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SANDRA BROWN

SMOKE SCREEN
June 18, 2007
To those brave nine
THANK GOD he was still asleep.

Waking up to find herself in bed with Jay Burgess was embarrassing enough without having to look him in the eye. At least not until she had time to collect herself.

As carefully as possible, she inched to the side of the bed and slipped out from under the sheet, trying not to lift it away from him in the process. She perched on the very edge of the mattress and glanced over her shoulder. The draft from the air-conditioning vent above the bed was cold, causing goose bumps to break out on her arms. But although Jay was naked and covered only to his waist, the chilly air hadn’t roused him. Shifting her weight from the bed to her feet a little at a time, she stood up.

The room tilted. To keep from falling, she instinctually reached out for support. Her hand found the wall with a smack that might just as well have been a cymbal crash for the reverberation it created in the silent house. No longer concerned so much about waking him as about wondering how in the world she’d got so terribly drunk last night, she remained propped against the wall, taking deep breaths, focusing on one spot until her equilibrium returned.

Miraculously, her clumsiness hadn’t awakened Jay. Spying her underpants, she crept to the foot of the bed and retrieved them, then tiptoed around the room, gathering strewn articles of her clothing, hugging each garment against her chest in a gesture of modesty, which under the circumstances was rather ridiculous.

The walk of shame. The college phrase seemed apropos. It referred to a coed who sneaked out of a guy’s bedroom after spending the night with him. She was way past college age, and both she and Jay were single, free to sleep together if they chose.

If they chose.

The phrase struck her like the cruel pop of a snapped rubber band.

Suddenly, the shock of waking up in Jay’s bed was replaced by the alarming realization that she didn’t remember how she’d got there. She didn’t recall making a conscious decision to sleep with him. She didn’t remember weighing the pros and cons and deciding in favor of it. She didn’t remember being wooed until practicality was obscured by sensuality. She didn’t remember giving a mental shrug and thinking What the hell? We’re adults.

She didn’t remember anything.

Looking around, she took in the layout and furnishings of the bedroom. It was a pleasant room, tastefully decorated and tailored for a man who lived alone. But nothing in it was familiar to her. Nothing. It was as though she was
seeing it for the first time.

Obviously it was Jay’s place; there were pictures of him scattered about, mostly vacation snapshots with various friends of both sexes. But she had never been in this room before, nor in this house. She wasn’t even certain of the street address, although she had a vague recollection of walking here from . . . from somewhere.

Yes, The Wheelhouse. She and Jay had met there for a drink. He’d already had several when she arrived, but that wasn’t uncommon. Jay liked spirits and had an amazing tolerance for large quantities of alcohol. She had ordered a glass of white wine. They’d sat and chatted over their drinks, catching up on what was happening in each other’s life.

Then he’d said—

Remembering now what he’d told her, she shivered, but not from the cold. She covered her mouth to catch a low moan and looked back at him where he lay sleeping. She whispered a sorrowful “Oh, Jay,” repeating the first words she’d uttered when he broke the awful news to her last night.

Can we continue this conversation at my place? he’d asked. I’ve moved since I’ve seen you. An elderly aunt died and left me all her worldly goods. Lots of china, crystal, antique furniture, stuff like that. I sold all of it to a dealer and bought a town house with the proceeds. It’s a short walk.

He was chatty, acting as though they’d been talking about nothing more worrisome than the approach of hurricane season, but his news had been a bombshell. Terrible. Impossible to believe. She’d been staggered by it. Had compassion moved her to affection? Did that explain the lovemaking that had followed?

Lord, why couldn’t she remember?

Searching for answers as well as for the rest of her clothing, she went into the living room. Her dress and cardigan were bunched up in a chair, her sandals were on the floor. There was an open bottle of scotch and two glasses on the table in front of the sofa. Only an inch of whiskey remained in the bottle. The cushions of the sofa were rumpled and dented, as though someone had been wallowing on them.

