

OCTOBER 1, 2006

There's nothing which can make a detective begin to doubt his own abilities more than the feeling he'd walked into a trap because he wasn't alert enough to notice. Every nerve in Jake's body had told him he was being watched before he'd stepped through the door of St. Cecilia's Church. Instead of listening to his gut, he'd chalked it all up to those old childhood feelings of being watched by the statues on the church's façade. Before Doug Sylvester had shot him, he'd told Jake it wasn't a set-up, but that doesn't mean anything to Jake. He's positive Detective Lewis is dead and he'd almost lost his own life because he made a huge mistake.

For the first week after leaving the hospital, Jake could barely move without causing pain in his shoulder and chest and even the slightest exertion wore him out. Once physical therapy had started, all of that quickly subsided. Sure, he still had some pain, especially after the therapy sessions, but not like he'd expected. Usually all it took to alleviate the pain was a hot shower and a gentle massage from Clarissa's soft hands. On the rare occasions those didn't help, all he'd had to do was take a couple of over the counter pain relievers.

Jake had some other injuries in his life including a couple of broken bones, none of which were as painful as these wounds, but the pain had lasted longer. Because of that, it had surprised him when he'd stopped taking the prescription pain medication after only the first week of therapy. With the pain he'd been having in the hospital and that first week at home, he'd thought the pain killers, as much as he hated taking them, were going to be a necessary evil at least a few weeks longer.

The therapists and his doctor were surprised at his speedy recovery after the near fatal gunshot wounds. In the past, Jake would've never given it a second thought because he'd always recovered quickly whether it was a broken bone, a concussion, or his previous gunshot wound to his knee. However, he doesn't think either "quick" or "fast" even begin to describe how rapidly he'd recovered this time. The doctors hadn't expected him to live through the night and couldn't have even guessed he'd walk out of the hospital only three weeks later. No, Jake thought, there was more to that recovery . . . something which couldn't be explained naturally.

The physical wounds have healed. He'll always carry the scars, but otherwise no one would ever know he'd been shot. On Friday, the doctor had given him the green light to go back to work. When he walks back through the station doors tomorrow morning, Detective Jake Stalb will once again be back on familiar ground. Life will once again be normal.

Or will it?

"Jake? Are you ok?"

He pulls himself out of the zone he reserves for deep thought. "Sure. Why?"

Clarissa looks concerned. "You've been staring at the television and have barely moved. The only time you can't focus on a Steeler game is if something is bothering you."

"Just thinking."

"About going to work tomorrow?"

Jake nods. "Yeah." He's still staring at the television.

Clarissa gets the feeling that instead of being happy to get back to work, he's more than a little worried. She gets up from the couch, sits down on the arm of his recliner, and wraps her arm around his shoulders. "I know something is bothering you. What?"

"I don't know if I'm ready."

"The doctor said you are."

"I know . . . but," he shrugs, "I don't think I can go back there as if none of this happened. I don't trust myself and I doubt anyone else does."

"That's not true," she assures him. "Cheryl, Steve, Jim, Rachel . . . they all told you they still trust you. They told you there was no way you could've known any of that was going to happen."

Jake shakes his head. He'd always trusted the opinions of his partner and most of his co-workers, yet among other things he's not sure about, something is causing him to doubt their sincerity. He sets aside that argument by telling her, "It doesn't matter. I don't trust myself. I can't go back to work if I'm going to doubt my own decisions."

"But you'll never know if you're going to make the right decisions in any situation, especially critical ones, if you don't have to make them at all. You had the same doubts about your abilities after getting shot in that drug

raid while you were still a patrolman. The same goes for when you were first put on a case as the senior detective. Why is this any different?"

He sits there for a few minutes thinking about what she'd said. The main difference is that at the church, he'd ignored his gut. He knows he should've been more cautious. However, it might also be true that just because he'd made that mistake, it doesn't mean he'll make the same mistake again. The only way to know for sure is to go back to work. Looking up at Clarissa with a smile on his face, he asks her, "Are you always right?"

"Just most of the time," she teases, then leans down to kiss him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jake sees a white streak heading straight toward him. He stiffens up to brace for the impact. At the last possible moment, Bob veers to the right and pounces on a stuffed mouse under the coffee table.

Clarissa laughs. "You thought he was going to get you, didn't you?"

"If it wasn't for that mouse, I'd have a lapful of whirling dervish. Crazy cat." Jake laughs along with her.

As if to prove the point about his instincts and reaction times still being finely tuned, she tells him, "See. You knew Bob was coming before I did and you automatically responded to the attack."

"That wasn't a life or death situation," he says, attempting to make it sound like a joke.

"No," she agrees, "but it could've been painful."

As suddenly as the cat had changed directions, Jake once again becomes serious. He turns off the television to avoid distractions, then looks back at Clarissa. "What about you? How do you feel about me going back to work?"

