

# Roadkill

Allie Lindell Series, Book 1

By  
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# Chapter One

I never set out to become an obituary writer. Who does that?

I'd grown up reading and analyzing the obits as my dad wrote them for *The Dallas Morning News*, and while I appreciated the stories my father told me about a particular obit, I had envisioned myself doing far greater things—like investigative reporting, traveling the world to write about vanishing villages in New Guinea, or genocide among the Hutu and Tutsi tribes. But no one places a want ad offering a job like that, so I'd responded to an ad in *The Columbus Dispatch* instead.

After five faithful years of filing away the obituaries, I was as hooked as my dad had been. This is something only obituary reporters can understand. Correction—obit reporters *and* the elderly. It seems to be their slightly morbid way of preparing for death. Elderly people follow the obits so religiously that I actually had fan mail from faithful obit readers—and not one less than eighty years old. While my fellow reporters did not see me as an equal, my research into the deceased was often more detailed than a piece on some local politician or the latest gas-drilling story. I loved my job and often mourned those I never knew.

I'll be honest. When I first started the gig, I just relayed what I got—name, date of birth, date of death. Where the service would be held and where people could send flowers. Then came that face. A picture of a young woman that came across my desk one rainy afternoon, and I couldn't stop looking at her.

*Why? Why did she die?*

There was just something about her face, the way she smiled up at me and I had to know. The thing with obituaries, it's a number game. It really is. After writing obituaries for a time, I began to see a pattern of how many elderly, how many middle-aged cancer patients, how many college student alcohol related accidents and how many small children and baby deaths were sent in each month. This is completely morbid and unscientific, I know, but each month I had a "feel" to the order of the universe through the predictable death notices. Then came the face. That face. Her face. That was the first time I

picked up the phone and called the family. I needed to know more. As it happened, they couldn't tell me. All they could tell me was that she had been murdered. There were no suspects, no motive, and no reason for her death.

After that, whenever I got an obit without certain details, I followed up. I wanted to know. I *needed* to know. It was shortly thereafter that I grew a fan base.

Obituaries are little bits of history. No, they don't tell you how a person made the decisions he did or why life events happened the way they did, but they do tell you how a person ended up: four kids, a military career, and so on. Every now and again, however, if you dig a little deeper, you can find a really interesting person—someone who's done all the things you wanted to do. Someone who invented the golf cart or stood next to MacArthur during the Korean War—and that's the obit that makes you ponder your own life experiences, what you have accomplished, and where you are going. What will be written about you when you die? At least, those are the obits that make me ponder my life.

Not my sister, however. I'm the one working obits, but she's the cynic. To Michelle, obits are depressing, morbid, and final. She sees the obit column as the last place her name will appear, and then it's all over. She claims nobody cares once the body is cold. As I understand it, that's normal for most cops. She's been with the Columbus Police Department K-9 Unit for eight years.

It's odd that it turned out the way it did. I'd been the tomboy, with skinned knees and covered in bandages. She was the priss—all silk skirts and perfect hair. I thought Toughskins were the way to go; she refused to wear clothes from discount stores. Yet she not only became a cop, but one of the best damn cops in the city, and I became a mother. Some things, however, don't ever change. My traditional mom clothes are faded jeans, T-shirts stained long ago with carrot juice and spit-up, and sneakers. I'm always sporting a ponytail. When off duty, Michelle lavishes herself in designer clothing. She carries Neiman Marcus, Bloomingdale's, and Macy's credit cards so that she can shop in either Columbus or New York when making the occasional visit to see our parents. Daily, in fact, she plots how she will one day shop some of the more exclusive shops on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills.

Both Michelle and Kipper have *the* most expensive hairdressers in the Columbus area. It took me some time to recover from Kipper's seventy-two dollar grooming bill when I picked him up at Kenneth's Pup Emporium months ago. What could you possibly do to a Doberman's coat for seventy-two bucks? But to Michelle, manicures, pedicures, grooming, and the finest of clothing are all just a way of life. While I think buying discount store-brand shampoo for a dollar is a great deal, Michelle would rather shave her head than use anything but the very best.

That's why my job at the paper suited me. I'm an average woman, thirty years old, not too flashy, but not so bad to look at. Just like my job—interesting, not earth-shattering. To my girls, I am beautiful. Straight, ash-blond hair, straight nose, perfect teeth—artificially so from caps after I got

kicked in the mouth, but that's a different story. I'm married, but not in the traditional sense. I'm committed to my partner and true love, Rae Ann.

When I slipped into the role of obituary writer, I had been comfortable. No, it hadn't been the exciting dream, but it was easier writing—straightforward, factual, black and white. A person lived. A person died. I'd never been one for flowery writing, and for the most part, it was how I saw life. My guess is I'd never been overly romantic because I never thought I would find romance.

I knew at an early age that I wasn't interested in boys. I don't recall a memory of knowing I liked girls. I just knew I never liked boys. As I had grown and seen my little girl friends *ooh* and *ahh* over boys, I'd felt isolated and insecure. Somewhere in there, I had seen things as they were. Black and white. You are or you aren't. It is or it isn't. My writing had reflected that.

Then I met Rae Ann.

There are only two things in life that I have ever written about with such passion and detail that I almost felt embarrassed.

The first is the Butter Frosted Chocolate Cupcake Delight at Franconia's Bakery near my parents' home in New York. It is the complete package cupcake—so divine, so yummy, so heavenly—my mouth salivates just thinking about it.

Unlike the icing a lot of chain stores use that has a kind of plastic smell and a texture that coats the inside of your mouth so that you know you are consuming more lard than any human should, Franconia's frosting is pure sugar, butter, yogurt, and sprinkles of something that could only have come from the flutters of a fairy's wing. Even as you bring it up to your mouth, your nose is filled with a smell of spun sugar, sweet dairy, and barely, just barely, something airy and flowery like when you catch the breeze blown out a florist shop doorway.

As a rule, I am not a big fan of dark chocolate. It's too heavy, too bitter, but the chocolate in Franconia's cupcake is rich, filling, yet so delicate to the tongue that it melts in the mouth. The light butter frosting is mixed with the rich chocolate taste, and your taste buds and mind are instantly drawn into a wicked battle of *eat faster!* and *slow down and savor!* It leaves you moaning and rolling your eyes uncontrollably.

There is a certain art to eating this divine creation. With each bite, one must measure out the perfect proportion of cake to icing as the blend between the two is beyond heavenly.

For me, I always swipe at the frosting with my pinky so that with the very last bite of cake, I can lick the frosting from my finger to have that final taste of sweet, light ecstasy slowly melt against my taste buds. I allow for a full minute before I take a drink of anything. I want that exquisite sensation to last as long as possible.

