a warm bed to cover the first murder of the New Year in Atlanta, Georgia. The assignment from the hard news editor of the paper was a challenge, and usually she liked a challenge, but murder and a dead body sent another kind of shiver up her spine.

Leigh hopped from one foot to the other, trying to keep warm, thinking Mr. Edwards had to be desperate to ask a society columnist to cover a murder. Her column was popular, but it wasn't hard news reporting---not by a long shot.

She clenched her jaw, still ticked he'd reminded her how far down the list he'd gone before he phoned her, and then made it worse by explaining in great detail how she should cover the story. The final indignity---he didn't trust her to get there on her own, so he'd arranged to have the staff photographer pick her up.

A firecracker exploded across the street, jerking her attention to a small group of couples who were still celebrating New Year's Eve. She envied their exuberance.

Would she still be out celebrating if she'd gone to the party with Kit and Carolyn? Na, she'd have left early, tired of trying to make small talk. Tired of trying to fit in. She glanced at her watch, two thirty, and for those of us working, it's already New Year's Day.

A Jeep Cherokee pulled up to the curb, in front of her condo, and then the window slid down and a man called to her. "Are you Leigh Blake?"

Leigh ran to the car, opened the door, hopped inside, and then glanced quickly at the driver. Confetti dusted the shoulders of his overcoat, and mixed with his sandy hair. "I'm her---guess that makes you Josh Logan." He was younger than she'd expected. "Looks like you've been out partying. How did Edwards tag you?" He glanced at her quickly and smiled. Broad shoulders, killer smile---and married, she noted as she spotted the circle of gold on his finger.

"I always carry my cell phone and he knows it. Never should have answered it," he chuckled.

He didn't sound or look like he'd been drinking all evening. He pulled away from the curb as Leigh settled in her seat. The car's heater blasted warm air across her feet, as an upbeat Christmas song played on the radio. Warm now, she leaned back, and fastened her seat belt. "Could we stop and get some coffee, I..."

"Sorry, no time," he said briskly, "you'd be amazed how fast a crime scene becomes a circus. I'm trying to get us there before the TV crews arrive."

Leigh swallowed her disappointment at losing the chance for a jolt of caffeine and started to think about the challenge of writing a story about a murder. She knew enough to get the who, what, where, when, and why.

Surrounded by warmth, the excitement of covering her first hard news story returned. Leigh imagined the reactions of her friends. While they all said they enjoyed reading her column, Lesley made it painfully clear he didn't think she was fulfilling her potential as a writer with a society column, or her unpublished Gothic Vampire novels. Kit, who was always supportive, called them adult fairy tales.

Leigh was adept at hiding her hurt feelings when they poked fun at her writing. She'd had years of experience at hiding her feelings

'Have yourself a merry little Christmas...'

Josh's baritone voice singing in harmony with the tune on the radio jerked her to full attention as the lyrics of the poignant song surrounded her like a cage, while the music twisted painful memories into her mind like a rusty screw into soft flesh.

'Maybe next year all our troubles will be far behind...'

She choked back a sob that clogged her throat. Yeah maybe, but next year is always more of the same--I'm still a screw up. The hurt, the guilt still lingers the way the smell of something rotted stayed in the air after it had been removed.

She gave herself a mental shake and then reached over and turned it off.

"Hey." Josh said, "Is it my singing, or don't you like the holidays?"

Leigh leaned back against the seat, wrapped her arms across her chest, hugging herself, mentally struggling to push the painful memories away. "I'm sorry. It's not your singing. It's the song." She lessened her grip and started breathing again.

Josh braked for a traffic light and glanced at her, his face reflecting concern, "I guess you're as happy as I am to get tagged tonight. Have you ever covered a murder before?"

"No. I write a society column." Josh's eyes widened in surprise. "Where did they find the body?"

"In an ally down by Tenth Street, formed by the backs of buildings that front two different streets. It's about a city block long and wide enough for trucks to make their deliveries." He paused a minute, and then said, "Covering a murder scene can be gruesome."

He glanced in her direction again, waiting for her to respond. She wished he'd keep his eyes on the road. Didn't he realize the only drivers out at this time were most likely drunk?

He looked back at the road, "Not at all like covering a society event."

She chose to ignore his comment. She was good at ignoring observations about how she didn't measure up, having practiced her technique since childhood.

Leigh busied herself with searching her pockets for gloves and a hat. She found the soft wool cap and pulled it down over her ears as he pulled to the curb. "I'll do fine. I've watched 'Law and Order' for years." I'd do better if I'd had a cup of coffee, she thought, turning away from his sympathetic gaze to look up and down the dark street for signs of a murder. Not a police car in sight. "Why are we stopping here?"

"The alley is around the corner of this street."

She climbed out of the car as a gust of cold wind slapped her. She shut the door, and then hurried to catch up with Josh. As she turned the corner, her body tensed at the eerie scene.

Buildings of various widths and heights loomed over the shadowy figures, dimly lit by a street light at one end of the ally. The flashing blue lights of two police cars, strobed the scene. Two uniforms leaned against the first car. Across the ally, dark figures held white luminous lighting as they circled the victim. Leigh glanced up and down the ally, relieved there was no sign of a TV camera crew.

Jitters of excitement jumped in Leigh's belly as she started across the street toward the policemen protecting what must be the crime scene. She inhaled deeply, trying to keep her nerves in check.

Cold damp air, mixed with a pungent odor she couldn't identify, filled her lungs.

Two men in uniforms were laughing and gesturing to each other. Their jovial mood seemed oddly out of place, and their conversation bazaar.

"He wasn't a satisfied customer."

"Extreme makeover---Unhappy John Edition."

Her shoulders stiffened. The comedian was a tall, muscular, black cop who reminded her of a bulldog. His white sidekick was shorter, stouter, and younger. Their gruff laughter grated her nerves.

Leigh was halted by the intimidating look she received as she locked eyes with the bulldog. "Excuse me, could I interrupt your comedy routine?" she asked sarcastically. "I'm a reporter with the 'Atlanta News'. Could I see the victim? Who is she?" Leigh pointed to a form half hidden by people working over and around it.

"A street whore." The younger man answered her, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down, while the older cop made a point of ignoring her. "The coroner's technicians are examining the body."

Leigh stepped to his side and looked at the victim. A woman's body lay sprawled face down on the pavement. When one of the technicians shifted, she noticed the victim's back, and stepped in for a closer look.

Suddenly the technician stood up and away, providing her a clear view of the victim's head and back. It looked like chopped meat with glints of bone. Liquid acid rose in Leigh's throat. She pulled off her cap to cover her mouth and stumbled back.

"Look out. She's ready to toss her cookies," the comedian hollered.

Leigh ran, retching, gagging, trying to control her rampaging stomach fluids, when the headlights of a car suddenly blinded her. She stumbled and fell to her knees as it screeched to a stop.

Piercing pain halted her gagging as bruised scraped knees and elbows clamored for attention. She gulped deep breaths of cold air, grateful she'd cheated the uniform jerks of a show.

Before Leigh could move, she heard the car door open, heard someone hurry toward her, but the glare of the headlights prevented her from seeing anything more than the outline of a large man. He knelt down in front of her. He must be coming home from a party, she decided, looking at the tux that fit his muscular body as if it had been made for him. She noticed he wasn't wearing a coat as his warm hand enfolded hers.

"Are you hurt?"

Only my pride, she thought, lifting her head and looking up into his eyes. Eyes black as the universe, widen in surprise, and then flared with the intensity of the sun as he studied her face.

"Angel." His voice was liquid silk---soothing.

She heated under his gaze, as a mixture of embarrassment tinged with fear overwhelmed her. She had to look away. She had to get away, but couldn't move.

Leigh's stomach retched and then projected a foul substance splashing over the man's silk clad thighs before she could turn away.

He didn't jerk back, but slid his arm across her shoulder and gave her a comforting squeeze. "It'll be all right," he whispered.

As suddenly as the heaving started, it stopped. She tried to brush the vomit off his pants with her hand, but he pushed it aside and helped her to her feet. She leaned against him as legs that felt like rubber wobbled. He pulled her close, steadying her.

Hot waves of embarrassment swept her, and his kindness only made it worse. He had every right to be furious.

She wanted to apologize; she needed to thank him for his kindness. But her throat felt like someone had scraped it with a pitchfork, and pieces of undigested food hid in corners of her mouth. An ugly image of what might happen if she tried to talk kept her silent.