"Are you looking for a reason for not going back?" She thinks that sounded a little mean, so quickly adds, "You're a great detective. Once you get a case to work, you'll see that's true."

"I just need to know how you feel about my job now that I almost died."

"I want you to do what's right for you. I'll support whatever decision you make."

"Aren't you worried this will happen again? I mean . . . You know next time I could . . ." He doesn't even want to say the word again. "It could all end differently. Sometimes people never walk out of the hospital."

"Yes, I'm going to worry, but I've always worried about you while you're at work and I always will. That's part of being a cop's wife. But no one knows when they're going to die or how it'll happen."

In the twenty years he's been on the force, Jake knows he's seen the majority of the ways people can die. "Sure. It doesn't have to be from being shot. It can be a car wreck, choking on something, or a sudden and unexpected heart attack like with my dad. Why add another risk to the list? I just . . . I don't want Little One growing up without me."

Clarissa looks at him with a confused look on her face. "Little One?"

"The baby."

She smiles at his nickname for the baby as she puts her hand over her stomach. "There are so many ways this baby could be forced to grow up without either you or me. I don't consider your job an added risk because, honestly, you're more careful at work than you are when you're driving."

Jake gives her one of his pretending to be mad looks.

"Stop!" She giggles as she playfully slaps his cheek. "I'm being serious."

"I know you are."

"You told me a long time ago," she reminds him, "you became a police officer because you wanted to protect the children. Now you have the added incentive of making this city safer for our child. I know most of the people on the force are trying their hardest to protect us, but that doesn't change the fact I've always felt safer knowing you were a part of the team."

"Are you saying you wouldn't feel safe if I changed careers?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying, but I don't want you to make your decision based on what I just said."

"If I did," Jake says with a grin, "I'd never be able to retire."

She pokes him the ribs. "Brat!"

Jake stands and stretches. "Come on," he says as he takes her hand.

"Where are we going?"

"Well . . . if this detective is going to be alert on his first day back at work, he needs to get some sleep."

OCTOBER 2, 2006

“Rissa,” Jake yells from the top of the stairs, “where’s my badge?”

That question lets her know he’s decided to go back to work. She walks out of the kitchen and looks up the stairs. “I put it in the lock box with your pistol.” When Jake goes back into the bedroom, she goes back and pours a cup of coffee for him.

Walking into the kitchen and taking the offered coffee, Jake asks, “Why did you put it in there?”

Clarissa shrugs. “I didn’t know . . . when you’d need it again.”

Jake notices the slight hesitation. She was going to say if he’d need it again. “Thanks.”

“What do you want for breakfast?”

“I’ll get something later. I want to get to the office and find out what’s in the works.”

Last night Clarissa thought he’d almost convinced himself he should hand in his badge and resign. This morning, Jake seems to be as excited as a little boy on the first day of school. “A little eager?”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “I just want to go before I have time to think about it and change my mind.”

“You’ll do fine,” Clarissa assures him. “Go get ‘em Tiger.”

“Maybe.” He hugs her and gives her a kiss. “Love you.”

“Love you.” As Jake walks toward the door, she shouts, “Good luck.”

Jake turns as he opens the door. “There’s no such thing as luck.”

Before she can ask him when he’d stopped believing in luck, the door closes and he’s gone. Something about him has changed since the shooting; something she can’t quite pinpoint. Jake is still the same loving, gentle, and considerate man she’d fallen in love with twenty years ago. However, little things he says since the shooting, like about there being no luck, catch her off guard. It’s as if he’s been on some kind of soul searching journey and many of his personal, long-held beliefs are changing. She thinks those changes are in some way spiritual, but he hasn’t talked about it yet.

And she knows she can’t rush him by asking him a lot of questions. Everyone learns from their experiences, especially ones like this. It takes time to process the new information, so she’s going to give him that time. Once he knows, in his own heart and mind, what to do with that information, she knows he’ll share those things with her.

Another reason Jake wanted to leave early was to avoid the stares and whispered comments about him having lost his edge he’s expecting from his co-workers. “No one wants to work with a cop who doesn’t even know when he’s walking into an ambush,” Jake mumbles.

By the time he pulls into the staff parking lot behind the station, he has himself convinced he’ll just turn around and go home. Convinced, that is, until he sees the banner saying “Welcome back Detective Stalb” over the door. There’s another sign taped to the door. “The ace returns! Welcome back!” There are at least three dozen signatures scrawled around the message. Jake shakes his head in disbelief. It seems the only person with any doubts is the man of the hour.

The next surprise comes when he opens the door to the office he shares with Detective McCoy. On the desk is a donut box, definitely out of place in this office. Neither he nor Cheryl eat the things. He leaves the box unopened, sits down in his chair, and turns on the computer.

Before the computer can power up, Cheryl, Officers Kennedy and Sanchez, and Lieutenant Adams walk through the door. All of them shout welcome back at the same time. Jake stands up and they all exchange hugs and handshakes.