Fitness gurus may argue that the cupcake isn't worth it. This is so not true. That cupcake makes me do things I would not otherwise do. Here's the rule. I'm a three-mile runner. But when I consume this sumptuous cupcake, I have to do eight miles. No questions. No debate. For every mile run, an average of

one hundred calories is burned. It's an eight-hundred-calorie cupcake, so I totally break even in calories and feel like a warrior princess later. It's a win/win.

The second thing that inspires great passion is so much more complicated than a cupcake. That complication is Rae Ann. The first time I saw her, my mind reeled back to the cupcake, and I felt powerful and amazing things. In short, she was my cupcake.

Rae Ann has always been everything I ever wanted but was too shy and too scared to dream about, and when I finally had my chance with her, I fell into a kind of denial. It's funny, and not the ha-ha kind.

To the world, I am known as Allie Lindell, super-amazing obituary writer and detective. To Rae Ann, I am Cleo, Queen of Denial. It started in college when she teased that I was in denial about who I was and about our relationship. Not true! Then when we got together, I was officially dubbed Cleo because she thought I was afraid for us to come out as a couple. So not true. I did find ways to dodge disclosing that my partner in life was a woman while working at *The Dispatch*, but not because I was ashamed of her. Not at all. It simply seemed easier to avoid comments, controversy, and unwanted remarks. I was, she said, in denial about us at work. Again, not true. I just knew how people could be. I continue to deny all charges, but somehow the nickname stuck.

When Rae Ann and I decided to get pregnant, however, specifically when I was impregnated by our friend, I made the full commitment. I would be a stay-at-home mommy and I would forever call Rae Ann what she is—my partner, my life, my pain-in-the-ass love.

For all my supposed denials, I do admit this new gig is not quite as cozy as I envisioned it would be, and I often wondered if making that full commitment might end up getting me fully committed. I'm still not certain being a homemaker suits me. Two children, a dog, and a partner, and I find myself calling Michelle quite often to see what's going on in the world. I fill her in on first words, diapers, and how to get spit-up out of . . . well, everything. In turn, she tells me about crime, corruption, and the basic moral breakdown of today's youth. It's the perfect tradeoff.

I've even watched some of those daytime talk shows—hey, they're better than soap operas, and a grown person can only take so many episodes of *Dora the Explorer*. I find them draining and bleak, but hearing about the world from Michelle is far more depressing. It's real.

It was during one of those depressing, real-life conversations with Michelle that I first learned about Jefferson Plant, a former Columbus cop. He'd been shot in his own home, no sign of burglary or break-in, no murder weapon on site. Michelle had been very upset. Cops are like that; they are very protective of their own and don't like covering police homicides. But as she told me about the murder scene, my mind tumbled over and over. It seemed to me that I'd heard the name Jefferson Plant before.

"Was he a close friend?" I asked, not remembering seeing him with her

before.

“No, not close. I knew him, you know? I mean, he was always on the same shift as me.” She sighed heavily.

“How come I know his name?” I wondered more to myself than anything else. “I swear I know his name from somewhere.”

“Well, he was in the news a while back,” she said slowly.

“For what? He’s an ex-cop, right?” As soon as I asked, I remembered. “Wait a minute! He’s the guy who was tried for sexual molestation.”

“They were trumped-up charges,” Michelle snapped. “But, yeah, that’s why he quit the force.”

“That’s right! He was arrested for sexually . . .” I searched my mind for the right phrase.

“Gross sexual imposition with a minor.”

“Yes! A GSI.” I snapped my fingers. “His niece.”

“Allie, the guy was innocent. He was acquitted, remember? He wasn’t that kind of guy. I worked with him for a couple of years, and I’m telling you—”

“You knew Jefferson Plant, *the cop*. You didn’t know him outside of work. And he was acquitted because the evidence mysteriously disappeared.”

“Allie!” She huffed, and I could tell she was struggling to lower her voice. “What is it you want, anyway?”

“Sorry, I was just curious. I didn’t mean to bad-mouth him,” I said warily. Something stank.

I remembered at the time of the trial that something had been off base, but I couldn’t talk to Michelle about it then either. The entire department had become incredibly defensive about Plant and the case. She’s my sister and my friend, but no matter how you slice it, she is a cop, too, and will always protect the name of the department.

Plant had voluntarily retired when the charges were brought against him by his own family members. The prosecutor for the case said Plant had admitted sexual conduct with the girl in a taped interview with police, but the tape had mysteriously disappeared by the time of the trial. There had been other things, such as witnesses recanting their stories that made the whole case seem very odd. When I mentioned my suspicion to Michelle, she became instantly irritated, and we dropped the subject.

“Well, look, I gotta go,” she said. “Kipper is due for his shots.”

When the phone clicked dead, I realized not much had changed.

“Shat Mimi?” Krissy asked.

Just over two years old and still not in full control of her tongue, Krissy had renamed Michelle, since Mimi was so much easier.

“Yeah, babe, but she’s not coming over. Kipper has a doctor’s appointment,” I said, looking down at her disappointed face. “Um. Where is your diaper?”

All blond hair and blue eyes, just like me, but with Rae Ann’s temperament—impatient and demanding—she disregarded my questioning altogether, stamped a foot, and threw one of her better pouts my way.

“I wanny. I wanny Kipper.”

Kipper is a huge Doberman Pincher. With a deep chest, gigantic head, and powerful legs, he can throw fear into the bad guys without ever leaving the patrol car. Kipper has twenty-seven arrests, three takedowns, two medals, and a knife wound to his credit. The knife wound came during a scuffle between two drunks outside one of the more run-down go-go clubs in Columbus. One of the drunks turned on Michelle with a knife and Kipper came to her aid out of nowhere. He brought the bastard down, but was cut pretty severely in the process. He was laid up for a couple of weeks, and it was during that time that Krissy and Kipper became great pals.

This ferocious K-9 lay on his two-hundred-and-ten-dollar, name brand foam bed, covered with a quilt while Krissy hand fed him everything she was eating. Peanut butter, cookies, apple slices, and wafers became a way of life for Kipper as he healed.

While I am a dog lover, I had been quite nervous the first time I'd seen her kissing his face. I'd seen Kipper in action. I'd seen the tremendous power and anger that he used to take down criminals. It's a frightening and awesome sight.

Our own dog, Sosi, is a lab mix—quiet, sweet, docile. If there ever was a break-in at my home, it would be up to me to protect us all. Rae Ann works nights, and Sosi would be under the bed.

"I wanny Kipper," Krissy wailed again.