She needed to leave before she embarrassed herself further, but when she tried to pull away, he squeezed her shoulder, keeping her close. She looked up at him, questioningly.

"Don't try to talk just yet."

"What's taking so long?" A high pitched, impatient female voice called over to the stranger, as a tall, slim, blonde, and draped in a full-length mahogany mink coat stepped from the car.

Leigh slumped and prayed the powers that be would open a hole in the street and swallow her up, right now, this instant. One glance at the woman told Leigh everything. She'd endured this type since she was a child in private school. Girls who puffed themselves up by ridiculing others as they hunted in packs for victims, and thought themselves better because of an accident of birth. Rich brats whose only ambition was to marry equally rich men and shop happily ever after.

"Susan, bring me a bottle of water," the stranger called back to the woman.

"Ask nicely," Susan said playfully, then turned back to the limo, climbed inside, and then climbed out again, with a bottle of water in her hand.

Water. She could clean her mouth and sooth her throat. Leigh's hand reached toward the precious liquid.

Susan held the bottle up, smiling at her achievement, taking forever to bring it to the stranger. Suddenly she stopped, and wrinkled her nose. "What is that smell?"

The stranger cursed, pulled his arm from around Leigh's shoulder, walked to Susan, and grabbed the bottle. "Get back in the limo." His deep, rich voice rang with irritation.

Leigh shrunk when Susan's gaze raked her, before she turned back to the limo.

The stranger, back at her side, handed her the bottle. "Just sip it at first," he cautioned.

Leigh grabbed the bottle as if it were a lifeline. She took a swig, swishing it around in her mouth, before spitting it out, and then sipped it as if it were the finest champagne. When she thought she could talk, she tried to apologize and thank the stranger. "I..."

"Are you alright?"

Josh's voice startled her to silence as he suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

"Are you with her?" the stranger demanded.

Josh backed up a step. "Yeah, we're together."

"Take better care of her." He growled before turning and walking back to the limo.

His long strides had him at the limo before Leigh had a chance to react. She debated running after him, but he had already seated himself next to the driver and then closed the door. The stranger never looked back.

Frozen to the spot, Leigh watched the limo back up the ally. When it disappeared around the corner, she drank the rest of the water, hoping to get rid of the foul taste in her mouth, vowing somehow she'd find a way to thank the stranger. Her teeth chattered from the cold. Her nerves jumped under clammy skin.

"Here," Josh said, handing her a pack of spearmint gum. "I reacted the same way the first time I saw a stiff. You rest here while I go back and get some answers."

Leigh shoved several sticks of gum in her mouth, and started chewing as if her life depended on it. The sharp flavor washed away the sour taste. She grabbed Josh's arm, halting him, and between chews managed a half smile. "Thanks." She might not be brave, but she could be stubborn. And that would get her through this. She may have been at the bottom of the editor's list, but she'd been on the list. She rolled her shoulders, "It's my story. I'm going back."

"You don't have to."

Another image of the victim slammed her. No one deserved that kind of brutality. No one deserved to be the subject of jokes. Everyone should be precious to someone. Everyone deserved to be treated with dignity. Even a street hooker. "Yes I do," she said quietly, and started to walk back, determination building with every step.

Leigh slowed as she approached the two cops and the body behind them.

Shorty grinned and poked his partner in the side. "Look who's back."

Anger rushed up, but didn't spill over her lips. She'd had years of practice holding her anger in check when petty tyrants taunted and teased.

Leigh ignored him and the snorted laughter that followed. Crouching down, she studied the body.

"Hey, step back." Leigh avoided the bludgeoned head and chopped-up back, concentrating instead on the woman's twisted legs. She stopped chewing as her gaze rested on the bright red nail polish on the victim's toes. The bottoms of her feet were smooth. Not a callus or a bunion marred the skin. No hard ridges outlined the heels. These feet didn't stand for hours on a street corner. These feet were pampered and treated to pedicures on a regular basis.

Leigh looked up over the smooth skin of the victim's splayed, lifeless legs. Her stomach rolled, and she chewed ferociously. High on the victim's inner thigh she spotted a splash of blue. Was the tiny bruise left by a lover in the heat of passion? Or by the murderer trying to restrain his victim?

Leigh noticed another mark a little above the crack of the woman's buttocks. The tattoo's vivid colors rivaled the nail polish on her toes. She squinted at the design. It appeared to be a flower.

Leigh stood up and backed away to where Josh was quietly taking pictures, and she pointed. "Get the tattoo at the base of her spine."

She pulled out her tape recorder and turned to the short cop again. "What's your name?"

He looked to his partner for guidance. But the bulldog just glared. While his eyes didn't reflect respect, they no longer questioned her right to be here. His partner sensing the change answered. "Bill Hightower."

It was childish to be pleased that she'd made the jerk nervous. "Who found the body and called the police?"

Hightower pointed across the alley. "The guy in the back of the police car found the body when he used the alleyway to take a piss."

Leigh started across the alley, but was halted when a third car pulled up behind the parked police cars.

A heavy-set man in his late forties wearing a tux and a scowl stepped out. Command settled on his shoulders like the raincoat draped across them. He held up a hand signaling a uniformed policeman to join him on the sidewalk. "Where's the guy who found it?"

The uniform shouted to the parked patrol car, "Get Bailey out here."

The back door of the patrol car opened, and hesitatingly, a tall, thin man climbed out wearing an overcoat that seemed too large for his small frame. His shaky hand brought a cigarette to his lips and he inhaled deeply. "I found her." He took another drag. "Never seen anything like it in my life."

Leigh motioned for Josh to follow as she walked over to Bailey. Had he lost his stomach the way she did? She halted in front of him, "Could I have your full name, Mr. Bailey?"

"Who the hell are you, Lady?" The newest arrival demanded before Bailey had a chance to answer.

Her face heated, and she pushed the gum to the side of her cheek. "Leigh Blake." Her back stiffened. "I'm a reporter with the 'Atlanta News'. Who are you?" Sour Puss "Lieutenant Williams"

His breath---a combination of old cigars, alcohol, with a hint of something foul that forecasted gum problems--- twisted up her nose. She turned her head slightly aside. It was obvious he'd come here straight from a party and was a little tipsy. Was Sour Puss in any condition to conduct an investigation? Maybe he was at the bottom of a long list too, she thought, giving him the benefit of doubt. "Were you off duty when you got the call?"

"I don't talk to reporters. We have a Public Relations Department that issues statements."

Her pulse spiked and she rolled the gum around in her mouth to keep from telling him where he could shove his public relations department. "Come on now, Lieutenant Williams. We both have a job to do. Can you tell me about the victim?"

Cold, uncaring eyes stared back at her. "I told you who to call. Now...."

"Hey," a uniform shouted as he jumped down from a dumpster, that was a short distance up the alleyway. "Look what I found."

Williams rushed over to the dumpster, followed by another cop. Leigh turned back to the witness, who was lighting up another cigarette. "How did you stumble on the body, Mr. Bailey?"

"Tom. Call me Tom." He shifted his cigarette and extended a shaky hand brushing her fingers, "I was walking home from a party," he paused for another drag and then blew smoke out his nose and mouth. It splashed across her face as he continued, "I needed to pee, and the alley was handy."

Leigh looked from where the body lay, up to the street corner. "I'm surprised you could see her from there?"

“I walked into the alley, away from the glare of the street light.” He shut his eyes against an image only he could see, and leaned back against the patrol car. “I almost tripped over her,” he said opening his eyes.

Leigh saw motion out of the corner of her eye and glanced over at cops dragging a man out of the dumpster. She turned back to Bailey, needing to finish her interview quickly. “What happened after you almost tripped over her?”

“I called 911.”

“Did the operator tell you to wait for the police?”

“I don’t think so. Honestly, I just couldn’t move, and then the police were here.” His attention was distracted by the approaching group.

Williams walked briskly in front of two cops holding a man between them. As they drew closer Leigh’s weakened stomach roiled as the smell of his unwashed body hit her. He’s homeless and probably nesting in the dumpster. She followed, recording her observations as they paraded back to the patrol car.

Williams looked at Bailey and nodded over to the homeless man. “Did you see him near the body?”

Bailey’s head jerked back.