Cheryl is the first to mention the box on the desk. “Hey partner, let’s have some breakfast before getting down to some serious work.”

Trying his best to act sick, Jake grabs his stomach and moans. “Donuts?”

“Come on,” Officer Kennedy encourages, “one donut won’t kill you.”

Jake breaks the stereotype because he’s one police officer who hates donuts. While in high school, his buddy Ernie had teased him about being a health food nut. The tall, lanky future detective had surprised Ernie by eating a whole box of donuts. That little stunt had impressed his best friend, but he’d been sick for the next two days and he hasn’t touched a donut since that day.

Now, only at the urging of his friends, he opens the box. Instead of donuts, it’s filled with his favorite

granola bars. He laughs as he takes one. "You got me."

The phone on the desk rings and the L.T. answers. The others go quiet so Steve can take the call. When he hangs up, he looks at the group. "I hate to break up the party, but the rookie has his first case," he says with a wink. He looks at Jake. "Your vic is waiting for you in the maintenance shed over at Armstrong Prep."

They all told Jake at one time or another over the past several weeks they'd rather work with him than anyone else, but he'd voiced his concerns about being able to do his job. Now they all look at him as he takes a deep breath and slowly lets it out, wondering if he's going to tell them he's not ready for this.

Jake shrugs. "What are we waiting for?"

As Jake walks past him, Steve stops him long enough to tell him, "You'll be fine."

Jake isn't as sure as his L.T. He nods in agreement anyway, then goes to meet Cheryl at the car.

Pushing his doubts to the back of his mind and getting down to business, Jake walks up to the officer standing beside the door of the shed. "What do we have?"

"Welcome back sir," the officer says before giving his report. "Male victim with a knife wound to the throat. No witnesses that we've been able to locate. Also, it was an anonymous tip. When we arrived," he points to his partner who's stringing the crime scene tape, "no one knew why we were here . . . or so they say."

"How long have you been here?"

The officer looks at his watch. "Fifteen minutes. As soon as we verified the tip, we called you."

"Talk to these people and find out if anyone knows more. Be thorough, but do it as quick as possible. These kids," Jake nods toward the rapidly growing group of students, "don't need to be here if they can't tell us anything."

"Yes sir."

"Then call dispatch. Find out where the call came from so we can track down the caller."

"Yes sir."

Jake looks at Cheryl. "Ready?"

She sees and is concerned about the look of uncertainty on his face and wonders if he's really ready. "I was about to ask you the same question."

Covering the basics with the patrolman had been the easy part. There's really no chance of making a huge mistake doing that, he thinks. He's still not sure if he's ready to work a case. The only way to know for sure is to get started. His only response to Cheryl is to walk into the building.

Upon seeing the victim lying on the floor of the shed, Jake freezes. He suddenly feels too hot and as if he can't breathe. It might just be some kind of anxiety attack, he thinks . . . one he can get over quickly by just getting started. On the other hand, maybe he can't. He stands there trying to decide whether he should stay or leave.

Once inside, Cheryl shakes her head. "They call this a shed? It's as big as my house."

She has always known exactly what to say to relieve the tension and it's what Jake needed now. He relaxes enough to look over the scene. Seeing Officer Kennedy taking pictures of the victim, Jake asks him, "Jim, did you already get the crime scene?"

"While you two were still messing around outside," he answers as he focuses the camera.

Jake walks over beside Jim and studies the victim. He takes a few minutes to view the body from various angles. He's investigated enough crime scenes to know what looks natural and logical. This man didn't just fall where he was killed. "You'd have to be a brand new recruit to think this is anything other than a staged crime scene."

Cheryl stops her initial survey of the shed and walks up beside Jake. "The killer took time to pose the body."

The man looks as if he should be stretched out on his couch at home. The killer had taken the time to lay him flat on his back, place his hands behind his head, and cross his ankles.

"And he wasn't killed here," Jim adds his opinion. "There's not enough blood." He snaps another picture. "Finished. All yours."

"See if you can find anything which could've been used to wrap the body," Jake tells Cheryl as he puts down the evidence collection kit and kneels down beside the body. "Jim, look around outside and see if you can find any blood trail or drag marks leading to the original crime scene or to where a vehicle might have been stopped long enough to dump the body."

Jake collects the blood and hair samples from the victim before checking more closely for anything the killer may have left behind. He finds a grey hair and a small piece of what looks like leather not matching anything else on the victim. The man's wallet provides an ID. "Benjamin Kerr," he says aloud.

Cheryl finishes marking her sample before asking, "What?"

Jake stands and shows her the driver's license. "Benjamin Kerr. It doesn't seem like anything is missing from the wallet. There are still credit cards and a large amount of cash inside." He points to the swab in Cheryl's hand. "What's that?"

"Some kind of fluid." She shrugs. "With all the maintenance gear and machines, it could be anything."

"But?"

"Except for this and very little blood, the floors look clean enough to eat off of."