Apparently she and Jay.

Quickly she went back through the bedroom, finding the bathroom on the far side of it. She managed to close the door without making a sound, a precaution that was canceled out a moment later when she retched noisily into the toilet. Her stomach was seized by painful spasms as it disgorged what seemed to be gallons of scotch. Never a big fan of scotch, she knew with absolute certainty that she would never touch a drop of it again.

She found toothpaste in the mirrored cabinet above the sink and used her index finger to scrub the film and bad taste from her mouth. That helped, but she still felt rather shabby and decided to shower. When she faced Jay, she would feel more confident and less embarrassed over the excesses of last night if she was clean.
The stall was a tile enclosure with a large, round showerhead mounted into the ceiling. Standing directly beneath the simulated rainfall, she lathered and rinsed several times. She washed carefully and thoroughly between her legs. She shampooed her hair.

Once out of the shower, she didn’t tarry. Surely all the noise she’d made had woken him up by now. She dressed, used his hairbrush to smooth out her wet hair, then bolstered her courage with a deep breath and opened the bathroom door.

Jay was still asleep. How could that be? He was a well-conditioned drinker, but apparently last night had been an overindulgence even for him. How much scotch had been in the bottle when they began to drink from it? Between them, had they nearly emptied a whole fifth?

They must have. Otherwise why couldn’t she remember taking off her clothes and having sex with Jay Burgess? Years ago, they’d had a brief affair that soon flamed out, ending long before it developed into a bona fide relationship. Neither’s heart was broken. There hadn’t been a scene or a formal breakup of any kind. They’d simply stopped dating but had remained friends.

But Jay, charming and irrepressible Jay, hadn’t stopped trying to lure her back into his bed whenever their paths crossed. “Having a roll in the sack and staying friends aren’t mutually exclusive,” he’d say with his most engaging smile.

That hadn’t been her experience, and she’d told him so each time he tried to talk her into a sleep-over for old times’ sake.

Last night, he must have persuaded her.

She would’ve expected him to be up early this morning to gloat over his conquest, waking her up with a kiss and a teasing invitation to have breakfast in bed. She could almost hear him saying, *Since you’re here, you might just as well relax and enjoy the full Burgess treatment.*

Or why hadn’t he joined her in the shower? That would be a Jay kind of thing to do. He would step in with her and say something like *You missed a spot on your back. Oops, and here’s one on your front, too.* But the shower hadn’t disturbed him. Not even the repeated flushing of the toilet.

How could he sleep through all that? He hadn’t even—

Moved.

Her stomach gave a heaving motion like an ocean swell. Soured scotch filled her throat, and she feared she was about to be sick again. She swallowed hard. “Jay?” she said tentatively. Then louder. “Jay?”

Nothing. No sigh or snuffle. Not even a slight shift of position.