"We'll see him later," I told her. "Meantime, what did you do with your diaper?"

She smiled at me and rubbed her hands over her tummy, extremely proud of herself. "I put it on Kelli."

*Ahh. How helpful.*

At ten months, Kelli had become more mobile, less doll-like, and a person Krissy could not seem to leave alone.

I headed for Kelli's crib. "And why did you do that?"

"I a big girl! I don' need it."

While we were doing pretty well with her potty training, I had two issues with that statement. Krissy still wasn't consistent with potty training, and Kelli really didn't need the diaper on her head.

"Krissy!"

With Kelli up, her head now diaper-free, and ready for some cereal, the girls watched cartoons while I called my buddy, Sandy Spencer, at *The Dispatch*.

Sandy is an investigative reporter covering homicides and other major crime stories, and my connection to the Metro editor, Frank Carlson. She's in the Columbus Police Department as much as Michelle, maybe more so, and always had the latest dirt on everyone. The difference being Sandy does not mind sharing the dirt when she gets hold of some. It's a true talent and one I greatly admire.

It also doesn't hurt that she is tall, slender, elegant-looking, and a hopeless flirt. Like Michelle, she is always dressed to the nines, but Sandy buys most of her clothes from discount clothing stores.



It's a deep, dark secret—*Sandy Spencer dresses in discount couture*—and it's my go-to threat when I need a babysitter.

She is *The Dispatch's* own beauty queen, but she can toss out phrases that make even the veteran cops blush. Beautiful, brash, and bold, the cops don't know what to make of her but can't get enough of her. She is always welcomed in the station, and it's for that reason I knew Sandy would know about this Plant fellow.

Admittedly, I was calling because I wanted something to do, and helping Sandy had become a salvation for me in two ways.

First and foremost, Sandy's phone calls keep me sane.

With a background in journalism, and after being student editor of the college paper at a small, decidedly conservative school in Ohio—where I had a well-known reputation among the student body as a “flaming liberal”—I *still* didn't have what it took to handle the most demanding job I've ever had—being Mom. Learning to defend yourself against an entire student body fully loaded for verbal assault? Cheesecake compared to having a very small person screaming some unintelligible command at you. Helping Sandy work out the details of some morbid homicide case is a delicious treat for me.

The second way she helps me is by providing a little extra cash so I, too, can indulge a bit. The days of pampering ended when we became a one-salary household, but working as a freelance investigative reporter allows me some money on the side.

Sandy knows our nap schedule, and she calls me accordingly so we can talk without being interrupted. Our phone calls have helped me develop quite a sense about murder.

With Krissy and Kelli otherwise distracted and Michelle still a tad too defensive about the Plant case, I had to talk to Sandy. Something definitely stank in Columbus.

## Chapter Two

“Spencer,” sang the voice on the other end of the line.

I heard the commotion in the background. Sandy was right in the middle of something big. I could tell by the tone of her voice. It was just the way she liked things—total chaos, making a deadline at the very last minute, with panicked editors breathing down her neck.

I smiled. “Having a good day, are you?”

“Oh, shit.” She laughed. “You don’t know the half of it. What’s happening, Mama?”

“I was wondering if you’re on the Plant story. You know, the dead cop? Ex-cop,” I said.

Her muffled voice told me that she pushed the mouthpiece of her phone to the side as she spoke to someone in the newsroom, and I could just imagine her, both hands filled with papers, phone crooked between her shoulder and ear, desperately looking for the pen that she probably had tucked behind the other ear. Then she was back.

“What? Hell, no. That’s yesterday’s news. Haven’t you seen today’s paper?”

“No,” I said slowly.

I’d read the obits, of course, but I hadn’t managed to read the front section yet. The girls only allow me so much time with the paper before we have to move on to something else. Certain cartoons buy me time for the obits. It’s not until nap time that I get to the rest of the paper.

“They found another body! This time along Route 21, closer to town than anyone likes.” She spoke in a muffled voice to someone else again.

I searched for the morning paper and found the front section. There, on the front page, was a large picture of a body covered with the white sheet and what looked like several state troopers standing around her. I say *her* because I assumed it was the same killer.

**SERIAL KILLER STRIKES AGAIN.**

“This one was another out-of-towner,” Sandy said, joining our conversation once more. “Lord only knows where she’s from.”

“Same MO?”

“Looks like it. I was playing with the map—say . . . you could do that for me. Could you do that for me?” she asked.

I could tell by her voice that she had been moving around her desk while she spoke to me, but this idea must have stopped her dead in her tracks. “You’re way ahead of me on this one, Spencer. What are you talking about?”

“I told you about the Columbus prostitute who was found in Wisconsin, right? And, that Detroit woman found in Minnesota. We’re figuring this guy holds onto the bodies for about forty-eight hours before he dumps them. I was trying to figure out forty-eight hours driving distance from Route 21. You know, get an idea where this little one came from. Maybe I could get on the horn, call in some missing persons to certain areas, and see if anyone bites.”

“Or you could let the Feds do that,” I said. “That’s what they’re paid for.”

“Except they never like to share. Tight-asses.”

“This sounds like overtime,” I teased.

There’s been many a time that I’ve helped Sandy make a deadline or pull in some information no one else had. Her peers marvel at the time she puts in, completely unaware that she has outside help. Very few people know I’m still on the payroll, even if it is on a *very* part-time basis. I may bitch and moan about her last minute pitches, but we both know I love it. As I said, the money is nice, but it isn’t about that.

Sandy had laughed when I’d told her I was pregnant and that I planned to stay home to raise my kids. “You? You’ll never last,” she’d quipped.

I’d always been a workaholic, addicted to deadlines and pressures. Even while I’d been in my final month of pregnancy with Krissy, we’d laughed about me sitting at home with nothing to do but hold my baby.

But by the time Krissy was two months old, I was never sitting, and I never had *nothing* to do—feeding, diapers, bath time, playtime, changing clothes (hers and mine) from spit-up, food fights, and leaky diapers . . . as Krissy got bigger, so did her demands. And then Kelli came along.

When babies cry, Sandy and I hang up and continue our conversation another time. When the house is quiet, we discuss homicide cases, and she teases me about all my spare time. But she knows.

“Oh, shit, you spoiled brat. You’ve got eighteen years to finish your job, I’ve got ten minutes.”

“Waah,” I said, reaching for a pencil. “Who do you have?”

“Great! Okay, so far, three hookers from Ohio. I’m thinking this guy is from the area. Well, wait, let me back up. There are fifteen altogether. All prostitutes and at least ten of the women were last seen at or known to work at the truck stops.”