Leigh looked down at her feet, thinking Bailey would have smelled the homeless man before he saw him. Her opinion of Williams dipped lower at the stupid question. Wouldn’t Bailey have told the patrolman if he’d seen anyone?

Bailey shook his head. “No. Didn’t see anyone.”

“A technician joined them. “This might be the murder weapon.” He held up a crowbar in his gloved hand, “It’s covered in dried blood.” He pointed the tool at the suspect. “I bet we find his prints all over it.”

Not likely, she thought, looking at the suspect’s dirty gloves. Who were these people? The Keystone Cops?

The homeless man became agitated. “It fell from the sky,” he whimpered.

Williams started listing the suspect’s rights, but he wasn’t listening. Instead, he was looking up at the sky. Clearly he didn’t understand what was happening.

Leigh clicked her tape recorder again, ready to describe the suspect. But in this light it wasn’t possible to see the color of his skin under the layers of crusted dirt. He wore a wool cap low on his forehead and gloves covered his hands. He seemed fragile, not quite connected to this world.

The policeman pulled him over to the patrol car, and as they passed a lighted area, the suspect’s eyes locked on to her.

His soft, sad, pleading, brown eyes reminded her of a puppy she’d saved after watching it get hit by a car that sped away. She’d called for help and then cradled the puppy on her lap until Kit arrived and rushed them to a vet. The suspect looked at her with the same trusting puppy dog eyes.

Leigh was pulled back to the present by Josh as he stepped in front of her to get a picture of the suspect.

“Ready?” He asked when he’d gotten his shot. “I’ve got enough pictures. Have you got enough for a story?”

“I want to take one last look at the victim. She shivered as a gust of wind tore down the alley. But as she looked across the street, she saw them loading the body bag onto a gurney. Her insides clenched as she remembered another time and another body. She

couldn't do anything then, but now---she'd protect the victim. Her story wouldn't add to the indignities the dead woman's body would be exposed to as part of a police investigation. Leigh walked back to the car.

Not a TV crew in sight, she thought as Josh pulled away from the curb.

"You did pretty good for your first crime scene."

A fresh wave of heat washed over her. "Murder is a horrible, dirty, smelly thing that's sanitized by the Ten O'clock news. I'm going to write about my first reaction to a murder scene. I want my readers to understand what I just experienced. I want them to feel my revulsion, be terrified by what one person could do to another."

Leigh shivered and turned up the heat. "Something about the murder scene isn't right."

Josh glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

Leigh leaned back against the seat. "It doesn't look like a neighborhood where a hooker would be trolling for Johns. And, what about Bailey? Can you think of anyplace in this area where he could have attended a party?"

"You've got a point."

"The police didn't ask him any questions at all, and I didn't ask him the right ones."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. It took a lot of courage to go back, and you did."

Josh's respect warmed her as much as the car's heating system. He was quiet on the drive back to the newspaper.

* * *

Should a murder victim be stripped of all human dignity? First by the murderer, who kills and discards the body like trash, and then by the criminal system's efforts to gather evidence. It's ironic that the people sworn to protect strip away the last of a victim's dignity.

Leigh glanced at the clock at the bottom of the computer screen, surprised she'd finished the story so quickly. She'd make one more call to the police station to see if they had identified the victim or the suspect before she gave the story to Edwards. She groaned when the operator put her on hold, again, and continued to search the Georgia O'Keefe web site while she waited.

"Yes," she said loud enough to draw a stare from a man passing by her cubicle, as she compared Josh's blown-up picture of the tattoo and a painting called Red Poppy.

She leaned back in her seat. When had she decided to be the dead woman's protector? More important, why? Why was she driven to protect this victim? Hell, the least she could do was call her something, anything, besides victim. She glanced at the computer screen and her mouth twitched up in a smile. Red Poppy would serve as the victim's name, until the police identified her.

The operator finally got back to her, stating that Lieutenant Williams had gone home. Leigh didn't want to wait any longer. Satisfied she'd dealt with the story honestly, she sent it to the editor and looked across the almost empty newsroom to his office. She stood up and stretched, trying to relieve the tension that bunched across her shoulders.

Writing the column wasn't enough---she had to make sure that Edwards used it---and didn't change a word. She scraped her teeth over her bottom lip realizing a battle with the senior editor could get her fired. But that wasn't going to stop her. Hands fisted, ready to fight for each word she headed across the room.

Mr. Edwards was still scanning the screen as she entered his office, braced for confrontation.

Finally he glanced up at her. His forehead furrowed in wrinkles, and surprise was reflected in his alert eyes. "It's good. It's damn good."

She did a mental victory dance and relaxed as her chest filled, swelled with pride.

"Could the police give you names yet?"

"No, that's why I referred to her as Red Poppy in my article." Mr. Edwards quirked an eyebrow, prompting her to explain, "Her tattoo resembles the Georgia O'Keefe painting Red Poppy."

Edwards looked over her shoulder to the doorway. "Come on in, Josh." He held out his hands. "Show me what you've got."

The hard new editor pushed piles of paper aside, making room on his desk for Josh's pictures.

"Jesus," he said several minutes later, shaking his head. "She doesn't look human. We can't print these."

Josh shoved the photo Leigh had requested toward Edwards. "How about this one I took of the tattoo at the base of the victim's spine?"

Edward studied the picture and glanced up at Leigh. "We'll lead with the head line 'Red Poppy'." He looked down at the picture. "Nice ass and legs." He pounded the photo with his finger, "This picture will sell lots of papers."

Leigh closed the door to her condo and started toward the kitchen. She was startled by her image reflected in the oval mirror in the foyer. She'd inherited the best features of her parents; curly golden hair from her father who teased it was only 14 karat gold, large round brown eyes from her mother. Unfortunately, on a good day her too curly hair resembled a rat's nest, and her wool cap had flattened the rat's nest to an unflattering tight circle around her face.

She didn't have the classic beauty and porcelain skin of Elaine. She wasn't as pretty as Carolyn, with her caramelized skin and exotic eyes. She didn't have the curvaceous body of her Kit.

I'm skinny, and my only hope for cleavage is plastic surgery. In the winter she hid in layers of clothing. In summer, she just hid.

Kit once told her, it was an air of innocence that drew men to her. Falling over themselves to rescue her.

In reality, Leigh knew she'd lost her innocence a long time ago, and most guys would knock her aside, to get at Kit.

Eyes, that reflected the terror of night's experience and the lack of sleep, looked back at her.

She shook her head with disappointment. So this is what the stranger saw. Damn. Yet, the man with eyes that could hold a woman spellbound, had called her, Angel. She arched her neck unconsciously. He'd make a great Vampire, and she'd memorized every detail of his unforgettable face and would put him in her next book. Of course she'd never see him again, and it didn't matter since he wasn't her type.

She ran her fingers through her hair trying to give it a lift as she hurried into the kitchen to make some coffee. She was and wasn't tired. Maybe her burst of energy come from the high praise Mr. Edwards had heaped on her, or maybe it was because he'd agreed she

could follow the story as long as she kept it interesting. Thoughts leaped around in her head as she tried to decide on her next move.

But, first coffee.

“Hi, Johnny,” she hollered over her shoulder as she opened a kitchen cabinet door and reached for the coffee can. “The hard news editor loved the way I handled the story.” Smiling to herself, she measured water and coffee. “I can’t explain why---but I’m drawn to the victim---I mean Red Poppy.” She pushed the start button and turned to the fish tank located at the far end of the counter snuggled against the wall of her efficiency kitchen. She crossed to it and dipped her fingers in the water stirring it gently until Johnny pressed his mouth at the side of the tank.

Fish were the only kind of pet the Condo Association would allow. His silent agreement to her every word made up for the qualities he lacked that were found in most pets.

Johnny was the best gift she’d ever received, even if Kit had given him to her as a joke, when she’d caught Leigh reading a page of manuscript out loud. Kit warned that women who talked out loud to themselves seldom found a happy ending.

Leigh had named him Johnny because his puckered mouth reminded her of Johnny Depp in Edward Scissor hands.

She pulled her fingers out of the water. “I’m probably in a little over my head, but I’m treading water,” she said crossing back to pour a cup of coffee. She took a sip and moaned with pleasure, waiting for the caffeine to kick in. “I also met a stranger who is the perfect man to model my new Vampire after. He’s too handsome---has a mesmerizing gaze that makes a woman feel like she’s the most interesting person in the universe.” She gulped the rest of her cup, laughing to herself that just thoughts of her Vampire sent tingles of excitement along her spine.