Because the building is well organized and cleaned, Jake agrees. "Exactly. Whatever that is doesn't belong here."

Jake knows most detectives will never draw a conclusion before all of the evidence has been gathered and processed, but his experience is telling him this was a set up. His gut is telling him the vic was killed in this building even though there should be more blood. "Get back to the basics," he mumbles to himself, "because your gut feelings failed you in August."

He calls for the M.E.'s van, then helps Cheryl finish processing the shed. Except for fingerprints, some or none of which could be the killer's, they find nothing out of the ordinary. The same thing applies to the area around the shed. Jim had expanded the crime scene, yet neither he nor the other patrolmen have found anything indicating someone carried or dragged the victim to the shed.

Jake takes time to walk the area himself. He knows he can trust the reports given to him by most of the patrolmen, especially Jim; however, he's always been the kind of detective to also look for himself. It's not a trust issue; it's only his way of being thorough.

Returning to the front of the shed, he tells Cheryl and Jim, "It seems there's no way Mr. Kerr was killed in the shed. There's not enough blood. Yet there's no sign of the body being moved here." He stands there and scans the driveway and lawns in view while thinking. "Even if the killer drove up to the door or even inside before removing the body from a car, there should be some evidence."

"But if the body was wrapped . . ." Jim begins, but stops as Jake shakes his head. "What do you mean? No?"

"We didn't find anything, inside the shed or out here, which was used to move the body. There are plenty of tarps and drop cloths in there," he nods toward the open door, "none of which were used as a body wrap. With a wound like that . . . No matter how careful the killer was, blood would transfer to the wrapping. Then, after unwrapping the body, that blood would spatter somewhere. I don't see that."

"He could've been dead for some time before he was moved," Cheryl suggests.

"We'll let Helen tell us the time of death. Now we need to find out who Mr. Kerr is and why he may have been killed or brought here. I want to . . ."

"Sir," a patrolman interrupts. "Sorry sir."

"That's ok. Go ahead."

"The phone call came from a cell phone account belonging to the victim." He gives Jake the name of the service provider and the account information.

Not having found a cell phone, Jake can only assume that whoever made the call took it with them. "Thanks Officer Carter. Help Officer Kennedy seal off the shed. Jim, after you lock up, take those samples to the lab." He turns to Cheryl. "Let's go talk to whoever is in charge around this place."

"The Headmaster," Cheryl tells him as they start walking toward the administration building. "Here at Casey Armstrong Preparatory Academy," she says the name of the school as if she's impressed by the school's prestige, "the man in charge is called the Headmaster."

"Impressive title," Jake says as he rolls his eyes. He's not impressed.

Before they go into the building, Jake calls the cell phone service, leaves his name and number, and receives the man's assurance he'll notify the "detective in charge" if anyone makes any further calls from Kerr's cell phone.

The Headmaster is actually Headmistress Bonnie Ross. After the secretary ushers them into the large, ornate office and introduces them, Ross offers, "Please, have a seat. Can Miss Saunders bring you something? Coffee?"

Tea?"

Both Jake and Cheryl decline the offer and Miss Saunders leaves the office, closing the door behind her.

"Mrs. Ross," Jake begins.

She insists, "Bonnie, please."

Jake doesn't correct himself and gets on with his question. "Who has the keys to the maintenance shed?"

"Only Mr. Keckly; however, once he unlocks the shed in the morning, it's left unlocked until he leaves."

"Then anyone can walk in and out at any time?"

"There are twelve maintenance crew members, including Mr. Keckly, who work out of the shed."

"That many people and only one key?"

Bonnie shrugs. "It's the way we've always done things."

Cheryl asks, "What do you do if Mr. Keckly calls off sick?"

"One of the other crew members goes to get the key."

While writing down the information, Cheryl asks, "Who unlocked the shed this morning?"

"Mr. Keckly."

"We'll need to talk to him," Jake says. "Where can we find him?"

"He's on his way to New York." She sees the suspicious look on the faces of the two detectives. "Let me assure you, Mr. Keckly had nothing to do with this . . . situation. He called me last night and informed me he was leaving this morning because of a family emergency. We arranged to meet at the shed at six o'clock so he could give me the key to pass along to Mr. Sheely. I was there when he went into the shed to leave the schedule for the others. After giving me the key, he left for the airport in a taxi. We were the only two people in the shed."

While the story might be true, to Jake it sounds a little too convenient. "We'll still need to talk to him. Did he leave a number where he can be reached?"

Mrs. Ross finds the card on her Rolodex and reads the cell phone number.

"We also need his full name and home address."

She hesitates, as if reluctant, and then gives him the information.

"Do you know Benjamin Kerr?"

Bonnie looks shocked. "Ben is the man who was murdered? He's an alumnus of the academy and one of our biggest contributors."

"Does he have children in school here?"

"No." Bonnie shakes her head.