“Truck stops?”

“Yeah, neat trick, huh?” She snorted. “They’re called ‘lot lizards.’ They hang out at the truck stops, pop into the back of a cab, do the deed, and go back inside the truck stop restaurant. They don’t have to stand around in the cold, and they might even get a free meal out of it.”

“How nice.”

“Okay. Gotta pen?”

“Yup.”

“We got three from Ohio, one from Detroit, one from Wisconsin, one from Tennessee, three from West Virginia—”

“West Virginia? They have prostitutes in West Virginia?” I asked.

“What? You think they give it away for free there?”

“No.” I laughed. “I just never thought about a place like West Virginia as having prostitutes.”

“Wise up, Pollyanna, they’re everywhere. Anyway, we got . . . where was I? Okay, four from Indiana, two from Kentucky, and today’s little gem makes sixteen. Only we don’t know where she’s from.”

“All right, I’m looking up the map now. I got a question for you now. What have you heard about Jefferson Plant?”

“Nothing, is what. I tell you, if I had the time to dick around with those yahoos downtown, I would, but I’m trying to make a deadline here. I can tell you this, though, they are *really* uncomfortable about it. Whatever happened to Plant, I mean, whatever reason he was offed, it’s making some of the guys downtown nervous.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because before this thing came in, I was on the phone with Captain Mason. He’s so busy running down his list of *no comments* and *can’t disclose that information as yet*, he never heard a word I said. It’s a feeling, you know?”

“Yeah, I had the very same one.”

“Like I said, if I had time, I would, but this truck-stop killer is sitting on my lap. And Frank is breathing down my neck. You know how much I love that,” she said, and I smiled.

I had a visual of Frank doing just that—only in my version, it was more like panting.

Frank Carlson. Editor of the Metro section for *The Columbus Dispatch*, and madly, hotly in love with Sandy Spencer. It’s probably that reason alone that he agreed to let me stay on the payroll as a freelancer.

Sandy had convinced him she couldn’t handle the load on a piece she was working on—a political scandal in Grove City involving suspected mafia ties. Sandy had been all over it, but she’d been too well known by the Grove City Police Department and city officials to snoop around.

That’s when I’d gotten the idea to freelance. Four days away from my due date, I’d waddled my pregnant body around Grove City’s city hall building, asking questions and scoring free donuts. Acting like a reporter from one of those tiny rural newspapers, I had played the wide-eyed country bumpkin routine to a tee, and they’d spoon-fed me everything I had wanted to know. The idiots. Just because I’d been pregnant, they’d talked to me as if I weren’t as quick or bright as they were.

Not being one to unfairly judge, I informed Sandy that getting the information had been easy as there were many tools in the shed and I had been

the only sharp one; that there was, indeed, an elevator where I'd been, but it didn't go to the top floor with that lot; that their collective IQ had been about the same number as my waist measurement. I'd been given the job only if I promised never to talk like that again.

"Okay, I'm on it. Just one more question. Did you cover the case when Plant was charged with molesting his niece?"

"Yeah." She snorted. "Talk about a joke."

"Why?"

"His brother claimed that Plant molested his little girl. The brothers hated each other. Not just because of this charge. Long before that. A regular family feud. So why was the little girl over at his house in the first place? I ask myself that even today. Supposedly, Plant had admitted to molesting the girl to some other cops, but the tape recording of that confession mysteriously vanished. And get this—the cop accused of misplacing the tape couldn't stand Plant. Why would a cop help destroy evidence and risk getting fired for a guy he can't stand?"

"The courtroom was filled with cops who detested the guy. His neighbors weren't too fond of him either. He wasn't exactly on anyone's popularity list, and yet, to talk to everyone now, he was a saint. No one will say *why* he was disliked. In fact, that prick, Mason, tried to tell me what a great cop Plant was."

"Well, I gotta tell you, Michelle speaks pretty highly of him."

"Uh, forgive me, but Michelle doesn't know what she's talking about. No offense, but your sister is about as cozy with her fellow officers as a mongoose is with a snake."

"She's got an excellent reputation," I said, instinctively defending my sister.

It's true. Kipper and Michelle have several impressive collars. They're an awesome team and have been called in multiple times when it was uncertain how other K-9 units would react under the pressure of gunfire.

"I'm not talking about her reputation as a cop," Sandy said harshly.

I knew that tone.

"She's got boobs and an ass that wiggles when she walks. As long as she's got those, she's always going to have to fight for professional respect. The last thing some of those guys are going to do is confide in her. The guys have get-togethers all the time that Michelle is never invited to—probably never even hears about—but you can bet your sweet ass she is the topic of many a conversation.

"Yeah, this guy Plant was no charmer," Sandy said, never missing a beat as she randomly jumped back to the original topic.

I sighed.

It was nothing personal with Michelle. In fact, Sandy liked Michelle, but she knew how things were downtown, and Sandy had never understood why any woman would want to be a cop. Not that she thought women couldn't handle the crime, the violence, the hours, or the hard work. In some regards, that's what Sandy does. She just couldn't understand why anyone would want to

subject herself to the kind of treatment female cops get from civilians and from other cops.

“So who killed him?” I asked, trying to push the image of my sister being mistreated from my mind. I don’t like her being a cop either, not for the same reasons as Sandy, but because the idea of Michelle having a gun pointed at her doesn’t sit well with me.

“Oh, baby,” she said with a laugh. “Where to begin? There is a whole list of possibles. It’s a regular whodunit.”

“Like?”

“Like his sister-in-law, who despised him. Her sister, Val somebody, who was sleeping with Plant, but also hated his guts . . .”

I grabbed a piece of paper and began scribbling names as fast as I could.

“The sister-in-law has a kid from a previous marriage—Danny, if I remember correctly—who despised Plant. Don’t know why. Let’s see . . . I know he wasn’t too popular with the neighbors. A guy, uh, Barkley, testified in court that Plant kept strange hours. He was considered a hostile witness. I’m telling you, Plant didn’t have many friends.”

“Interesting,” I muttered.

“Why do you want to know all this stuff?”

“Just curious. It’s like you said, something isn’t right. Now more so than ever.”

“Yeah, well, Dick Tracy, are you gonna help me with this new body? Where she came from?”

“You gonna tell Frank I’m working two stories? You know, get that double time?”

“Shit! You’re so spoiled.”

\* \* \* \*

Using a freebie satellite GPS system I found on the web, I calculated the distances between the different drop spots for dead prostitutes and poured myself another cup of coffee. Glancing at the clock, I figured I had an hour before Kelli woke up. Krissy, distracted by cartoons, was easy enough, but once Kelly was awake, the entire house changed. Alone, she was an easy baby. Paired up with Krissy, they were two little beasts.

