

On the drive to Bud's, she joked about it with Jameson. Then, she fell silent. He would notice after a few minutes, glance over at her to see if she was all right. She pretended not to notice. After a few more minutes of silence, he gave up and awaited the inevitable play.

"Did you kill him, Kobe?" she asked her partner, matter-of-factly. Kobe laughed. He knew this game; she played it often, especially if she had time to kill. "Where were you last night between the hours of ten and midnight?" She did this with no facial expression. He chuckled again. "You're a spy, aren't you?" she added. "You're working for the Russians? Or is it the Chinese?"

"You got me there," he answered. "But, I do have an alibi."

"What might that be?"

He looked at her. "Were we not playing poker on your deck last night?"

"Ah," she said, a massive grin on her face. "That is your excuse? You left at nine, as I recall. Nice try, though."

"So am I under arrest?" he asked resignedly.

"I'm mulling it over. It might be necessary for me to have you wear the cuffs, though."

Jameson shook his head. "It would make my driving quite dangerous."

"I suppose. Well, don't leave town. I may have more questions later."

"I will not leave," he assured her. "I have nowhere else to go."

After they reached the repair shop, while she waited for her car to be brought out, she dialed the number on Curtis Delaney's wallet card to leave a message.

"Mr. Devin Parker, this is Detective Michaels at CCPD. I need to speak with you at your earliest convenience. Could you please come down to the station at 321 John Sartain Street, at the corner of North Chaparral? You can call me at this number if you can't find it. Thank you."

"It will not be a pleasant day for him," Jameson said.

"Can't be helped. He needs to identify the body. I have an odd feeling about this one, Kobe. It isn't straight-forward like the others."

The lot boy, an eighteen-something, with shaggy hair tied into a man-bun, brought out her Galaxy-Blue Metallic Audi Q7. “You washed her,” she gushed. “You guys are too much. Thank you.”

“It’s a beautiful color,” the lot boy told her with a hint of envy in his voice. He would have loved to own the car, unlike the heavily-used Dodge truck he had bought for five hundred dollars, systematically replacing the alternator, fuel pump, tires, and rebuilding the engine over three weeks, using money earned from his job.

“It truly is,” Maxie replied. She turned to Jameson. “Thanks for the ride.”

“You are welcome. I will see you at the office after you...?”

“After I what?”

“You know what,” he said. “You always stop.”

“Stop where?” she said coyly. “Kobe, I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“You know where,” he laughed, his prominent teeth white against his skin. “You can bring me a Danish as a thank you for driving you around.”

Now it was her turn to laugh. He did know her well. She nodded, watched as he started up his car and drove off. She waved after him.

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Jameson met her back at the station. She had an actual office there, unlike other detectives who had desks in the central area, mostly because she had asked for one. It was a no-brainer. Maxie had solved more cases in her time on the force here than most people. Her tenacity, style, and—despite ruffling some feathers of her colleagues—her open-ended way of dealing with the media, the public, and city officials, made her invaluable. When it came to Maxie, there were no limitations. Maxie could have whatever she wanted, not that she was demanding, nor did she take advantage of her status.

Maxie was astute. Professionally, personally, and financially. Wise investments in the stock market had netted her enough for a luxurious, two-story waterfront house on Padre Island, complete with a boat dock and her sailboat. She had named it: Lady Tears, had the name painted in gold lettering and outlined in black, across the stern. The boat was a 1982 Bristol 40, centerboard/sloop, sleek, fast, with a shallow draft and a waterline length of twenty-seven and a half feet.

Reddish-brown mahogany interior colors, a small galley and room for a handful of people to sleep, she loved taking her out on the bay, hoisting sails, after using the Westerbeke motor to get out of the channel. There was a sense of peace about sailing rather than using the motor.

She used the boat frequently, finding the change of scenery conducive to solving crime, as well as schmoozing with everyone from the police chief, city council, city mayors, and others who came seeking her counsel. It was her home away from home and her retreat. And she could handle the sails alone, and with relative ease, to a point where she considered herself proficient.

“He is in your office,” Jameson told her as she walked in, handing him the small brown bag with his Danish inside. “I gave him a coffee.” She nodded, strode past, casting him a ‘you didn’t give him that awful swill, did you?’ look before entering the corner office.

Her office had been painted a light peach, and she had decorated it with her two favorite things: tall, lush plants and ornaments with a nautical theme. On her desk, a small wooden sailboat served to remind her of her boat. A wooden inbox was now a tiny beach oasis; she added sand, shells, and a small plastic dolphin. Large paintings of various beach scenes, one with an abandoned wood lifeboat, another with two images of pelicans, adorned the walls. It was less an office than a retreat. And she had left an open invitation for any other detectives needing a place to retreat, to use without asking permission, something that had ingratiated her with them even more than her charm. At least no one openly seemed to resent her for it.

Devin was sitting on one of the twin chairs by the desk, flipping through his phone messages. She closed the door.

“Mr. Parker, Maxie Michaels,” she said, extending a hand for him to shake. “Thanks for coming in.” He started to stand, but she waved him back down, instead lifting the paper coffee cup and placing it on the opposite edge of the desk. “Trust me, you don’t want to drink this,” she said quietly.

