

A GRAND MURDER



STACY VERDICK CASE

Chapter One

I rolled out of bed and lowered my feet onto the hardwood floor. Damn, it was cold this morning.

The persistent ringing of the phone made my heart race with an urgency to make it *stop*.

Where the hell did I put that obnoxious thing?

Finally, I found the cordless handset, under the clothes I had shed the night before, next to a pile of dirty laundry I'd been meaning to wash for a while.

"Yep," I croaked into the phone.

"Catherine, is that you?"

I recognized Louise Montgomery's smoky voice right away. When the department had assigned us as partners, I couldn't stand her, but I'd grown to like her over the three years we'd been working together.

"Yes, Louise, it's me."

I buried my feet in a dirty sweater lying on the floor to ward off the cold. One of these days I'd have to give serious consideration to buying an area rug for the bedroom.

"Jesus it didn't sound like you. You feel okay?"

"Yeah, just cold and tired."

I checked over my shoulder to make sure the ringing hadn't woken Gavin. His dark hair drooped over his eyes and a

grunting snore rattled out—still asleep. He could sleep through a tornado.

“What’s up?” I asked and shuffled the sweater toward the bathroom.

“You’d better get in here.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “All hell’s breaking loose. You’re going to want to be here for it.”

“Do I have time to shower?”

In the background, I heard shouting that was definitely our police chief.

“I wouldn’t if I were you.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

Another barrage of yelling came over the line.

I sighed and rolled my head from side to side, hearing an all—too—familiar cracking. “Make that ten minutes.”

“See you when you get here.”

The phone went dead.

“Work?” A sleepy Gavin said.

“How’d you guess?”

I stumbled to the dresser in the corner. With any luck, I’d find clean underwear in there somewhere. I hated to go without.

“Sorry I woke you.”

“Christ, how late were you at the station last night?”

He propped himself up on his elbows. The blankets slid to his waist, exposing his bare chest. I loved the way he looked in the mornings. His dark hair disheveled and sexy. His hazel green eyes dreamy with sleep.

“I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Actually, I just got home a couple hours ago.”

I tugged open the sticky top drawer of my dresser. Success! One pair of clean underwear — my granny panties — my “last resort” underwear. No bra though.

“And you have to go in again?” He scrubbed his hands

through his hair. “When am I going to get a few minutes of your time? Not much, maybe fifteen minutes for a little loving.”

“Gav.”

“Well, I’m a normal, healthy, American male and it’s been awhile.”

A shiver raked over him and he pulled the blankets up around his neck.

“The guys on my work crew are starting to look good to me for Christ—sake. Especially that new guy.” He waggled his eyebrows at me.

“Poor baby.” I gave him an exaggerated frown. “Give me your hand.”

Gavin suspiciously held out his hand. I lifted my pajama top, pressed his hand to my right breast, then pulled it away.

“That should hold you for awhile,” I said and patted his hand before I shuffled into the bathroom. “Or at least keep the new guy safe for another day or so.”

Gavin laughed.

“Catherine O’Brien, you’re a freak!” he yelled behind me.

“You have no idea,” I said and closed the bathroom door.

Less than ten minutes later I guided my red 2003 Dodge Charger into the downtown St. Paul parking garage and turned off the ignition. The car sputtered a little before it stopped.

I have to get a new car.

Maybe the Charger would last through the summer and I could get a new one before winter. The Charger had been good to me this long despite the fact that I neglected all general maintenance and ignored all warning lights. I had faith she would keep running until winter.

My stupid high—heeled boots echoed through the nearly

empty ramp, making it sound like I was following myself. The suspicious part of me glanced over my shoulder just to be sure no one was there.

Paranoia and stupid shoes—that was me for as long as I could remember. Afraid of my shadow and ashamed of my five—foot—one stature.

I took the elevator to the eighth floor bustled with activity. Cops never slept.

I saw Louise’s braided head bob above the crowds. At nearly six feet, with dark mahogany skin and African braids that hung to her waist even after she had knotted them together at the back of her head, she was hard to miss. She stepped away from the crowd, and I noticed she was in the same suit she’d worn the day before.

“Didn’t you go home?” I threw my diaper bag of a purse on my desk.

She shook her head. “The fucking place fell apart right after you left this morning. I never got out.”

“And yet you look put together. How the hell do you do that?”

Louise grabbed a Starbucks cup from a cardboard drink holder on her desk and stuffed it into my hands.

“Nectar of the gods.”

I took a sip of the bitter brew. It burned all the way to my stomach.

“So who died?”

I gulped my next taste of coffee. Why not? My tongue had lost all feeling after the first sip.

Louise rifled through some papers and finally came up with the red file folder she called her “hot” file. All our current cases were located in the hot file. Supposedly, the red would make the folder easier to find in the mess that was her desk, but she was constantly losing it.

I laid the file on top of my coffee cup, flipped it open

with my thumb, and scanned the first sheet in the folder. There wasn't much information, just the name and address of the victim and the name of the first responding officer.

"Nathan Stanley. Don't know him. Who is he and why is he ours?"

"He's ours because I was the butt in the seat when it came down." An errant braid tried to creep across her forehead and she pushed it away. "Who he is, is a prominent business man and an acquaintance of the chief."

She slumped into her chair and spun it around, catching her feet on the wall and pushing herself back.

"He cares so we have to care."

Scrubbing my fingers over my head, I realized I hadn't run a comb through my unruly curls. I pulled a rubber band from my center desk drawer and raked my hair back with my fingers.

"You couldn't have gone home when I did and spared us the honor?"

"Sorry, couldn't drag myself away." She stood. "We'd better get over to the scene and see what's happening before someone's dog walks through the evidence."

She grabbed her purse, the Smartphone that rarely left her hand, and her keys.

"By the way Catherine, your ponytail's crooked."

It figured. Louise was always suited in the finest, feminine, latest, and well coiffed. Standing next to her made me feel like a short, pasty-white, slug. My hair was never right and my clothes, except for my boots, were more masculine than feminine. One of these days, I would make Louise take me shopping.

Poor Gavin, having to be married to a slob all these years, but then again, I was no different on the day he married me. He'd probably have a heart attack and die if I came home in something feminine and sexy. Better forget about shopping

with Louise.

“The ponytail stays that way. Let’s get on the road.”