I read the news story first. The woman had yet to be named, but authorities were confident they would learn her identity soon enough. It seemed pretty safe to assume that she was a prostitute and had met the killer at a truck stop during the forty-eight hours preceding her death. Like all the other victims, she had been strangled and, presumably, contained in some sort of refrigerated unit.

The theory, of course, was that the killer was a truck driver with a refrigerated rig. He had been careful never to kill on main roads, and Sandy suspected he used the major highways to pick up the women and then turned onto less traveled highways to dump the bodies. These roads had less traffic

but were still busy enough that no one would think twice about a big rig.

Because the bodies were strung along these routes in several states, the FBI had become involved—but barely. No roadblocks had been established. The objection being that it might tip off the trucker and he would cool his jets for a while. There had also been the expense of targeting highways around the nation.

I looked back at my list of victims and the places they had been found. These women were so unimportant to anyone. If we had been talking about a bunch of prominent businessmen being bumped off, there would've been immediate action. But a bunch of prostitutes? Soon enough, this would be a back-page story. The only reason they were worth noting at all was because they were dead—and only then because they had been killed by a serial killer. Their identities, lives, and personalities meant nothing. All that mattered to anyone was where they had come from and where they had been found. I knew there wouldn't be much said about these women in the obituaries.

As the day wore on, my mind kept straying back to Plant and all the people who disliked him. The morning had begun so innocently—Dora singing about her annoying backpack, Krissy continuously pinching Kelli—but by nap time, I was obsessed with a man I didn't know. I turned the list of Plant suspects over in my hand then looked back at the list of dead prostitutes. I could have simplified my life by just concentrating on the truck driver murders. No one was interested in the Plant case, so why not just drop it? It was the notion that a perverted cop could get away with sexual crimes that bothered me. That he was killed and police were still apparently unwilling to link Plant's past deeds to the murder further bothered me.

It would have been so much easier if I'd never gotten involved with that blasted Plant family, but like everything else, I had to stick my nose into both cases. *I just had to . . .*

\* \* \* \*

Barkley was the name of Jefferson Plant's neighbor. He wouldn't be too hard to find, I thought. I shuffled back through the paper until I found the story.

#### EX-POLICE OFFICER FOUND SHOT TO DEATH

It said that the body was found near Michelle's old beat on Delaware Avenue. How many Barkleys could there be on Delaware? Providing, of course, that he was still there.

I browsed the web looking for the right Barkley, and after a moment of searching, I found a listing for Jeff Barkley at 979 Delaware Avenue.

I dialed, let it ring once, and hung up. I stared at the phone in my hand.

*What was I thinking?*

I went to my purse and fished out my throwaway phone. It was a cell phone purchased by *The Columbus Dispatch* and one that was untraceable. At least, it was untraceable to me, which was critically important for two reasons: safety and Rae Ann.

I dialed again with the new phone.

This guy was considered a hostile witness at Plant's trial, but death has a way of making people sentimental, right? Maybe he wouldn't want to bad-mouth the dead. Money had to be my angle. People—especially the circle Plant ran in—don't care too much about justice, but the dollar sign is a whole different story.

"Mr. Barkley?" I asked when I heard a click on the other end.

"Yeah?" a rough voice grumbled.

I could picture the face almost instantly.

White male, late sixties, white hair, leathery skin—maybe from too much liquor, or maybe from too much manual labor—bad teeth, maybe one or two missing. He probably chewed tobacco. This guy was going to jump at my offer.

I plunged ahead. "My name is Sally Kilmer, and I'm an associate editor at *Columbus Corner*. We would like to speak with you regarding the late Jefferson Plant. Of course, Mr. Barkley, we would pay you for your time. I'm sure you're a busy man, but we would certainly appreciate an interview with you."

I prepared myself for the next question. He'd want to know why we were interested in Plant, and what we wanted to know. I'd tell him that although this looked like a family squabble, the death of ex-police officers was the focus of our next assignment. I'd explain to him that we simply wanted him to tell us what kind of man Plant was, what kind of neighbor he was.

"How much you paying?"

That's all. No moral dilemma, no concern, no remorse, or regret over his neighbor's passing—just money.

"Well, of course, we have to verify your information," I said, my voice croaking more than I would have liked. I wasn't prepared for him to jump that quickly. "I would like to come out and chat with you. If we think your information is suitable, then I'd like to schedule a time to come out for the interview."

"I'd be on television?" he asked.

"Well, no. It's a blog, Mr. Barkley. But millions view it all the time."

"And you gonna pay me?"

"Yes, we can discuss the amount when I meet you. How does that sound?" I tried to sound as professional as I could. This guy was too easy.

"You got my phone number," he said. "You got my address, too?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll be here all day," he said.

We settled on five that evening and hung up.

I looked at the clock and called Jenny. She should be home about that time.

Jenny had entered my life in a rather frightening way. I had seen her many times. We had that polite, waving-to-the-next-door-neighbor kind of relationship. We didn't know anything about each other, although we lived only forty yards apart. Looking back, I can't help but wonder if I had been



prejudiced, too. Fact is, Jenny is a big lady. On the rare occasion that I'd seen her outside the house, I noted how slowly she got along. She lumbered.

I'm a runner, taking the girls jogging with me in the double baby-jogger. I love the outdoors and stay active to fight the calories of chocolate that I consume far too often. What could I possibly have in common with a woman like Jenny? Once, I'd even questioned whether she should be allowed to drive as I watched her slowly trudge to her car and thought, *now how could she possibly react quickly to a child running in the street or someone suddenly swerving in front of her?*

That way of thinking had quickly ended the day she rang my doorbell.

I was looking for Krissy, who had been sent to her room for torturing Kelli. I managed to calm Kelli down and went to talk to Krissy about her actions only to discover she was gone. I was walking up and down the hallway, searching for her, when the doorbell rang.

*Oh, great, now what?*

I opened the door to find my neighbor, whose name—I must confess—I didn't know, and Krissy. My mouth fell open.

"I believe this belongs to you," Jenny said with a smile.

"Yes, how did . . ."

"I found her walking down the street," Jenny said. Her hand rested on Krissy's shoulder.

"Her name Benny," Krissy said, all puffed up and proud of having a new friend.

"Close. Jenny Sabatini. Next door." She thumbed over toward her house, and I nodded.

"Yes, hi. I'm Allie Lindell, and I guess you've met my daughter, Krissy. But —" I looked from Krissy to Jenny again. "Where did you say you saw her?" I couldn't believe Krissy was out of the house. It was only then hitting me that while I dried Kelli's tears, Krissy was alone in the world.