Devin was in his late-thirties, six-foot tall, muscular in the right places. He had a shock of dark hair that fell over his face—he swept it back. His eyes were a compelling, deep-blue color. “No one would tell me why I’m here.”

“I asked them to let me,” she said, pulling out her chair and sitting down. “I apologize. There’s no easy way for me to say this, but we found Curtis Delaney dead this morning.” She held out the business card they had retrieved from the body.

Devin’s face fell, the blood draining from the shock of what he had just heard. “Curtis...that’s not possible. I just spoke with him yesterday.”

“I am so sorry for your loss. We got your name from this card.” She flipped it over. “He carried it in his wallet. How exactly are you related?”

“We’re cousins. Long story. How...? What happened?” Devin could barely get the words out. His head felt suddenly waterlogged, and he was unable to clear his thoughts.

He hadn’t seen Curtis for some time, each promising to arrange a dinner, or a weekend away fishing, but both were always extremely busy, and time mercilessly, slipped by unnoticed.

Maxie sat upright and leaned closer, her hand reaching for the box of Kleenex she kept on the side of the desk and moved it closer to him. Devin’s face, she noted, was frozen, and she knew he was struggling to process the information. “Murdered,” she explained. “Blunt force to the back of the head.” She let it sink in for a moment. “Do you know anyone who would want to hurt him?”

Devin shook his head. “Curtis is...was...the most honest person I knew. He always treated everyone fairly.”

Maxie was watching his expressions for any telltale signs of a lie or deception. There were none—he was genuinely distraught and caught off-guard, and she felt sorry for him, for the pain that she knew he was experiencing. It never got any easier having to tell people a loved one was murdered—that was the only news she delivered as a homicide detective.

“No enemies?”

“God, no,” Devin said.

“What line of work was he in—Stanton Investments. What is that?”

“Financial advisor. He was always good with money, finances, stocks. He advised so many people where to put their money. He was considered somewhat of a genius with money.”

“Could someone have been seeking revenge for a bad investment?” Maxie asked.

Devin shook his head. “There were not many bad investments. People knew Curtis put his money where his mouth was—he always invested where he advised his clients to invest. If they lost money, so did he. God, this is terrible.” He put his face into his hands, felt the tears surging, and quickly grabbed a Kleenex, fighting them back.

“I am sorry,” Maxie said. “I know this is difficult.” She was sizing him up, noting the way his body hunched over as he fought back the tears. She studied how he sat, what he wore—tailored, open collared shirt, high quality cotton and well-ironed, tailored slacks, Allen Edmonds Cap Toe Oxford shoes—stylish, she thought.

His mannerisms confirmed what her gut had already assessed: Devin Parker was not involved in the death of Curtis Delaney in any way. And this made her job much more straightforward—she would remove him from her suspect list rather than having to ferret out information had he been trying to be deceptive. “We’ll talk more about Curtis later as I learn more, but now, I’m afraid I need to ask you to do something uncomfortable. I need you to positively identify the body for me? Can you do that?”

Devin’s face answered the question. A look of horror—he would have to look upon the lifeless body of his cousin, let alone how he had been murdered. But he knew he had to do it—there was no other family to do so. He nodded slowly.

Maxie stood and came around to help him up. “Take a moment if you need it,” she said softly.

He shook his head, brushed his hair back and took a deep breath. “It’s okay,” he said. “There’s no avoiding it. I’d rather get this done.”

“Good,” she said reassuringly. “We’ll take my car—it’s a short slog to the Medical Examiner’s office.”

They walked together through the precinct, the bright, overhead neons hiding the plain look of the place. The walls had the usual OSHA safety notices, some Wanted posters, and two walls devoted to awards—an Officer of the Year plaque covering the last ten years, and an enclosed glass bookcase with older artifacts

from earlier days of Corpus law enforcement, such as old handcuffs, uniforms and defunct weaponry.

They avoided the eyes of the curious, down the stairs to the lobby and out the rear door where her car was parked. She unlocked it remotely. “Where’d you park?”

He pointed to a jet-black, Ducati Multistrada 1200 Enduro motorcycle in the visitor lot. It was a beautiful bike to look at, designed for adventure riding. Devin didn’t off-road with it, so did not have mud tires, nonetheless, it was the kind of bike that would catch your eyes, as it passed you on the road.

“Nice,” she said. “I thought about getting one, what with traffic and all.” But really, she had not—bikes were not her style, besides which, she loved her Audi, had custom-picked the color, and no way would she part with it voluntarily.

A handful of minutes later, they had passed under the Crosstown Freeway and were heading south on 17th Street. Devin had been silent the whole way, and Maxie knew the shock of the news had cemented itself.

“Doing okay?”

“Does it ever get easier?” he asked her.

“Does what get easier?”

“Dealing with death?”

Maxie considered the question. She had certainly seen her fair share of death since joining the force. Almost none were from natural causes, such as heart failure or hospital illness deaths. Only the homicides came her way.

“The day it does is the day I quit,” she answered. “Death should always affect you, remind you how precious life is.”

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