She gulped more coffee, thinking back to her story. “Johnny---when Edwards said it was my story—God, it felt great. I’d written it my way and he’d like it. He said it would put the readers right there at the scene, said my column would give them something the TV news crew couldn’t. I’d made the victim a living person, not just a statistic. And he’s right. I do see her as a person, and she has every right to justice. I intend to write her story until we put her murderer behind bars.”

“Don’t look at me that way, Johnny, you don’t understand. Who else is going to help her? Not the police. They arrested an old bum who couldn’t connect enough dots to form a thought.”

What could his motive be? Money? She banged her cup down on the granite countertop, “Johnny---they didn’t find her pocketbook—or clothes or coat.”

Leigh closed her eyes, remembering everything that happened prior to the arrest of the homeless man. She was positive the police hadn’t search the dumpster after they pulled him out of it. Was she the only one asking these questions? She opened the cabinet under the sink, reached in, pulled out a pair of rubber gloves, and then stood up.

“Don’t look at me that way, Johnny. I have to get answers. We both know I’ve got to go back to the alley and search the dumpster. No arguments Johnny. I’m out of here.” She inhaled deeply and grabbed her coat. Talking to Johnny, like whistling in the dark, gave her courage.

* * *

Leigh looked at the dashboard clock. It was close to five and still dark. She pulled her ancient Toyota up to the corner of the alley, left the motor running, and got out of the car to remove the police tape. She pried the end of the tape from the building and dropped it to the street before returning to her car. The alley looked deserted as the headlights swept away shadows. She pulled to a stop when the headlights lit the area where the body was found. She stopped and got out of the car. A gust of icy wind whipped at her face as an image of Red Poppy's back flooded her. She leaned down close to the cement, searching for signs of a bloody murder that would have splattered blood in many directions. She found little on the sidewalk and didn't see any on the building. Maybe it was there and she just couldn't see it.

Leigh stood up slowly. How could the Lieutenant have arrested that old man, knowing the murder didn't happen here? Or did he? She hopped back in the warm car, pulled up next to the dumpster, turned off the motor, and pulled on rubber gloves. She would search, but she didn't expect to find the victim's clothes, shoes, or handbag.

Leigh pulled her scarf up to cover head and nose and climbed up onto the roof of the car. She shivered as her gaze wondered over the rubble and junk that rose to a foot from the rim of the dumpster.

Can't search it from here, she thought, leaning over the edge, stealing herself for the job at hand. She took a deep breath as if ready to dive into water, and threw one leg over the side of the dumpster. Bracing her hands on the rim, she pulled her other leg over the side and dropped inside.

Now what? She looked for signs that it had been searched and found none. An indentation and a blanket that'd seen better days outlined the spot where the homeless man probably slept. She decided to start with the other side.

Leigh waded through the debris grateful for the lack of garbage and started poking around looking for an area that seemed recently disturbed.

Something red glinted below layers of wood and wallboard, and she hopped across a pile of woodwork laced with nails to get at it. But one foot landed on wallboard that crumbled into nothing. For an instant she danced on air before stumbling and falling across a pile of debris that quivered beneath her as she landed. Her heart pounded against her throat. If she got buried in this mess would she ever get out?

What the hell am I doing here? Thoughts of a warm bed and hot coffee were pushed aside by an image of the body, and determination pushed away the last bit of fear.

Can't stay here all night. Hesitantly, she pushed up on her knees and then stood. Cautiously she moved, testing the stability of the debris with her foot as she edged her way to the side of the dumpster.

She clutched the rim of the dumpster, breathing heavily, searching for the courage to continue, when she spied a glint of metal sticking up out of the rubble. Still clutching to the rim of the dumpster, she reached for the copper pole and pulled it up and out of the rubble. It wouldn't be easy to handle. But, it would be a lot safer to poke around this mess with it rather than risk falling down a rabbit hole.

She used the pole to move away top layers of rubbish to see if it uncovered something interesting.

She gasped when she moved a crate aside and found a canvas bag. Would it contain the victim's things, or did it belong to the bum. It took a while for her to get the bag to slide onto the pole and then lift the pole and get the canvas bag to slide down to her

stopping as it hit her chest. She grabbed the bag lifting it over the rim and dropping it onto the roof of the car.

Slowly, patiently she continued her search with the pole working her way back to the homeless man's sleeping area. She stood up to stretch, trying to relieve a cramp in her back, when suddenly a tingle shot up her backbone. Someone was watching her. She ducked below the rim of the dumpster as her pulse jumped in her throat.

Breathe, She gulped down air in an effort to calm her fear and then peered over the rim to search the street for signs of life. The night was fading into a dark gray color, casting shadows of the approaching dawn. She tried to identify a shape in the shadows as every nerve ending screamed---move. She climbed over the side, slid down to the roof of her car, and then jumped to the street pausing only to get the canvas bag. She took one last quick glance around the ally just as a shadow shifted. Her stalker was on the move.

Leigh's heart thundered against her chest a warning---Get the hell out of here.

Chapter Two

Leigh glanced at the time at the bottom of her computer, pressed the send bottom, and turned her laptop off. It would be another column, telling about her trip to the dumpster and her conclusions. The police department would not like it.

If someone had told her a few days ago that not only would she be covering a murder, and she would also go back to the scene and maybe had encountered the murderer, she would have laughed at the work of fiction.

She'd slept for over twelve hours when she came back from her early morning tour of the dumpster. And, she'd needed it.

The canvas bag was a disappointment. Its content had nothing to do with either the victim or the homeless man.

Leigh glanced at the clock and realized she'd have to hurry if she wanted to get to court in time for the homeless man's arraignment. She glanced around her messy bedroom, searching for boots, wondering when she'd find the time to straighten the piles of books and various boxes used to temporarily store her latest novel, as she headed to the kitchen.

"Johnny, you must be starving." Leigh spread fish food across the top of the small tank on the countertop noticing her phone was blinking, signaling another message.

It had taken her sometime to clear the messages that were left after the New Year's Day edition of the paper hit the streets with her story on the front page. The Witch of the West was having a fit, while the Witch of the East wanted more gory details. She would eat out on the story for a month at least. Pretty much the reaction she'd expected from her Grandmothers.

Her friends had surprised her somewhat with their praise. Lesley had gushed over the brilliance of her article. "What would I do without my friends?" she tapped the tank with her finger.

She had to return the phone calls from her Grandmothers, but she would do it later. Now she had to get to court. The DA, obviously an idiot, intended to proceed with an indictment against the old man. The police still didn't know the identities of either the victim or their suspect. Someone had to make a case for the homeless man's defense, and she had one outlined.

* * *

An hour later, Leigh entered the Fulton County courtroom just as a policeman led the homeless man to a seat. He was cleaned and dressed in prison garb. As she entered the row in back of him, he turned to her.

"Amy," he said smiling and reaching out to touch her.

The guard leaned forward to restrain him. "Please." She said to the guard while taking the old man's hand in hers. His fingers were surprisingly warm, and his dirty fingernails needed cutting. "I'm here for you. I'll do everything I can."

He was old enough to be her grandfather, and maybe since both her grandfathers had died before she'd been born, that was the connection. She'd often wondered what her life would have been like if one of them had lived.

"Are you a relative?" His deep resonant voice came from just behind her.

Leigh let go of the old man's hand, turned to answer and gasped. He was the image of the hero she'd created over the years of writing.

Recovered now her gaze swept him. Tall--at least six feet, broad shoulders, with well-developed muscles and a tapered waist, she'd bet—now hidden by a suit jacket. An expensive suit, she noted. He looked as if he'd stepped off the pages of GQ.

There were a few variations. His dark blond hair with streaks highlighted by the sun, was straight instead of curling across his forehead. Dark slashes of brows framed sea green eyes, not the dark blue eyes she'd created for her hero.

His straight nose was the same, and so was his sensuous mouth that now slowly curved up to a grin as he correctly read her body language. She resisted the urge to lean in closer and see if her fantasy hero come to life smelled of spices and tobacco.

Say something you idiot and stop staring at him. Finally she blurted, "Who are you?"

"Dylan Foster." He extended his hand. "I'm an attorney with Webster, Rain and Shaw."