"I mad," Krissy said, pouting. "I wanny Mimi."

I invited Jenny into the house and discovered that Krissy had planned to walk to Mimi's. Thankfully, Jenny was just coming home from work and found her walking alone.

I discovered a lot about my neighbor as well. We dealt with Krissy later, something which included lots of talks, a new lock on the front door, and a padlock on the back gate. Jenny, it turns out, works part-time at our local library, volunteers twice a week at the Red Cross blood bank, and has multiple sclerosis.

I had pegged her as an older, inactive woman who lumbered around, keeping odd hours, and shouldn't be allowed to drive. In reality, Jenny is a fascinating person who doesn't know the meaning of the word *quit*. She is stubborn, determined, and intelligent. Despite being physically challenged, she is always optimistic. She really is an inspiration to me and has become one of my most favorite people. Even better, to my great delight and good fortune, she loves my children.

Still, as we were getting to know each other, I was hesitant about Jenny's abilities. She constantly offered her babysitting services, stating that she would love the company, that she loved children. In fact, she'd been a vibrant twenty-four and working in childcare when the MS had come on, but I was hesitant.

I didn't know much about the disease before I met Jenny. The symptoms vary among different people, and Jenny is luckier than many. Multiple sclerosis is a disease affecting the central nervous system and has a myriad of ongoing issues as it progresses. For some, the symptoms are merely blurred vision, while others may be completely paralyzed. Why the disease hits the people it does is not so easy to explain, and from what I understand from Jenny, is perhaps one of the hardest parts of dealing with it. She says wanting to yell, "Why me?" at the top of her lungs every day is still with her, though the impulse has faded dramatically. She admits that every time she struggles to do the smallest of chores, the urge to get frustrated and cry is still there. I've never seen any indication of this myself, and I've accused her of making that up only so I will think she *is* human after all. Truly, Jenny is one of the strongest people I know.

For Jenny, her relapsing remitting MS meant unpredictable flare-ups followed by almost total remission. Her episodes involve sudden blurred vision, unusual fatigue, and clumsiness. They don't last long, and history has shown that once the attack is over, Jenny won't have another for at least six months. But during the bad periods, she pulls away, staying in her home and spending several days in bed.

It's these reasons that made me unsure about Jenny as a babysitter. She is a wonderful friend and the girls just love her, but how could we know Jenny wouldn't have an attack in front of the girls? Krissy is too little to call 911. She wouldn't know how to help Jenny, and Jenny wouldn't be able to help the girls if they needed it. So I continued to take the girls with me or work around Aunt Mimi's schedule when I could. Until the day Jenny bonked Krissy on the head with her walking cane, that is.

The girls and I had been at her house, having just returned with some groceries for Jenny, when Krissy began to run wildly through the house. *Hurricane Krissy*, as we call her, and Jenny's crystal figurines were yet another reason I didn't want Krissy in her house.

After countless commands of "Krissy, stop that!" I began to hunt her down.

I know people are down on a good old-fashioned swat to the behind these days, but not me. I was all ready to deal with the fallout of just such a swat when Jenny got to her first.

Jenny had had an episode a while back, and as a result, she relied on a walking cane for stability. It wasn't a big deal, she insisted, but she liked the added security. It was that same piece of added security that she used to tap Krissy lightly on the head.

We were both so surprised, we froze. For a moment, there was no sound. Then Krissy began to cry. Jenny had hurt her feelings.

But it was the beginning of a new respect. Jenny said *no*, and it was over. Jenny said *stop*, and whatever it was stopped. Jenny has a kind of power that I'll never have. There is something about her stature, her tone of voice, and the doom of possibly disappointing her that she holds over the girls.

After the famous caning incident, Jenny became our favorite babysitter. Although Mimi is always very exciting, Jenny has a special, maternal quality about her with the babies.

On this day, however, it turned out she had a doctor's appointment and would not be returning until after five thirty.

*Looks like Aunt Mimi wins the babysitter nomination tonight.*

Michelle was working night shift this month and would be awake by four. I called and asked her to watch Krissy and Kelli for an hour. If I ran over the hour, she could always take the girls to Jenny's.

It was a plan.

## Chapter Three

The entrance of Aunt Mimi was topped only by the fact that she brandished a “new” movie, *The Lion King*. The girls had no idea how old this movie actually was, and they were thrilled. I would never even be missed.

A quick check in the mirror, hugs and kisses shared with the girls, and I was out the door. I jumped on I-71 South and headed into the city. It was an easy twenty-minute drive, so I rehearsed my pitch as I drove. Barkley hadn’t even expressed any sympathy or concern about his late neighbor. He was primarily interested in money and fame. I would play on that.

A man looking a lot like the one I had pictured strolled out onto the front porch of 979 Delaware Avenue. He wore a flannel shirt, although the weather was entirely too warm for it, and faded jeans that barely hung on his hips. How men manage to keep pants low on their hips without the aid of a clearly needed belt is a talent that I’ve never been able to understand. This guy was a pro—the crotch of his pants seeming to fall at mid-thigh.

As I approached, he cocked his head to the side and waited.

“Mr. Barkley,” I said, extending my hand, although I was still quite a few steps away.

He made a polite step forward. A small one. “That’s me,” he said slowly.

“My name is Sally Kilmer. We spoke briefly this afternoon.”

“I remember.” He threw a nervous glance toward Jefferson Plant’s home then back at me. “This where we’re gonna have the interview?”

“Well . . .” I gave him my best professional chuckle. “First, I will need to verify a few facts.” I pulled out a notepad. “You are Jeffrey Barkley?”

He nodded.

“Of course, when the time comes you can produce the appropriate documentation.” I waved my hand around. “A driver’s license, social security card.”

He nodded again.

“Now then, how long have you lived here?”

“I been here since 1972. Funny thing is, before that, I was right across the

street. Over there.” He pointed, and I pretended to look interested.

In truth, I was barely listening. As he rambled on about his old house, his new house, and why he had moved, I peered over at 981 Delaware. The police tape was still up. It was a single-family home. I couldn’t guess the mortgage payment. It would depend on when he moved in.

I interrupted Barkley. He was somewhere in the middle of 1979, and how his family had to move to Tennessee.

“How long had Plant lived in his home?”

“Oh, shoot, Plant been there since about the mid-1970s.” Barkley rolled his eyes.

“He lived alone, right?” I asked.

“He had his brother living with him for a couple of years. Now, that was a bad deal. Him, his wife, the kid. It was a bad deal. They were always fighting. Finally kicked the brother out, he did. Uh, Clovis was his name. Dumb shit. Dumber than his brother,” Barkley snapped.