She stood rooted to the floor, her heart thumping hard now. Forcing herself to move, she lurched toward the bed, hand outstretched to touch his shoulder and give it a firm shake. “Jay!”
Raley pulled open the rusty screen door, its hinges squealing. “Hey! You in here?”
“Ain’t I usually?”
A curl of faded red paint flaked off when the wood frame slapped closed behind Raley as he stepped into the one-room cabin. It smelled of fried pork and the mouse-gnawed Army blanket on the cot in the corner.
It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dimness and find the old man. He was sitting at a three-legged table, hunched over a cup of coffee like a dog guarding a hard-won bone, staring into the snowy screen of a black-and-white television. Ghostly images flickered in and out. There was no audio except for a static hiss.
“Good morning.”
The old man snorted a welcome through his sheaves of nasal hair. “He’p yourself.” He nodded toward the enamel coffeepot on the stove. “Can’t recommend the cream. It curdled overnight.”
Raley stepped over the three hounds lying motionless on the floor and went to the refrigerator that was jammed between an antique pie safe, which served as a pantry, and a drafting table, which served no purpose whatsoever except to collect dust and further reduce the floor space in the crowded cabin.
The handle on the fridge door had broken off, probably decades ago, but if you pressed your fingers just right into the soft rubber sealant in the crack, you could pry it open. “I brought you some catfish.” Raley set the newspaper bundle on one of the rusty wire shelves, then quickly shut the door against the mingled odors of cream gone bad and general spoilage.
“Much obliged.”
“You’re welcome.” The coffee probably had been boiled several times and would be the consistency of molasses. Without cream to dilute it, Raley thought it better to pass.
He glanced at the silent TV. “You need to adjust your rabbit ears.”
“Ain’t the rabbit ears. I turned off the sound.”
“How come?”
The old man replied with one of his customary harrumphs that said he couldn’t be bothered to answer. A self-proclaimed recluse, he had lived in voluntary exile ever since “the war,” although which war had never been specified. He had as little as possible to do with other Homo sapiens.
Shortly after Raley had moved into the vicinity, the two had come upon each
other in the woods. Raley was staring down into the beady eyes of a dead opossum when the old man came crashing through the underbrush and said, “Don’t even think about it.”

“About what?”

“About taking my possum.”

Touching the bloated, flyblown, limp body with the pink, hairless tail and horrible stench was the last thing Raley intended to do. He raised his hands in surrender and stood aside so the barefoot old man in stained overalls could retrieve his kill from the metal jaws of the small trap.

“Way you been stampin’ ’round out there, it’s a wonder to me it ain’t you caught in this trap ’stead of the possum,” he grumbled.

Raley wasn’t aware that anyone lived within miles of the cabin he’d recently purchased. He’d rather not have had a neighbor of any kind, but especially one who kept track of his comings and goings.

As the old man stood up, his knees protested in loud pops and snaps, which caused him to Grimace and mutter a string of curses. With the carcass dangling from his hand, the old man looked Raley over, from his baseball cap and bearded face to the toes of his hiking boots. Inspection complete, the old man spat tobacco juice into the dirt to express his opinion of what he saw. “Man’s got a right to walk in the woods,” he said. “Just don’t go messin’ with my traps.”

“It would help me to know where they are.”

The old man’s cracked lips spread into a wide grin, revealing tobacco-stained stubs that once were teeth. “Wouldn’t it though?” Still chuckling, he turned away. “You’ll find ’em, I’m bettin’.” Raley could hear his laughter long after he disappeared into the dense foliage.

Over the ensuing months, they’d accidentally bumped into each other in the woods several times. At least to Raley these were chance meetings. He reasoned the old man made himself visible when he wanted to and didn’t when he was disinclined to give his new neighbor even a grunt of a greeting.

One hot afternoon, they met in the doorway of the general store in the nearest town. Raley was coming in, the old man going out. They nodded to each other. Later, when Raley left with several sacks of groceries, he noticed the old man sitting in a chair on the shaded porch of the store, fanning himself with his straw hat. Acting on impulse, Raley peeled a cold can of beer from the plastic webbing and tossed it to the old man, who, revealing excellent reflexes, caught it in one hand.

Raley stowed his groceries in the bed of his pickup and climbed into the cab. The old man regarded him with patent suspicion as he put the truck in reverse and backed away, but Raley noticed that he’d popped the top on the beer.

The following morning there was hard knocking on Raley’s door. This being a first, he approached the door cautiously. The old man was there, holding a chipped ceramic bowl containing a heap of some raw animal flesh that Raley couldn’t identify. He feared it was carrion that even the trio of hounds had
rejected.

“In exchange for the beer. I don’t like bein’ beholden to nobody.”

Raley took the bowl thrust at him. “Thanks.” His visitor turned and walked down the steps. Raley called after him, “What’s your name?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Raley Gannon.”

The old man hesitated, then grumbled, “Delno Pickens.”

From that morning, they developed a quasi friendship founded on loneliness and a shared reluctance for interaction with other people.