She took his extended hand, and mentally kicked herself for grinning like a rock star groupie. "Leigh Blake," she said noticing his firm handshake. Was he a real life hero, here to help the homeless man? "Why are you here?"

His smile deepened. "I'm here because of the column you wrote about the murder."

"You read it?" Stupid, stupid question

"Yes. It was a great column. The partners of my law firm were so impressed that they sent me to represent the suspect."

Her face heated at his praise. "That's wonderful." She turned to look at the old man. "Now maybe he'll have a chance. If I knew his name I'd introduce you to your client." Leigh leaned forward and touched the older man's shoulder to get his attention.

The old man looked up. "What do you want, Amy?"

Dylan arched an eyebrow.

Leigh shook her head. "He has me confused with someone named Amy." She smiled at the old man. "This is your attorney, Dylan Foster. You can trust him. When you remember your name, tell him."

The old man's eyes crinkled with the start of a smile then altered to a look of confusion. "No."

Dylan frowned. "He's really out of it. Haven't the police identified him yet?"

"Not as far as I know. But, I know he's not guilty"

"Not guilty? I thought he was found at the scene and had the murder weapon."

"Yes and no. He was found near the dead woman, but I don't think she was killed where her body was found. There wasn't enough blood, and the victim was naked, and I couldn't find her clothes or pocketbook at the scene."

He frowned, "The crime scene investigators probably took them."

"I asked. They found nothing but a crowbar."

Dylan's frown deepened. "The old man will be better off with an insanity plea. Obviously he has a mental problem."

Leigh blinked. Mr. Foster had a character flaw that didn't exist in her hero, an ability to jump to the wrong conclusion. "Insanity plea?" She shouted, and then looked around to see if anyone had heard.

The courtroom had filled while they talked, and some heads turned toward her. Leigh averted her eyes from their startled gazes. She moved closer to Dylan and whispered, "He's not guilty. Give me a day or two and I'll prove it."

Suddenly voices erupted in the courtroom. Dylan turned to see what was causing the commotion. "Damn."

"What's the matter?"

"Scott Brady is the prosecuting DA. He's a hot shot on the fast track for the Governor's office."

Leigh turned and felt her eyes widen as her heart dropped to her belly. Striding down the aisle was the mysterious stranger from the other night. Silently she prayed he wouldn't recognize her. Just then their eyes locked, and she felt like a deer caught in the headlights.

Leigh's heart bounced around her chest like a ping pong ball as his magnetic gaze held her captive, until he looked away, turned, and sat down at the table. He'd recognized her, but did he know she'd written the scathing words about the assistant DA who hadn't bothered to visit the crime scene.

Leigh's stomach dropped lower with shame. What a way to repay his kindness. Should she beg his forgiveness? Would he retaliate? Was it a crime to throw up all over an Assistant DA.?

The judge, a sober-looking man nearing retirement, entered the courtroom. Dylan scooted up the aisle to sit next to the old man, preventing further arguments.

While the bailiff asked everyone to rise and opened the court session, she searched her brain for a way to convince Dylan to plead not guilty.

The judge looked over to the DA. "Present your case."

Scott Brady stood up and looked at the Judge and then back down at a report in his hand. "The accused was at the scene of the murder, and he had the murder weapon." He paused, looked up at the Judge, and then continued. "He refused to answer questions or give the police his name. Clearly he has no ties with the community, and the state requests he be held without bail."

"How do you plead?" The judge asked, including the old man and Dylan in a sweep of his gaze.

Leigh halted her planned interruption, when Dylan stated clearly. “Not guilty.” She leaned back against the bench, grateful Dylan had a change of mind, and wondered what had caused it.

Dylan put his hand on the old man’s shoulder. “Your Honor, I’ve just been introduced to my client, and while I haven’t had a chance to interview him, I’m convinced he doesn’t remember his name. I think a psychiatric exam for competency is required.”

The Judge looked over to Scott Brady. “Has the accused been tested?”

“Not that I’m aware of, Your Honor.”

The Judge shook his head back and forth. “Held without bail, and see that he gets tested.”

* * *

Leigh looked down at her wristwatch. Where had the day gone? It seemed minutes instead of hours ago that they were in court. The afternoon melted away as she and Dylan waited at the jail until they were allowed to interview the old man. Dylan had invited her along, and she was grateful for that because she intended to be there one way or the other. Dylan might look like her hero, but he still had to earn her trust.

This morning’s courtroom scene and the interview would be the subject of her next column. She debated whether to include her first meeting with the prosecuting attorney.

While the old man was happy to see her, the painful interview was a series of starts and stops. He didn’t know his name or what year it was. Every so often he would look at her and beg his Amy to forgive him and cry. It broke her heart.

When Dylan asked him how he’d got the deep gash across his hand, he kept talking about vengeance falling from the sky.

Leigh finally pieced together the old man’s words and solved the mystery. Dylan finally agreed with her conclusion that the old man’s hand was probably injured when the murderer threw the crowbar in the dumpster as he left.

After reading the police report, Dylan also agreed the old man could be innocent. Just as Leigh had pointed out, it didn’t list clothing or any personal effects of the victim. The lack of blood was credited to the below-freezing temperatures.

Dylan agreed the police had botched the job.

It was already dark outside as they left the police station, and she would be late for the weekly dinner with her friends if she didn’t get started right now. The punishment for arriving late was picking up the tab for everyone’s dinner. A little incentive for promptness, she and her friends had agreed to years ago.

“How about we go over everything at dinner?” Dylan took her arm, steering her back to his car.

Leigh warmed at the invitation, but death was the only excuse for missing a meeting. “I can’t. I’m having dinner with friends.” On the other hand this was her dream man come to life and she didn’t want her time with him to end. “Would you like to join us? We could talk about the case after dinner.”

A slow, sexy grin spread across his handsome face. “We’ll do something after dinner.”

A short time later, with Dylan in tow, Leigh entered the Buckhead Diner, made famous by news reporters when Atlanta hosted the Olympics. The crowded restaurant at first glance reminded one of a luxury dining car on a train, including waiters dressed as porters. Traditional diner booths---complete with coat hangers---of Mahogany wood and

frosted glass, lined the walls, while tables dressed in white linen filed the room. It was noisy enough to have a private conversation, but not too noisy to talk.

Leigh waived off the Hostess, and led Dylan down an isle of booths to a circular booth at the back of the restaurant where her friends were sitting.

She'd spent years boring them with descriptions of her perfect hero, and laughter bubbled up in her as she took in their surprised expressions when they saw Dylan.

Lesley recovered first and stood up from the booth, hugged her to him, lifting her off the floor and swinging her in a circle. He planted a wet kiss on her cheek before putting her down. "Great column, girl. I always knew you could write something better than that society crap."

"Was that a compliant or an insult, Professor?"

"Lesley, Carolyn, behave. I've brought a guest. At least let me introduce him," Leigh winked at Dylan. "The brute with mahogany hair is Lesley Furlong," Dylan extended his hand.

When they were finished shaking hands Leigh nodded across the table. "Carolyn Brewster is the sweetheart who was questioning the sincerity of his praise, and Elaine Stewart is the classic beauty at the back of the booth."

Lesley's sherry eyes sparkled with amusement as he looked at Leigh. "How come you brought a guest?"

Leigh averted her eyes. She loved and trusted her friends completely. Their weekly dinners were a time for each of them to hash over achievements or problems in their business or personal life. Outsiders were seldom included. But she couldn't resist showing them her hero come to life, and she suspected Lesley knew it.

She ignored his question. "Where is Kit?"

Elaine pointed across the room. "She just came in."

Kit's untamed mop of brown wavy hair bounced in rhythm with her perfect cone shaped breasts that tented a red silk blouse. Her hips swayed to the same unheard song, and to complete the picture she held a fur coat over one shoulder by a finger. Kit never walked into a room, she always made an entrance.

Leigh knew by now most of the men in the room had shifted their attention from eating or talking to watching the show Kit put on strutting across the room. Usually Leigh laughed at the show, but tonight it irritated her, as she watched Dylan's expression change as he watched.

As Kit neared their booth, a middle-aged man sitting at a table said to her, "I'd pay to watch you walk across a room."

Kit flashed him a smile. "Well this is your lucky night, honey, because you just got it for free." Everyone at both tables laughed as she passed her fur coat to the back of the booth. She looked at Dylan, "Who brought the Ken Doll, and why?"