“Didn’t like him much?”

“Not a bit. Always parked his truck in front of my house, blocking my view. See?” He pointed back toward his porch. “From there, you can see the whole neighborhood. My old house, the whole thing. But with that truck in the way, you can’t see shi— nuthin’. Sorry.”

“I’ve heard worse.” I shrugged it off. I had. Namely from my own sister. Or worse, Sandy. “But he lived alone, right? I mean no wives, girlfriends?”

“Oh.” He snickered. “There’s been gals. Lots of gals.” He gave a kind of wink that I could only assume was the universal sign for *He got lucky*.

I raised my eyebrows to give the appropriate response. “Ah,” I said. “But no Mrs. Plant?”

“Ha, I don’t think he could’ve paid ’em *that* much.”

“Come again?”

“He worked the pros. Hookers. I guess he met ’em through work. Through *work*, get it?” He laughed at this.

“Prostitutes?” The hair raised on the back of my neck.

Barkley’s grin broadened. “Had quite a few parties, he did!”

I feigned writing on a notepad while my mind raced. Dead prostitutes littered on the sides of highways and a dead cop who liked hookers seemed too much of a coincidence.

“Parties with these prostitutes,” I repeated.

“And the others,” Barkley chided, stroking his chin. He squinted over to Plant’s home.

“Others,” I said slowly. “Other prostitutes? Like a *ménage à trois*?”

“Times ten.” He chuckled.

I shook my head at him, not understanding.

He brought his eyes back to me, looking somewhat disappointed that I had not immediately understood. “He had little shindigs for the boys in blue and the ladies of the night.” He winked at me and rocked back on his heels. Truly, he was enjoying himself as he recounted the sordid details of his

neighborhood.

“Excuse me?”

“That’s right. I seen it. Lots of times.” He stuck his chin out toward the Plant home. “They thought they were being sneaky, comin’ in late at night, dressed in regular clothes, but you knew. You knew who they were. And them ladies. All gussied up. You knew what they were all about, too.”

My mouth fell open. I had nothing to say, but the thoughts were plentiful. Columbus’ finest. Michelle’s comrades.

“But the cops come sniffing around when Plant was killed, and they don’t want to hear about that. They want to hear about Plant’s brother or that kid of his. But no one wants to hear about all the late-night parties or the poker games.”

“Poker games?”

“Yeah, Plant was runnin’ a regular casino, he was. Every Friday night they come and didn’t leave ’til early Sunday morning. Girls come and go, but the fellas are there for the whole weekend. I’m sayin’ it was one of the cops that killed him.”

“What’s this about the kid?”

“Plant’s nephew.” He shook his head. “Plant and him didn’t get along, but the kid was always over. I heard he got hauled in for questioning.”

“It doesn’t sound like Plant had many friends, and yet he was a pretty popular guy,” I said.

Barkley nodded. “Don’t need to have friends with the kind of business Plant was runnin’.”

“And what kind of business was that?” I asked, wanting to make sure I was getting the full picture. This Plant fellow appeared to be a regular entrepreneur—casino man, pimp, possible child molester. What else?

“Just building his retirement fund, I guess,” Barkley said.

*Nice.*

I let Barkley stare at the house, repeating himself over and over while I formulated my thoughts. There was no way I could have this conversation with Michelle.

“Mr. Barkley, may I ask you how you know all this? I mean, you seem to know an awful lot about your neighbor’s activities.”

He shrugged sheepishly. “I didn’t ask for it,” he said. “They come at all hours, parkin’ in front of my house. I want to know why they’re parkin’ in front of my house. At all hours. So I watch—you know—try to see who is doin’ what. I don’t like ’em parkin’ in front of my house.”

I nodded, jotting down notes for myself. “Well, I thank you for your time. We’ll be in touch,” I said as I backed down the driveway.

“Is that it? Am I gonna be on TV?”

“Well, no. It’s a blog, but you will get plenty of exposure. This is good stuff,” I said, holding up my notebook. “I’ll show it to the editors, and I think they’ll bite. I’ll be in touch with you in a few days.” I knew I would be back, and I wanted it to be possible to pump more information from Barkley.

Keeping him baited seemed like a good idea. I stopped and faced him. “Of course, until we get all this settled we would appreciate it if you would keep this meeting to yourself.”

Barkley looked a little unsettled.

“At least until we work out an agreement with you,” I said, and he nodded enthusiastically.

“No problem” he said.

“Thanks again.” I waved. “Good stuff.”

That went well, I thought. Maybe I was wasting my time looking in the classifieds under consultant writer. I should have been looking under super blogger or super sleuth.

\* \* \* \*

“Get all your errands done?” Michelle eyed me suspiciously.

I was surprised to see her still there. I was hoping it would be Jenny.

While I have to tiptoe around Michelle, Jenny loves the cases I get involved with. She revels in every delicious detail I can give. Jenny and I understand the need for *something else*—something to take us away.

“Yeah, almost.” I sighed as though it had been a hectic time and breezed into the kitchen.

Kelli lay asleep in Michelle’s arms. *The Lion King* was long over with, and *Snow White* was playing, I noted with slight irritation. I was trying to encourage only one to two movies per week, not per day.

The dwarfs were singing “Heigh-Ho,” and Krissy was singing along with them at full volume.

Michelle eased off the couch and followed me into the kitchen. Like me, she has heard the “Heigh-Ho” song more times than she cares to admit. In fact, she can break out into any number of Disney tunes. It’s a problem. Once you let one of those songs creep into your head, you’re doomed to hum it for days on end. It’s one thing for me to be humming little tunes while strolling down the cereal aisle in the grocery store but quite another for Michelle to sing *Snow White* while making a drug bust.

“Snow White?” I asked her. “You couldn’t find anything more relevant than that?”

She shrugged. “Sandy called,” she said. There was a certain edge to her voice.

Internally, I winced.

*Dammit.*

I’d turned off my phone when I’d gone to talk to Barkley and totally forgotten to turn it back on. I’d gotten in the car, turned it on, and the radio had been playing an old rock song that I loved. I’d wound up listening to music—my music, adult music—and had completely forgotten about those other little things like someone trying to reach me.

“Oh?” I hoped Sandy called and shot the breeze with Michelle, leaving no

particular message. She knew how Michelle felt about me playing detective.

“Yeah, she wanted to know what kind of luck you were having with the maps.” Michelle’s body posture changed, and I instantly recognized the cop stance—feet planted wide-spread, arms folded across her chest, jaw set.

This was the part where I supposed to say, “I swear, I only had one beer!”