The sum-total value of Delno’s possessions wouldn’t be a hundred dollars. He was always dragging home something he’d salvaged from God knew where, items he had no practical use for. His cabin was situated on stilts to prevent it from flooding when the Combahee overflowed its banks. Junk had been stuffed into the crawl space beneath the structure, as though to provide a more solid foundation. The area surrounding the cabin was also littered with junk that was never utilized so far as Raley could tell. Collecting it seemed more important to Delno than the articles themselves.

He drove a truck that Raley called Frankenstein because it was made of parts Delno had assembled himself, held together with baling wire and duct tape. It was a miracle to Raley that he ever got the contraption started, but as Delno said, “It ain’t pretty, but it gets me anywhere I want to go.”

He would eat anything. *Anything.* Anything he could knock from a tree, trap, or pull out of the river. But whatever he had, once their friendship had been established, he was always willing to share it.

Surprisingly, he was very well read and conversant on subjects which, to look at him, one wouldn’t have expected him to have even a passing knowledge of. Raley came to suspect that his hillbilly accent and vocabulary were affected. Like the squalor he lived in, they were protests against a former life.

But whatever that former life had entailed remained Delno’s secret. He never mentioned a hometown, his childhood or parents, an occupation, children, or wife. Beyond his hounds, he talked to no one except Raley. Intimate relationships were limited to a stack of old nudie magazines with well-thumbed pages, which he kept on the floor beneath his cot.

Raley shared nothing personal with Delno, either. Not for the first two years of their acquaintanceship. And then one evening at sunset, Delno showed up at Raley’s cabin, bringing with him two Mason jars filled with a murky liquid that he’d fermented himself.

“Haven’t seen you in over a week. Where you been?”

“Here.”

Raley didn’t want company, but Delno elbowed his way inside anyway. “Thought you might be needin’ a swig or two.” Giving Raley one of his scornful once-overs, he added, “Lookin’ at you, I’d say my hunch was right. You appear to be in bad shape. Could smell you as I was coming up the steps.”

“You’re a fine one to criticize someone else’s appearance and personal
hygiene.”
“Who’d you call?”
“What?”
“That blabbermouth that runs the cash register at the store? The one with her hair piled up high, wears long, dangly earrings? Told me you come in there last week, got a handful of change, and fed it into the pay phone outside. Said you talked a few minutes, then hung up, looking like you was ready to kill somebody. Got in your truck and took outta there without even paying for your groceries.”

He uncapped one of the jars and passed it to Raley, who sniffed the contents, then shook his head and passed it back. “So, I’m askin’,” Delno continued after taking a hefty swallow from the jar, “who’d you call?”

It was dawn before Raley stopped talking. By then, Delno had drained both jars. Raley was simply drained—emotionally, mentally, physically. It had been a painful but therapeutic catharsis. He had lanced a dozen wounds.

With nothing more to say and no breath left to say it, Raley looked over at the old man, who had listened for hours without making a single comment. The expression on the creased, leathery face was one of profound sadness. His eyes were naked and unguarded for the first time since Raley had known him, and Raley knew he was looking straight into the soul of a man who’d experienced indescribable heartache. It seemed Delno Pickens had collected all the misery and injustice in the world and packed it into that one hopeless gaze.

Then he sighed, and in one of the rare times they’d ever made physical contact, reached across the space separating them and patted Raley on the knee. “Go wash your armpits before the stink of you makes me puke up all that good liquor. I’ll cook you some breakfast.”

They never again referred to anything Raley had told him that night. It was as though the long night had never happened. But Raley never forgot the bleakness with which Delno had looked at him that morning. And this morning when he raised his head from staring into his coffee mug and looked up at Raley, he was wearing that same expression of despair.

“What’s the matter?” Raley’s heart hitched, automatically thinking disaster. A 747 loaded with passengers crashing into a mountainside. A presidential assassination. A terrorist attack on the scale of 9/11.