Even though there is still the possibility Mr. Kerr had been killed somewhere else, he asks, "Why would Mr. Kerr be on campus?"

"He wouldn't have any reason to be here so early. We have a board meeting this evening and it's open to all parents and alumni. I would've expected him at the meeting, but not before then."

"I think that's all for now," Jake says as he stands and Cheryl does the same.

"Detectives, I'd like to request that all of this stay out of the media. Please be discreet."

"Detective McCoy and I never talk to the media about active cases," Jake assures her. "We might have more questions later."

Bonnie shakes their hands. "Have a good day detectives."

As they walk to their car, Jake asks Cheryl, "Can you believe that?"

"There's a lot about this case I'm thinking about. Believe what?"

"The Headmistress," he uses the title sarcastically. "No sign of fear a killer was on the campus, no quaver in her voice when talking about a victim she knows, and sounding more worried about keeping the story out of the papers than protecting the students."

"Some people deal with these things in private," she offers.

"Maybe."

"Do you consider her a suspect?"

"Do you?"

Cheryl nods. "Right now everyone is a suspect."

As Jake starts the car, he nods at Cheryl's evaluation. "Unless we can pinpoint the killer."

Seeming to be pulled out of nowhere, Cheryl asks, "What do you have against the school?"

“What?”

“The main thing is the way you seem to think Mrs. Ross’ title is a little too much.”

“I know it’s unfair to judge everyone the same,” he admits. “I grew up with this though.”

“You’re a prep boy?”

“No,” Jake quickly answers. “Public school. My parents couldn’t even afford the tuition at the Catholic high school.” He thinks he should probably drop the subject, but continues. “A lot of the parents of the prep kids and the staff of the school were always looking down their noses at us. Go ahead, just tell me to get over it.”

Cheryl doesn’t say anything more about it. She knows why he’d feel the way he does because she had attended a private high school. Even though she and her friends hung out with kids from the public high school, many of the other kids followed the lead of their parents and thought they were better than other people.

To save time, Jake sends Cheryl to get and review the lab results as he goes to the Medical Examiner’s office for the autopsy report.

Jake knows he can walk right in, but instead knocks on Helen’s door.

An angry voice is muffled by the door. “What?”

Speaking in a higher tone than usual and adding a quaver to his voice, Jake asks, “Is this Doctor Dupree’s office?”

“Yes, it is!” She hasn’t identified the voice and she’s still angry. “If it’s important, come in; if it isn’t, go away.”

Jake walks into the office.

Helen doesn’t even look up from her paperwork. What comes off as rudeness to some people is her way of letting all of those in law enforcement know this is her domain and she can’t be bullied or bossed around. “What?”

Back in his normal voice, Jake says, “Hi.”

She finally looks up. “Big J!” She knocks files off her desk as she gets up and quickly walks around the desk. She gives him a big hug. “Welcome back!” She steps back to look at him. “You look good. How are you?”

“So far, so good. It’s good to be back.” No doubts, he thinks, it is good. “Do you have anything for me?”

“All business as usual.” She laughs, then picks up the papers from the floor and shakes them at him. “These are yours Detective,” she scolds, “and would’ve been organized if you wouldn’t have surprised me like that.”

They both laugh.

In the autopsy room, she uncovers the body. “To most people, it would seem Mr. Kerr died when the arteries and veins in his neck were severed. One quick motion with enough force behind it and the victim would be dead within minutes.”

“Then I must be in that group of people.”

“For now, but you haven’t reviewed all your evidence yet.” She shuffles through the paperwork and lays the crime scene photos on the instrument table. “What’s missing at your scene and what’s your theory?”

Feeling like a school boy taking an oral exam, he answers, “The shed is too clean. We sprayed that place down with luminol and there’s no sign the blood was cleaned up. What we saw was all that was ever there. Even though we didn’t find any evidence to support it, I say Kerr was killed somewhere else and dumped at the shed.”

The tone in his voice lets her know he has another theory in mind, one he believes is a better fit, yet he’s worried she’ll laugh at the idea. “Come on Jake,” she urges, “trust your gut. What’s it telling you?”

Doubt creeps back into his mind because his gut has been telling him all along, even before Helen’s hints, something different than what the evidence shows. “Call me crazy, but I think its possible Kerr died right where we found him.”

“Give the boy a gold star,” Helen shouts with a laugh. More seriously, she tells him, “Never stop trusting your gut. Of all the detectives around this place, yours is the one I’d listen to every time.”

“Are you saying he did?”

“The lack of any signs of a struggle and very little blood at the scene are deceiving. Your vic was dead, or almost dead, before his throat was cut and wasn’t dead more than an hour or two when you got there.”

The time line fits. Keckly and Ross were at the shed around six, the patrolmen arrived at seven-thirty. “Are you sure about the time?”

Helen gives him a slight look of mock anger. “Since when did you start questioning my findings?”