Leigh relaxed and leaned back against the booth. She should have known Dylan wasn't Kit's type.

"Name's Dylan Foster," he said smiling. "Nice show, but you need more practice with the hip action."

Leigh sucked in her breath, waiting for Kit to cut Dylan to ribbons.

"Let's play nice Kids." Tim interrupted to get their food order. Tall, black and handsome, waiting to be discovered, he'd been their waiter for years, amusing them with

tales about the rich and famous. He could tell you, which celebrities were nice in person, and of course which ones were good tippers.

Tonight he was rushed and all business. As soon as Tim finished taking their orders, Leigh grabbed Kit's hand. "Kathryn Tamasi, this is Dylan Foster, the attorney who will represent the homeless man I wrote about in my column."

Kit's eyes grew wide. "Red Poppy's murderer?"

"I'm convinced he's innocent. Didn't you get that from my column?"

"Yes, but the police..."

"Didn't do a good job. I went back to the scene after I wrote my story..."

"Alone?" Carolyn shrieked. "What were you thinking? You've said yourself a heroin who does something like that is too dumb to live."

Leigh heated with embarrassment tinged with anger. These people were her friends and she shouldn't have to justify her actions to them.

Kit patted her hand. "Carolyn, investigative reporting isn't for the faint of heart. I'm proud of you, Leigh. You took a chance and got a great story. You make all your best decisions by listening to your instincts."

"Kit's right." Lesley's voice boomed across the table. "Still next time call one of us and we'll go along with you."

Carolyn shook her head in the negative, as Kit leaned in close and said, "You know I'm up for it."

"Actually, I could use some help," she paused and studied their faces for a reaction.

Elaine spoke first. "Help, how?"

"I'd like to know a little more about Tom Bailey, the man who found the body."

Carolyn pulled her Blackberry out of her pocket and pounded on the keys. "I'm on it." She glanced up and around the table, "Everyone but Dylan looked surprised. I'm dating a cop, and I'm sure he can get me all the information Leigh needs."

Elaine squared her shoulders, "What can I do?"

"I'm not sure, but, I believe she was killed somewhere else and the body was moved to the alley. My gut feeling is the murderer's familiar with the area and knew that a dumpster was there." Leigh turned to Elaine. "Any information you can get me about the businesses located in the buildings and how long the dumpster has been there would be a great help."

Conversation halted as Tim approached the table with plates of food. Leigh's gaze circled the table resting on each in turn. They were more than friends. They were her hand-picked family. And, like most siblings, they disagreed with each other.

As soon as the waiter left, Lesley holding a fork full of food high, looked over at her, "OK Leigh, fill us in on everything."

Leigh told about her trip to the crime scene and how she thought she was being watched, but added that by the time she got home, she'd convinced herself it had to be her imagination. A heated discussion between Lesley and Carolyn, regarding the merits of the murderer returning to the scene of the crime followed, reaching no conclusion. In between bites of food, Leigh and Dylan took turns telling them about their day.

"What I'm about to tell you," Leigh said looking at each of them individually, "must not be repeated---ever." Now I have their attention. "Remember in my first column, I mentioned throwing up on a stranger?" They all nodded. "Well, in court today, I found

out who the stranger is. Scott Brady, the Assistant DA, and he will be prosecuting the case.”

Carolyn’s mouth formed a little O, Elaine bit down on her bottom lip, Lesley shook his head back and forth.

Laughter erupted from Dylan. He laughed so hard that a piece of food got stuck in his throat, resulting in a coughing fit. Carolyn came to his aid, offering him some water.

Kit’s eyes grew wide with excitement. “The Scott Brady---Tall, dark, handsome, and ruthless with women, if you believe gossip.”

Elaine shook her head in agreement. “But, that doesn’t stop women from throwing themselves at him. I’ve heard a few stories firsthand.” Sadness played across her beautiful face.

Kit waved the statement away with a flick of her manicured finger. “If a woman’s hunting a sexy hunk, she’d better have the right equipment. Any woman who throws herself at a man should be prepared to hit the pavement hard.” She glanced over at Leigh. “He’s a tiger who eats little girls like you for lunch. Stay away from him. Now,” a sultry smile spread across her mouth, “if I ever get my hands on him---I’d tame him in a night.”

Dylan smirked. “And sell tickets to the event, I bet.”

Kit’s eyes shot darts at him.

Leigh touched Kit’s arm gaining her attention before she had a chance to castrate Dylan. “The identity of the victim is still unknown, but I think her tattoo may help.

“How?” Kit asked, her interest clearly written across her face.

“I’m sure it’s special.”

Lesley grinned. “Special how?”

Leigh looked across the table to him, “Get your mind out of the gutter. The victim’s tattoo is a copy of Georgia O’Keefe’s Red Poppy, and it’s a darn good copy.”

Kit wiggled her eyebrows. “You need a tattoo artist, and I know just the man. We’ll visit him tomorrow.”

Elaine leaned across the table. “I’ll ask clients if they know anyone with a similar tattoo or an artist talented enough to copy it.”

Dylan leaned back against his chair. “You’re a lucky woman. I don’t have the kind of friends who would drop everything and jump in to help me. How did you all meet?”

Carolyn answered. “We were roommates in college, and we’ve been friends ever since.

“Lucky dog,” Dylan turned to Lesley and arched an eye brow. “You roomed with these women?”

Lesley grinned wickedly until Carolyn poked him in the ribs. He yelped and then his facial expression changed, suddenly serious, “There was some confusion over my name. They thought I was a female. I was a poor boy from Dawsonville, Georgia in school on a scholarship and the girls took pity on me until I could get my money back and find another place to live.”

Leigh ignored the urge to comfort him, wondering if the sound bite he’d offered explaining a very emotional time in all these lives, indicated he was still embarrassed about his background. She looked at Dylan. “By the time he found a room we had all bonded. He became an older...”

Kit interrupted, “Interfering, bothersome...”

“Helpful, caring, loving, brother.” Elaine completed the sentence.

Carolyn changed the subject. “Can you win, Dylan? Can you get justice for the old man?”

For just an instant the mask fell, revealing a street fighter. “I don’t believe in justice, but I’ve never lost anyone to the system.”

Chapter Three

Kit entered Grecco’s Tattoo parlor followed by Leigh. “Cross your fingers.” It was the fifth place they’d visited since her hand-picked expert had started them down the yellow brick road. High-heeled boots, that made her legs look fantastic weren’t meant for this kind of walking, and already a blister was forming where they rubbed against her ankle. Leigh would never give up, but Kit was growing tired of the search. Aside from the forming blister, her stomach kept reminding her she’d only had black coffee for breakfast.

It was at times like this that the urge for a cigarette raised its ugly head. It had been over two years since she’d stop smoking—vowing at the time she’d stop only as long as she didn’t gain a pound. But, since she hadn’t gained an ounce, she had no excuse to light up.

So, why did second-hand smoke still torment and tease. She inhaled deeply, looking at the man sitting across the room from her with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. Most of his neck and part of his face were covered in tattoos of various designs. His fingers and wrists also sported them. She inhaled again, wondering what his boots, pants and jacket hid. What the hell are we doing in a place like this?

Kit nudged Leigh and lowered her voice, “If we judge this expert from his customers, I think we’re out of luck again.”

“Don’t give up so soon. Look at the pictures he has on his walls. Some of these designs are very detailed. Look at the shading on the dragon for instance.”

Kit glanced at the wall filled with unique designs, hoping Leigh was right. Because in spite of her pain and hunger, she would help Leigh as long as the search continued. Not just because she owed Leigh, not just because her life started to change dramatically as soon as they met, but because they were sisters of the heart. The only sister she had.

Kit looked down at Leigh's practical, low heeled-boots and groaned. In boots like that she could walk for the rest of the day.

Kit watched as Leigh approached the tattooed man sitting on the couch and tried her version of flirting. "Are you next? Or are you waiting for someone?"

He smiled up at her. "I'm not waiting for anyone." He answered in a voice so soft you had to lean forward to hear him.

It still surprised Kit how fast men lined up to help, protect, and pamper Leigh. I never leave the house without my mask firmly in place. But Leigh faced the world without one. And she led with the chin.

A young girl stepped out from behind a thick velvet curtain, interrupting Kit's thoughts. The girl's hair was long, stringy and needed a shampoo. Her face was pale.