“Don’t go and do somethin’ crazy, now, okay?” Delno said.
“What happened?”

Muttering dire predictions about “nothin’ good comin’ outta this,” Delno hitched his chin toward the TV.

Raley went over to the vintage set and turned the volume knob, then fiddled with the rabbit-ear antenna in the hope of getting a better picture.

The video remained erratic and the audio was scratchy, but within moments he had a clear understanding of what had happened and why Delno had dreaded telling him:

Jay Burgess was dead.
 THEY DON’T BELIEVE ME, DO THEY?”

Britt addressed the question to the stranger whom she had retained as her attorney. It was now twenty-four hours since she’d discovered that Jay had died while lying beside her, and still she continued to hope that this was all a terrible dream from which she would soon awaken.

But it was all too real.

Shortly after her frantic 911 call, EMTs and two police officers had arrived at Jay’s town house. They’d been followed by the coroner and two detectives, who introduced themselves as Clark and Javier. They had questioned her in Jay’s living room while, in the bedroom, his body was being examined and prepared for transport to the morgue. She had gone to police headquarters with the detectives to give them her formal statement. After the last i was dotted and the last t crossed, she’d thought that would be the end of it, except for grieving.

But this morning Clark had phoned her at home. He apologized for the imposition but told her he and Javier would like to clear up a few details and asked if she would mind returning to the police station.

The request was issued in a friendly, casual manner, but it made her uneasy, uneasy enough to feel it would be advisable to have counsel meet her there. Her dealings with lawyers were limited to tax issues, real estate transactions, contracts, and her parents’ estate. She doubted the attorneys handling those matters had ever been inside a police station.

Needing a reference, she had called the television station’s general manager.

Of course the lead story on every station last night had been about Jay Burgess’s shocking death. Her fellow broadcast journalists had been discreet in their reports of her involvement, but no matter how they’d couched it, it was a hot story: The highest rated news reporter in the market, Britt Shelley, was now the one making news.

From the objective standpoint of a television journalist, she had to admit it was a juicy irony as well as a sensational story.

The general manager had commiserated with her situation. “What an awful ordeal for you, Britt.”

“Yes. It was. Is, actually. That’s why I’ve bothered you at home.”

“Whatever you need. Whatever I can do to help,” he’d said. She’d asked him to recommend a lawyer.

“A criminal lawyer?”

She’d been quick to assure him that she was only being prudent, that the
interview—she didn’t even refer to it as an interrogation—was routine, a formality really. “Even so, I think I should have counsel.” He had readily agreed and promised to make some calls on her behalf.

When Bill Alexander had arrived at the police station, he’d been breathless and apologetic for being ten minutes late. “I got stuck in traffic.”

She’d hoped for someone imposing, authoritative, and charismatic, so it was difficult to hide her disappointment when the slight, unassuming, and frazzled Alexander proffered his card and introduced himself only seconds before they were joined by the two detectives.

By contrast, Clark and Javier personified central casting’s call sheet for tough detective types.

Yesterday, when the pair had arrived at Jay’s town house and realized they were talking to the Britt Shelley of Channel Seven News, they’d been dumbstruck and awkward, as people sometimes were upon seeing a TV personality out among ordinary folk.

The detectives had apologized for having to detain her and put her through the police work on the heels of such a traumatic experience, but unfortunately it was their job to learn exactly what had happened. She’d answered their questions to the best of her ability, and they had seemed satisfied with her account.

This morning, however, the tenor of their questioning had changed, slightly but noticeably. They seemed no longer star-struck. Their inquiries had taken on an edge that hadn’t been there yesterday.

Britt was cooperative, knowing that reluctance to cooperate with the authorities usually signaled guilt, at least on some level. All she was guilty of was sleeping with a man who happened to die in his sleep. It was fodder for crude jokes about Jay’s sexual prowess, and hers.