"I completely trust your judgment. It's just that I know you also usually tell me it's possible to add or subtract time from your estimate. I need the full range of time to verify an alibi."

"Three hours max. Happy now?"

He's glad to know, by the tone in her voice, that she hadn't taken his question as a personal attack. He'd never questioned anything Helen has ever told him about her findings and, he thinks, she realizes he probably never will. "Yes," he answers with a grin. If Kerr was killed after Keckly left, the killer worked fast. "So what's the cause of death?"

"An overdose of epinephrine."

Jake goes through some of the possible scenarios in his head. "So Kerr took a few too many cold tablets by mistake or to commit suicide, then someone else slit his throat and posed him to make it look like a murder. A little far-fetched."

Helen rolls her eyes. "That would be ephedrine." She teases him by adding, "And I thought you knew everything. Epinephrine is used . . ."

He knows her remark is all in fun. Catching his mistaking the name of the two medicines, he finishes for her, "For treatment of allergic reactions so as to prevent anaphylactic shock and/or death."

She whistles. "Impressive. Your theory may sound far-fetched to some people, yet it is a possibility. Worse, I think you have a murderer out there who knew injecting a healthy person with epinephrine could be fatal. Even someone having a severe allergic reaction would've died from the amount I found in his bloodstream."

"Anything else?"

"Just these light scratches across his abdomen. I'd say they were caused by a knife, most likely the same knife used on his throat. Again, post mortem."

Jake shakes his head. He'd seen people killed in many ways. He'd also processed scenes the murderers have tried to clean up in the attempt to cover their crime. What he'd never faced was a killer who mutilated and posed the victim after they were dead. "Thanks Helen." She hands him the paperwork and he leaves, deep in thought.

Cheryl isn't in the office when Jake gets there. He calls Mrs. Ross to get the name of the cab company Larry Keckly had used and ask if he'd mentioned which airline he was flying. As he dials the number for Fast Track Cabs, he mentally kicks himself for forgetting to ask Bonnie for that information while they were at the school.

The cabbie informs Jake he left the school at twenty minutes after six and drove straight to the airport. He didn't wait around to see if his fare went into the airport. He then mumbles something about not getting paid if the wheels aren't turning.

Jake's next call is to Keckly's cell phone. No one answers, so Jake leaves his name and number. "Not like he'll call back if he killed Kerr," he tells himself.

He'd hoped he wouldn't have to call every airline in order to verify the flight information, but Keckly hadn't told Ross. He sits there listening to a bad musical rendition of "Bad Moon Rising" for what seems the hundredth time.

At the same time the woman at the ticket counter comes back on the line, Cheryl walks through the door. Although she looks like she has some interesting results, he doesn't want to be put on hold again. He holds up one finger to Cheryl. The woman on the phone verifies that Mr. Keckly picked up his boarding passes. She also tells him the number of tickets sold for the flight and that every passenger was on board. He thanks her and hangs up.

"Did he make it to New York?"

Jake shrugs. "From what I could track, Mr. Keckly went straight from the school to the airport and boarded the plane. There wasn't enough time for him to come back after getting out of the cab, kill our vic, and make it back to the airport without missing his flight."

"Which may rule out Keckly." She had heard what Jake said and hates to sound like she's correcting him. "Keckly could still be the murderer, even if the body was dumped later by an accomplice."

"I don't think the body was moved."

"Since when?"

"As stupid as it sounds . . . as soon as Jim didn't find any evidence saying otherwise. Helen's report just reinforces the lack of evidence."

Jake had taught her a lot in the four years since she was promoted to detective, moved here from Maryland,

and partnered with him. His number one rule is to put aside all assumptions once the evidence has been processed. She knows their initial assessment of the cause of death had been incorrect. "If he was killed in the shed, the scene was staged in more ways than just posing the body. He was dead before his throat was cut."

"That's what the autopsy reveals. What did you find?"

"You're not going to tell me how he died?"

Always one to teach the younger detectives as they face new situations, Jake nods toward the folders in Cheryl's lap. "You should have the answer in your results."

"Sorry it took so long at the lab. They're backed up and I ran the blood analysis myself."

"No problem."

"Other than the staged scene, the only thing we found unusual was . . .," she stops before mentioning the fluid she'd sampled because she finally makes the connection. She now knows how Kerr could've been killed where they found him without him or the floor being covered in blood. "The spill on the floor was epinephrine. Overdose?"

"Or . . ."

"Murder weapon," she finishes the sentence for him.

Cheryl gets the keys to Mr. Kerr's apartment from his personal effects. Everyone they've talked to about their victim said they hadn't noticed anything unusual about his behavior nor knew of anyone who would want to kill him. There may be something at his apartment leading to a motive.

The apartment is on the second floor at the end of a long hallway. As Cheryl reaches to unlock the door, she hears muffled cursing coming from inside. Kerr's downstairs neighbor, who she and Jake had talked to in the lobby, had told them Ben lived alone and never had visitors.