A short, stubby, bald man followed behind her. He had to be the tattoo artist.

Leigh looked between him and the man still sitting. "Would you mind if we just asked a few questions before you two get started. I promise it'll only take a moment."

"Sure."

"I'm a reporter with the 'Atlanta News. My name's Leigh Blake and this is my friend Kathryn..."

"You wrote about the Red Poppy murder." He looked her up and down before extending his hand. Your story gave me chills. I'm Bill Mosley." He looked over to his client. "Johnny, I'll be right with you."

"Thanks, Bill." Leigh extended her hand to him.

Kit stopped a laugh from erupting at the look of hero worship on Bill's face as he looked at Leigh. She followed them at a distance into the back room. Would Leigh change now that she was a celebrity?

Leigh got right to the point and pulled a picture out of her purse. "This is a blowup of the picture used in the paper. I'm trying to find the artist who did it. I've been told it required a great deal of skill because of the necessary shading."

Bill took the picture over to his desk, picked up a magnifying glass and examined it. Finally he looked over to her. "It's a masterpiece, and the only person I can think of capable of creating these colors is Johnny Two Feathers."

Leigh's face lit up, "Where is his shop?"

"Chicago."

Leigh's smile slipped away and she looked dejected. "I guess that's the end of it."

Kit's stomach rolled with something more than hunger. Their search couldn't end here. "Look, Pal, can you make a call---see if your friend did it."

Leigh jumped in. "Maybe he's taught the technique to someone who works in Atlanta."

"I doubt it."

Kit motioned to the phone. "Make the call Bill. It might get your name in the paper."

He looked between her and Leigh, and slowly grabbed the phone as if he hadn't quite made up his mind. Finally he started pushing buttons.

One way or the other the search would end here, Kit thought. No matter how it turned out, they would go to lunch.

Johnny Two Feathers must have answered the phone, because Bill explained the purpose of his call and started talking in technical words that sounded like a different language, and she could only guess at the response at the other end of the phone.

Kit tapped her foot, impatient with how long Bill's conversation with Johnny Two Feathers was taking. Finally Bill looked up and motioned to Leigh, his head bobbing up and down. "Yes. That's the one." He put his hand over the receiver and said to Leigh. "It's his design. Do you want to talk to him?"

Kit's pulse spiked at his words, tempted to talk to the man herself.

Leigh grabbed the phone out of Bill's extended hand. "Hello, I'm Leigh Blake, and I'm looking for the artist who did this tattoo..."

Leigh's eyes widen and she gripped the phone as if it were a life line. "You've done it. Well this one was at the base of her spine, and..." Leigh nodded her head in agreement with whatever Johnny was saying. "Yes, yes I'll fax it to you right away, and thank you. Thank you."

Leigh handed the phone back to Bill. "You've been a great help. Thank you so much."

Caught up now in Leigh's excitement Bill handed her a sheet of paper, "Let me fax it for you." Bill motioned to the picture in her hand. "Make out a cover sheet with your name and numbers. I'll send it as soon as you're done."

Leigh completed the cover sheet, and watched as Bill sent it.

Leigh tucked the picture back in her briefcase as Bill followed them to the front door. Leigh smiled at him. "May I mention the help you've given me in my column?"

Bill blushed. "I'd like that."

Kit buttoned her coat up before she opened the door of the shop. "You owe me lunch and I know just the right place."

Leigh danced down the street. "I owe you much more than lunch. I'm so happy. Johnny's sure he did the tattoo but wants to see the picture of it. He sounded a little concerned about giving me a name, like he had to check something. At least now I know who did the victim's tattoo. Soon I'll know her name. What a scoop." Leigh linked arms with her. "I couldn't have gotten this far this fast without your help."

Kit enjoyed the praise, but she had a realistic idea of her own contribution. This was Leigh's show. Leigh's hunch motivated the search. Leigh lived by her hunches and instincts and seldom let the facts block her way. Like when Leigh became her silent partner. Three banks had turned her business venture down. Leigh made her decision based on Kit's ability. Thank God, the business succeeded.

Kit glanced at Leigh as they entered the restaurant. What motivated her this time?

Leigh's cell phone interrupted her thoughts and brought a lot of unwanted attention to them.

Leigh's face heated with either embarrassment or excitement.

"I have to take this call." She whispered, "Hello Dylan. What did you say?"

Leigh was beaming when she finished the call. "That was Dylan. The Assistant DA has called a press conference in half an hour from now. Dylan's sure they are going to drop the charges against the homeless old man. Kit, don't be angry with me, but I've got to be there."

“I know you do. Get going.” See watched Leigh push out the door and flag down a cab. Was Dylan her motivation?

Chapter Four

Leigh slid through the door of the room as quietly as possible since the press conference had already started.

Nancy Clarkston, the county medical examiner, stood at the podium. The petite brunette looked strained and tired. “Yes. I’m saying the victim was already dead hours before the lacerations to her back and head were made.”

Damn, someone should have notified me of the news conference, she thought wondering how much she had missed and who she would get it from later.

A man shouted from the audience. “Is that the reason for the lack of blood at the crime scene?”

“There is physical evidence the body was moved after death to the location where it was found.”

The room erupted with questions.

Lieutenant Williams stepped up beside the petite woman. “We’re withholding that information at this time.”

Individual voices shouted questions that vibrated against the high ceilings, and the noise level rose to a dull roar.

The lieutenant's face clouded with anger. "Keep it down," he shouted. "We can only answer one question at a time." When the noise leveled off, he pointed into the crowd. "Now, you in the third row. Yes, you."

"Did you find the victim's clothes at the crime scene?"

"A thorough search was made, and no clothing or personal effects of the victim were found."

Leigh noticed they were asking the questions she'd brought up in her column. She bowed her head to hide the smile of triumph that played at her mouth. The lieutenant pointed at a woman in a red suit in the first row.

"Have you identified the victim yet?"

Leigh held her breath waiting for the answer.

The lieutenant was sweating and getting angrier with each question about the initial investigation. Leigh couldn't work up any sympathy for him. He'd wronged the victim by writing her off as a prostitute, by deciding she wasn't worthy of his best effort.

A tingle of heat ran up her spine, pulling her gaze across the crowded room to where Scott Brady stood staring at her. Her heart jumped into her throat as his gaze pulled at her, holding her captive when she'd tried to look away. My Vampire, she thought, expecting any moment for him to bare his fangs and fly at her.

The spell was broken when Lieutenant Williams bellowed, "Brady get up here."

Scott Brady hurried to William's side, commanding everyone's attention. The crowd quieted as he approached the lieutenant.

"Thanks to the media, we have identified the man charged with murder as Thomas Ryan. He is a mental patient who wandered off about two years ago from a facility in Maryland. All charges against him have been dropped. We still haven't identified the victim. All we know at this point is that she was never arrested and doesn't have a Georgia driver's license. Her prints will be run through the FBI database."

Leigh eased her way back to the door. If she left now, she might catch Thomas and his family before he was released.

* * *

Leigh stepped out of the cab and pulled her coat collar up over her mouth and nose as protection against the sharp wind whipping through the corridors created by buildings in downtown Atlanta. She ran to the building where Dylan's law firm was located and entered the lobby. Interesting, she thought, glancing around as she crossed to the elevator, marble, marble everywhere. She pushed the button for the fifteenth floor.

She stepped off the elevator into an elegantly decorated and spacious reception area. An attractive young woman sitting behind a high reception desk smiled a warm greeting at her.

"May I help you?"

Dylan called from across the room, "It's about time you got here."

Leigh bit back a bitter reply. If Dylan had left a message about where he'd be, she would have arrived sooner. She put on her happiest smile. He may be flawed, but today he'd delivered, and that made him a hero in her eyes.

Dylan stood up from the couch. Thomas and a younger version of himself that had to be his son slowly rose.

Leigh unbuttoned her coat as she hurried over to them. "I've been running around for hours. I went to the press conference and then to the jail and now here. I wanted to say goodbye to Thomas."

"Amy," Thomas said returning her smile.

"Leigh," Dylan said, "This is Thomas Ryan, Jr."

Thomas Ryan, Jr. extended his hand, but stopped and hugged her close for a moment. When he released her and stepped back, she could see his eyes were glistening. "Mr. Foster has told me how you saved dad from becoming a victim of the system and then got the media to help identify him. Thank you. Thank you so much. I'd like to reimburse you for your help."