He went out with a bang. Wink, wink.
Bet he died with a smile on his face. Wink, wink.
He came and went at the same time. Wink, wink.

If these detectives were after details about the sex, they were out of luck. All Britt remembered was waking up and finding Jay lying dead beside her in his bed. She had no memory of anything else happening in that bed. Even after an hour of intense dialogue, she didn’t think the detectives believed that.

Moments ago, they had suggested taking a break, leaving her alone with her newly retained attorney, which gave her an opportunity to better acquaint herself with him but, more important, to get his read on the proceedings.

“They don’t believe me, do they?” she repeated, since he’d faltered on his answer the first time she’d asked.

This time, he gave her an insipid smile. “I don’t get that sense at all, Ms. Shelley.” His tone of voice suggested he was stroking a nervous cat. “They’re being thorough, which they must be whenever someone dies under unusual circumstances.”

“Jay Burgess’s cancer was terminal.”
“Yes, but—”
“He’d had a lot to drink. Probably the alcohol didn’t mix with the strong medications he was taking.”
“No doubt.”
“All too often people mix prescription drugs with alcohol and it kills them. Jay died of cardiac arrest, respiratory failure. Something like that.”
“I’m sure you’re right.”
“Then explain to me why I’m being questioned so extensively.”
“In part, it’s a knee-jerk reaction to the sudden death of one of their own,” he said. “Jay Burgess was a decorated police officer, a hero to the men in this department and beyond. Naturally his colleagues want to know what happened during the hours before he died.”
She’d covered the funerals of fallen policemen, and had always been impressed by the global fraternity of law enforcement officers, who rallied ’round when one of them died.
Rubbing her forehead, she conceded the point with a tired sigh. “I suppose you’re right. But that’s just it. I don’t know! I’ve told them I can’t remember. I don’t think they believe that, but I swear it’s the truth.”
“Maintain that,” he said as though applauding the passion behind her voice. “Or, even better, say nothing at all.”
Shooting him a scornful look, she began pacing the compact interrogation room. “Everybody says, especially lawyers, that it’s better not to say anything. But as a reporter, I know that people who refuse to talk look like they have something to hide.”
“Then don’t deviate from your story.”
She came around, ready to object to his calling her account of Jay’s death a “story,” but just then the two detectives returned.
“Do you need a restroom break, Ms. Shelley?” Clark asked.
“I’m fine.”
“Can I get you something to drink?”
“No thank you.”
He was tall and rawboned with thinning reddish hair. Javier was short, swarthy, and his black hair was as dense as carpet. Physically they couldn’t be more dissimilar, yet she was equally wary of both. She mistrusted Clark’s politeness, thinking it might be affected to cover suppressed redneck leanings. And Javier’s pockmarked cheeks made her think of fatal knife fights. Clark’s eyes were blue, Javier’s so dark that the pupils were not discernible, but both pairs of eyes were quick and watchful.
Having dispensed with the courtesies, Javier resumed the questioning. “When we left off, you were saying that your memory got foggy after you had a glass of wine at The Wheelhouse.”
“That’s right.” Everything that had happened since she drank that glass of Chardonnay was a hazy, disjointed recollection. Up to a point. Then her memory of events had been completely obliterated. How could one harmless
glass of wine wipe clean her memory? It couldn’t. Not unless . . . Unless . . .

“Date rape drug.”

Until the three men froze in place, she didn’t realize she had spoken the words. She stepped back from herself, examined what she’d just said, and was struck with the plausibility—no, almost certainty—that she was right.

“I must have been given one of the substances collectively known as date rape drugs.” The two detectives and the lawyer just stood there, staring at her as though she was speaking a foreign language. “They give you temporary amnesia,” she said with a trace of impatience. “I did a feature story on them. An incident at Clemson sparked concern about the increased usage of them at parties and bars where young people hang out. They cause a short-term memory loss. Sometimes the memory never comes back. But it doesn’t matter, because by the time the effects wear off, the damage has been done.”