Jake has also heard the voice and is on alert. "Easy," he quietly tells Cheryl.

They draw their weapons and quietly enter the large apartment. There's more cussing coming from what is most probably the kitchen; however, from where they stand just inside the door, they can't see around the angle from the living room. Jake points at Cheryl, then at two closed doors, silently telling her to check the bedrooms. When she nods, he slowly makes his way toward the continuous string of curse words.

Stepping into the kitchen, Jake sees the man from mid-chest down, the rest of his body hidden by the cabinet under the sink. "Slowly come out from under there," Jake orders.

The man jumps and bangs his head. That brings on even more colorful cussing. The man wiggles his large body into the kitchen. He has a pair of pliers in one hand and a large screwdriver in the other.

"Lay down the tools and stand up."

Cheryl walks up behind him and reports that the rest of the apartment is empty.

The man looks very angry. "Who are you and what are you doing in here?"

"I'll ask the questions," Jake informs him. "You answer those questions first."

With two armed people in front of him, the man answers. "Names Alex. Alex Emerson. I'm trying to fix the . . ." he stops himself from cussing again, ". . . the garbage disposal. Now who are you?"

Jake ignores the question. "Does Mr. Kerr know you're here?"

Talking to Jake as if the answer should be obvious, Alex says, "Of course he does. I'm the landlord and sometimes handyman."

"Can you prove that?"

Alex reaches for his wallet.

"Slowly," Jake warns.

Mr. Emerson opens his wallet, pulls out his driver's license and a business card, and hands them to Jake.

After checking the papers, he hands them back. "Thank you Mr. Emerson." He puts his pistol back in his holster. "I'm Detective Stalb. My partner," he nods at Cheryl, "Detective McCoy."

"Is Ben in some kind of trouble?"

Cheryl answers, "He was killed this morning."

Tears fill Alex's eyes. "He was?"

Jake doesn't reveal any of the details. He asks Emerson about the vic's behavior or if he'd ever had problems with his tenant. None of the information he provides indicates the death was a suicide and he doesn't know who would want to kill the man.

“Thanks for your help Mr. Emerson. We’re going to have to ask you to leave now. We’ll need you to keep this apartment locked and not let anyone in, not even Mr. Kerr’s family, until we inform you we’re finished with our investigation.”

“Ok. I hope you find the . . .” he pauses again to censor himself, “. . . the guy who did this.”

Cheryl and Jake thoroughly check the apartment for anything which might provide them with clues to their victim’s state of mind or a motive for murder. Nothing. Unless, Jake thinks, he killed himself for leaving some trash in the wastebasket. The man seems to have been a complete neat freak. He even has his spices lined up in alphabetical order.

As Jake is searching desk drawers for any threatening letters or a suicide note, Cheryl returns from the bathroom carrying a small prescription bottle. “Kerr had allergies,” she reports. “I found these.” When Jake looks up, she shows him the bottle. “They’re antihistamines.”

Jake reads the label. “Can’t be too bad. Those aren’t much stronger than the O.T.C.s I take.”

She can see the question in his eyes. “A half bottle of aspirin, a few stray cough drops, and a tube of antibiotic ointment. No other medications. If he had any injectable epinephrine, it’s gone.”

“I think we’re finished here.” Jake closes the drawer. “Let’s go see if Doctor Shepherd can tell us anything useful.”

The trip to Shepherd’s office, whose name is on the prescription bottle, is a bust. After waiting almost an hour for the warrant to arrive, without which the doctor wouldn’t say a thing, he didn’t have anything to tell them except that Kerr has never had an allergy for which he would need epinephrine and he couldn’t be considered suicidal.

Having been so busy they’d worked through lunch, they stop at Wall’s Mini-Mart to get some sandwiches and drinks. They eat in the office as they review their notes and the reports.

“Sir,” Officer Sanchez says from the doorway. When Jake looks up and raises his eyebrows, she corrects herself. “Jake.” She finds it hard to call her superiors by their first names even when, like Jake, they ask her to drop the formalities when they’re working together.

“Where have you been hiding?”

“I had a dentist’s appointment and then Sergeant Kennedy . . .”

Jake smiles. “Sergeant? Since when?”

“It was official this morning,” Rachel explains as she sits down in the chair next to Cheryl.

It bothers Jake a bit that he hadn’t noticed the new badge when he’d been talking to Jim earlier. Usually, he notices everything at a crime scene, whether it’s about the people he’s working with or anything possibly related to the crime. He wonders if that’s any sign of him slipping. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

Cheryl laughs. “Too much excitement.”

“Well it’s about time.” Because it looks as if both of them are about to apologize for not telling him sooner, he quickly adds, “About time he got promoted.”

They both agree.

“Anyway,” Rachel continues her previous statement, “Jim put me on phone duty.”

Jake appreciates Rachel getting them back to business. “What did you find out?”