Her throat constricted, making it impossible to talk for a moment, as her eyes started to tear. "This happy ending is all the payment I need."

Dylan said, "I told you she wouldn't take money." He looked between her and Thomas Jr. "Sit down. I'll be back in a few minutes. I need to take care of something."

Leigh unbuttoned her coat, sat down next to Thomas Jr. on the couch, and pulled a recorder from her pocket. "There is something you can do for me and my readers. I need to write your father's story for them." He nodded in agreement, and she continued, "Who is Amy?"

"My mother." Thomas Jr. began, and by the time Dylan returned to tell them he'd arranged for a limo to take them to the airport, she had another great column.

Leigh leaned over and kissed the old man on his cheek. "Goodbye Thomas."

Thomas Jr. helped his father to his feet. "I promise we'll take better care of him." They started to walk to the elevator.

Leigh stood up, buttoning her coat ready to leave, when Dylan grabbed her arm "Stay. The partners want to meet you."

It had been a long day, and she wanted to write her column, but Dylan's sea green eyes pleaded. "It's important to me."

Could any woman turn him down, Leigh wondered. They entered a private elevator located in a hallway just off the reception area and rode it to an upper floor. As they stepped from the elevator, Dylan reached for her hand. She tried to remember when she'd last applied hand lotion and wondered if her hands were as rough as sandpaper.

They walked down a long dimly lit corridor. She noted the distance between the closed doors that must be offices. The quiet was overbearing, until they crossed a large open room. She glanced at the room that had to be the firm's library. Floor-to-ceiling rows of walnut bookcases traversed the room. Long tables with lamps at intervals were situated in an open area a little back from the entrance. Men and women dressed in somber business suits were busy reading and making notes. Some leaned in to each other and spoke in hushed tones.

"We have the largest law library in the state." Dylan said when he noticed her interest in the room.

She'd bet her last dollar only members of the firm would be allowed to use it.

Finally they reached a set of richly carved mahogany doors. She straightened her shoulders preparing to enter the hallowed hall usually reserved for the very rich or powerful. Had the Witch of the West had anything to do with Dylan being sent to help Thomas? Usually any interference by her Grandmother angered her, but this was one

time, if her Grandmother Meriwether, had interfered, she'd let it pass. Dylan swung the door open, and they stepped inside.

Sunlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows that made up one wall blinded her momentarily as she entered the board room. Recovered, she looked around the room with mahogany paneled walls decorated with elaborately framed paintings. A huge, highly polished cherry table and chairs were the only furniture and filled the room.

Sitting around the far end of the table were four men and a woman, the partners of the firm.

A man a few years younger than God pushed himself up to a standing position. "Good afternoon, Miss Blake, Dylan."

His watery eyes still reflected intelligence and challenge. "As the most senior partner of our firm, let me express our admiration for your reporting of this interesting story. I'm Henry Webster, and the younger man on my right is Harold Shaw."

The younger man on his right had to be at least seventy with a wicked twinkle to his eye. Just the kind of man the Witch of the East would date. Was it her Grandmother Blake who had them come to Thomas's aid?

"It's a pleasure, Miss Blake. I read your society column everyday. I especially like it when you write about past events of old Atlanta. Your column on the Pink Pig reminded me of Christmases with my children."

Leigh felt her face heat under his praise. It was cut short by a cough from the man sitting next to him. Webster frowned at him and said, "This is Jonathan Wells."

Wells, a man in his early fifties wasn't quite handsome, but he had a presence that women would find attractive.

"It's a pleasure to meet you at last."

Boldly his eyes swept over her, measuring her, and confirming he was aware of just how attractive women found him. Sorry, not this time, hot shot. She averted her gaze to the woman standing next to him.

She was tall, slim, polished, and wearing a designer suit that made Leigh wish she'd dressed in something other than jeans this morning. The woman wasn't pretty or beautiful, but clever use of makeup made her attractive. Like most women, her age was harder to pinpoint. She could be in her late thirties or mid to late forties. Leigh was certain of one point---to be a partner of this firm at any age, a woman had to be one tough cookie.

"I'm Mary Bauer," she said, not waiting for Wells to introduce her. Her gaze switched to Dylan. "We're very pleased with the quick ending you and Dylan brought to this matter."

Was that a royal we? Leigh suddenly felt like a peasant, God knows she was dressed like one, being thanked by her betters. Was the queen bee sleeping with Dylan? Was Dylan sleeping his way to the top?

It was none of her business if he decided to take the short route. It's time to bring this meeting to an end, Leigh decided, suddenly tired and deflated.

Leigh looked a moment at each partner. "I want to thank all of you for your support, and especially for sending Mr. Foster to Mr. Ryan's aid." She started buttoning her coat. "It was very thoughtful of all of you to take out time from your busy schedules to meet with me like this."

The senior partner remained seated as he said, "It was our pleasure."

Leigh turned and started for the door. Both witches would have been proud of her exit. Dylan reached the door first and held it open.

As soon as it closed behind them, he grabbed her by the waist, lifted her off her feet, and swung her around. “Now we celebrate.”

* * *

Leigh and Dylan stood in front of her apartment door. Earlier, she’d turned down his invitation explaining that she was tired, still had to write tomorrow’s column, and wasn’t dressed for dinner anywhere.

But he countered that argument with a plea of his own. He deserved to celebrate his victory over a worthy opponent with the woman who had helped him get it. Leigh caved.

Dylan amused her with stories of jury selection over dinner at a small quaint in-town restaurant. Her hero didn’t believe in justice or the system.

“It’s not a team sport, Leigh. At the end of a day, I’m the only one standing between my client and jail. I’ve played football—now that’s a team sport—with lots of back-up, but in a courtroom, I’m a gladiator, and it’s me against all of them.

His analogy shocked her. “You don’t think the system works for the innocent?”

“Innocent or guilty, you better have a damn good attorney, or you’re not going home.”

The street fighter disappeared, as a smile spread across his mouth, and those incredible green eyes focused on her, making her pulse race. “I checked you out. Raised by your Grandmothers, both members of the highest circles in Atlanta; private schools, published by the age of ten, currently writing a society column.”

Skipping over the death of her parents won him points. “Would I make a good witness?” she asked playfully.

“Hell no. But you’re gonna make someone a great wife. Now that this story’s ended, what’s next?”

Should she tell him about the new direction of her story? “The story isn’t finished until we have the murderer.”

“That’s a job for the police.”

“They haven’t done a very good job so far.”

“Leigh, there’s a murderer out there, and he knows who you are. Drop it. Why put yourself in danger?”

“I intend to see that the killer is caught. Do you want to help?”

“You remind me of a terrier I had as a child. Once the dog bit down on something, he wouldn’t let go.”

She wasn’t sure if he’d complimented or insulted her, and it didn’t matter. Should she try to explain her feelings to him? How could she when she didn’t understand them herself. She only knew that when she saw the victim, a feeling of helplessness buried deep in her core suddenly surfaced, and she had to deal with it now or she’d have to live with it for the rest of her life. And she couldn’t face a lifetime of feeling helpless.

Searching for the victim’s identity and her murderer empowered her, lessened the feelings of helplessness. If she could bring the murderer to justice, she might banish these feelings forever.

Dylan’s reaction disturbed her. He tried to reason with her, and then he tried to scare her. Why did he insist she leave the investigation to the police? Leigh wondered as she

jiggled the key in her lock of her apartment door until she felt the tumblers roll. She opened the door slightly and turned to Dylan. “I had a good time tonight. I...”

Leigh felt heat rise and spread across her face at the way his deep green eyes lingered on her lips. Was she dreaming or was he about to kiss her?

Dylan’s hand softly touched her cheek as he bent his head and touched his lips to hers. They were warm and so very soft. He deepened the kiss; she leaned into him, waiting.

Waiting for the explosion of feelings only a lover’s kiss would inspire. She felt nothing but the gentle pressure of his warm lips. No heat, no flames, not even a spark. Leigh finally pulled back and away. “Good night, Dylan,” she said and slipped through the door closing it behind her. She sighed as disappointment swept her. Dylan was her dream man come to life. He kissed nicely, like other men she’d kissed in the past. Maybe sparks only happened in fiction.

Red Poppy is now available on Amazon in its entirety.