She looked at each man in turn, expecting them to be sharing her excitement over this credible explanation for her blackout. Instead they continued to stare at her without reaction. With asperity she said, “Blink if you can hear me.”

“We hear you, Ms. Shelley,” Clark said.

“Well, then? Don’t you see? My wine was doctored with one of these drugs. They work quickly. That would explain why I can’t remember anything after reaching Jay’s apartment.”

“How about an empty bottle of scotch?” Javier asked.

“I don’t like scotch. I never drink scotch. If Jay had offered it to me, I would have declined it, especially since I wasn’t feeling well.”

“Your fingerprints were on one of the drinking glasses. Your lipstick on the rim,” said Javier.

“You’ve already examined the drinking glasses? Why?”

The two detectives exchanged a glance. Clark said, “Let’s start at the beginning and go through it again. Tell us everything that happened.”

“I don’t know everything that happened. I can tell you only what I remember.”

“Okay, then, what you remember. You don’t mind if we videotape it this time, do you?”

Immediately suspicious of Clark’s dismissive tone, she said, “Why would you?”

“Just so we have it, so if the need should arise, we can refer back to the tape, get the details straight in our own heads.”

Mistrusting his explanation as well as his snake-oil salesman’s smile, she looked at Alexander, who said, “It’s standard practice, Ms. Shelley. You still don’t have to answer any question you don’t want to.”

“I want to answer the questions. I want the answers myself. Probably more than they do.”

Since calling 911, she’d been swept up in the disagreeable technicalities of an unexpected death—the pronouncement of the coroner that Jay was indeed dead, the questioning by police, the paperwork. She hadn’t had time to indulge the
personal aspects of it. She hadn’t yet actually grieved the loss of her friend.

Nor could she now. Not until she got past this unpleasantness. Restating her point, she said, “I’m desperate to know what happened to Jay.”

“Then we’ve got no problem.” Javier sat down at the small table and motioned her into the chair facing the video camera. “I sure wouldn’t expect you to be camera shy.”

His grin made her think again of sharp blades piercing soft tissue. She turned away from it and sat down. Clark checked the focus of the camera, stated the time and date and who was present, then sat down on the edge of the table and began swinging his skinny leg back and forth. “Who called who?”

“What do you mean?”

“Who made the date?”

“Jay. I told you that.”

“We can check phone records.” Javier’s statement wasn’t just that. It was a veiled threat.

Looking him squarely in the eye, she said, “Jay called me earlier that day and asked if I would meet him at The Wheelhouse for a drink. He said he wanted to talk to me.”

“Before that, when was the last time you saw him?”

“I don’t know the date for certain. Several months ago. When the man accused of child molestation at the preschool in North Charleston was arrested. Jay was at the press conference and addressed questions about the police investigation. I covered it for the station. We waved at each other, but I didn’t talk to him. I got my story from one of the arresting officers, not Jay.”

“But you and Burgess were friendly.”

“Yes.”

“More than friendly?”

“No.”

The two detectives exchanged another telling glance. Alexander sat forward in his chair, as though about to warn her to be cautious.

“Never?” Clark asked.

“Years ago,” she replied with equanimity. Her brief affair with Jay hadn’t been a secret. “I relocated to Charleston to take the job at Channel Seven. Jay was one of the first people I met. We went out a few times, but our friendship was always more or less platonic.”

“More or less?” Javier’s raised eyebrows suggested more.

“We’d been nothing more than friends for the past several years.”

“Until night before last, when you became lovers again.”

“I—” She hesitated. Alexander raised his index finger as though forestalling her from answering. She lowered her gaze to her lap. “I don’t know whether or not we were intimate that night. I’m not sure. I can’t remember.”

Clark sighed as though he found that impossible to believe, then said, “So you met at The Wheelhouse.”

“I arrived at seven, the appointed time. Jay was already there. He’d had