“I was able to get verification from the Syracuse P.D. that Mr. Keckly arrived on Flight 104, so his alibi checks out. Mr. Kerr’s family was shocked to hear about his death and say suicide is out of the question. His employees at his printing company said the same.”

Jake jots a note to search Kerr’s office. “Call the company back and have them seal his office.”

“Already done sir. I told them you’d be down there as part of the investigation.” She pauses long enough to scan her notes. “That’s all.” The tone in her voice sounds like she’s apologizing for not doing more.

Rachel has only been on the force since February and Jake already sees more than a little potential for her to step up to the next level. He stands, spins his chair so it faces her, and says, “Here. You can have my chair.” When Rachel looks at him with a confused look on her face, he tells her, “You should be promoted to detective for digging in, asking the right questions, and focusing the investigation in the right direction.”

She knows he’s being serious and blushes at the compliment. “Thanks Jake.”

By the time Jake and Cheryl finish in Kerr's office, talk to his employees at TechniPrint, return to the office to add their new notes to the files, and Jake pulls into the driveway at home, it's a quarter after six.

Bob meets Jake at the door from the garage into the dining room. Jake bends down and scratches him between the ears. "Hi buddy."

The water is running in the kitchen sink and the radio is turned up, so Jake knows Clarissa hasn't heard him come in. Instead of going through the door directly into the kitchen, he walks through the living room and down the hall. Quietly walking up behind her, he puts his arms around her waist and, as she jumps in surprise, he kisses her on the nape of her neck.

"Jake! You almost gave me a heart attack!" She turns in his arms and returns his kiss. "You're as sneaky as Bob."

He gives her one of his little boy grins.

"How was your day?"

Jake gets a glass from the cupboard and pours himself some iced tea. "Busy," he answers as he sits down at the table. "Who was it who said death doesn't take a vacation?"

Clarissa shrugs. When the microwave timer beeps, she removes the plate and sits it in front of him. "I don't remember." She sits down in the chair across the table from him. Knowing he won't go into details about a case, but being curious she asks, "What happened over at Armstrong Academy?"

He looks up at her. "I'm not surprised you heard about it, but how did you know that was my case?"

"I saw you on the news."

Now he's surprised. "The news?"

"Yeah. They reported the murder on the five thirty broadcast. They showed a clip of you talking to Cheryl and Jim in front of the maintenance building." By the look on his face, she realizes Jake didn't know they were being taped.

Jake's cell phone rings. "Jake . . . Clarissa just told me . . . Mrs. Ross isn't going to be happy . . . Right. I want to find whoever shot that video and find out if they saw anything else . . . First thing in the morning . . . Bye." He snaps his phone closed. "Cheryl just watched the report." He runs his hands through his hair, frustrated.

"What's wrong?"

"I know we can't keep everything out of the news," he shakes his head, "and people do have the right to know what's going on. The problem is the Headmistress asked us to keep things quiet, now we're going to have her all over us about this." He pushes the plate back, puts his elbows on the table, and rubs his face with both hands. "Cases are bad enough when we don't have any leads on a suspect. This . . ." He sits back in his chair.

Clarissa walks around the table so she can rub his shoulders. "She'll be a nuisance," she agrees. When he reaches up and rubs the muscle at the front of his left shoulder, she asks, "Sore?"

"Stiff. Nothing a hot shower won't fix."

"You go shower. I'll be up in a few minutes."

He stands, wraps his arms around her, and gives her a kiss. Having heard the concern in her voice, he assures her, "The shoulder is fine. Really." He gives her another kiss, then goes upstairs to take a shower.

By the time Clarissa cleans and puts away the dishes, fills the cat bowls, and goes upstairs to take her shower, Jake is already in bed with his eyes closed. She knows it's probably going to take some time for him to get used to being up and active all day. Once his wounds had healed enough and his recovery was well under way, the doctor had told him to start increasing his level of activity. Jake was more than happy to be doing anything besides sitting around. But, she thinks, being at work is a lot more strenuous than walking around the house or his light workouts. While she knows he's ready, mentally and physically, to be working, she's worried he'll push himself too hard.

When she gets into bed, Jake rolls over on his back. She snuggles up close to him and lays her head on his chest.

"Don't worry," Jake mumbles sleepily.

Clarissa giggles. "Stop reading my mind." She rises up on one elbow and sees he's grinning at her.

"I'll try."

To her, he looks completely exhausted. "Stop worrying about Mrs. Ross and get some sleep." She leans over

and gives him a long kiss.

“Yes ma’am,” he says with another grin. “Love you Rissa . . .” the end of his sentence trails off.

“I love you,” she tells him even though he’s fallen asleep. She lays her head back on his chest. She knows she’ll keep worrying about him pushing himself too hard until he’s been back at work for a while because he’s worried about his own abilities and thinks he has to prove to everyone else that he’s still a good cop. Lying there, she thinks about how happy she is that he’s still here for her to worry about.