“Maps?” I asked, trying to sound as genuinely confused as I could and hoping Michelle was buying it.

*I swear, I only had one beer!*

I poured a glass of water, and as I took a drink, I glanced out the window to see Sosi standing on top of Kipper. He had allowed himself to be thrown to the ground and was now spread out on the grass while Sosi gnawed ferociously on his neck. She jerked violently on his collar, causing his body to twitch slightly. Sosi thinks she is very tough when she takes Kipper down.

“Maps,” Michelle repeated patiently. “You’re trying to figure out the course of the serial killer?”

“Oh.” I chuckled.

*Silly me.*

“That. Yeah, she asked me to.” I shrugged. “You know, she’s working on a deadline and was hoping I could help her out.”

“Uh-huh. Is that what the errand was about?”

“No! In fact, I haven’t even had a chance to look at the maps. See?” I pointed to the table where the notes and maps I had printed out this morning sat untouched.

What I failed to mention, however, was that I had become distracted with the Plant case. That, I would keep to myself. It was insane that I was defending myself this way. After all, I was being paid to do it. Life is short, and some things just aren’t worth arguing about, so I tried to skip over it, as I always do.

“Hugs,” Krissy said, coming into the kitchen. She held her hands high over her head, looking pathetically into Michelle’s eyes. Mimi never had a chance. And secretly, I thanked Krissy.

Michelle dutifully handed Kelli over to me and scooped up Krissy into her arms. Kelli barely stirred in the transition.

“No Whi,” Krissy said, pointing back to the living room.

“What, sweetie?” Mimi asked.

“No Whiii,” Krissy repeated, this time with more urgency.

Mimi looked to me for help.

“*Snow White*,” I said. “She probably turned off the DVD again.”

“Oh,” Mimi said, turning her attention to Krissy. “I think we can handle that.”

They left the room discussing why Krissy should leave the buttons on the remote alone. From the other room I heard, “Alright! No Whi!” and then a startled cry. Krissy, in her excitement, had apparently run to her sleeping sister to make the great announcement that yet another showing of the movie would begin.



*How exciting.*

I hustled in and snapped Kelli up. Suddenly alert but very confused, she couldn't decide whether to be happy to see me or cry because her heart was suddenly pounding from Krissy screaming.

I stared down at Kelli and then the maps. "Now, where do you suppose this one is from?" I asked Kelli.

At ten months, she was very smart but not very savvy in the way of geography.

I propped her in my lap and proceeded to study the map.

This latest case strayed from his MO. Route 21 was off the beaten track—enough so that it would have been too much trouble unless he really knew the area. Why would a trucker risk upsetting his rig on an unknown path? The only hotels on that highway had long since closed. Route 21 would have been the worst place for a trucker to be late at night, again, unless he knew the area and had a specific plan in mind.

The phone rang as I was narrowing my choices.

"Hello?"

"So what's the beat?" Sandy asked.

"*You.*" I lowered my voice into the phone. "Big mouth! Why'd you tell Michelle I was looking into this thing for you?"

"She asked?" Sandy squeaked.

"Believe me, I don't need her to know. She's already pissed at me from this morning," I said.

"Well, then answer your damned phone next time. Besides, what does she care? Hell, it's a job. A job, I might add, that you are very good at," Sandy said.

I could hear the clicking of a computer keyboard in the background. Only Sandy can carry on a conversation and write a piece for the following day at the same time. It's a rare talent.

"Suck up." I smiled. "She's a cop and a big sister. She doesn't like me snooping around."

"Double whammy!"

"No." I snorted. "She's also a survivor. She's afraid I'll get my head blown off snooping and she'll be left to take care of the girls."

"Not Rae Ann?" I could see her smiling over the phone, teasing me.

While Michelle and Rae Ann loved each other, their relationship was strained. They had very different approaches to life, to the girls, and to me. Mimi doted on the girls' every whim and fancy. Rae Ann, on the other hand, was determined to make the girls practical. She believed that being a toddler was no excuse for throwing a fit. She's analytical, brilliant, practical, and sometimes utterly useless when it comes to child rearing.

She could tell you the entire configuration of a computer's hard drive but can't begin to tell you the girls' routines, and she's not exactly thrilled about super sleuthing skills.

"Are you kidding me? She can't be left alone for prolonged periods of time

with the girls unattended. The other night I asked her to tell them a bedtime story.”

“And?” I could hear the humor in her voice.

“She told them the *Who stole my arm* story. You know, the one about the serial killer hitchhiker?”

Sandy snorted.

“Yeah. If I die, I’m going to need you or Michelle to move in with Rae Ann and the girls.”

“Oh, well, that sounds fair,” Sandy said with a laugh. “Let’s pause for a moment and imagine me and Rae Ann as a parenting pair. Hey! Only I don’t want her to, you know, get a thing for me.”

I burst out laughing. “Uh, you’re not her type.”

“Super sexy?”

“No, a high-maintenance, fashionista, potty-mouth police whoremonger who likes to pimp out her friend and tease her boss for better leads.”

I heard a faint gasp, and I smiled.

“I am not a pimp!”

“And a big mouth. I forgot big mouth. So, you see, telling Michelle I’m hunting a serial killer doesn’t make for a happy cop, happy sister, or happy aunt.”

“Shit, all I wanted you to do was to look at a map for me. Tell her to relax.”

“Well, she’s being entertained right now. *Snow White* is running for the one-billionth time. She’s mesmerized.”

The keyboard stopped clicking. Suddenly, she was all ears. “So what have you got?”

I hedged. “Well, I’ve been thinking about this last one.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m thinking she could be from around here.” The truth was, I was off playing detective with the Plant case and hadn’t had time to look at the maps. Sharing that with Sandy, otherwise known as *Deadline Spencer*, didn’t seem like a great idea. Particularly since I wanted to run a couple of thoughts past her from my conversation with Plant’s neighbor, Barkley. I bargained my way around to those by sharing my thoughts on the trucker using Route 21.

“Hmm. Yeah,” she said slowly.

“These other bodies. They all turned up on back roads, off the major highways, didn’t they? Not little ones like Route 21?”

“Yeah, mostly big ones.”

There was a long pause and I could almost hear the gears turning.

“I like this. I like this a lot. Especially since this new information just came in. This new Jane Doe was found early enough that the coroner’s office can give a better time of death.”

“When?”

“She was dead less than twenty-four hours.”

“So she could be from here. He could have picked her up around here and dumped her body before he headed to his next job.”

“Why so fast? I mean, he hangs on to all the others, drives around with them for forty-eight hours. Criminy, that gives me the creeps. And why dump this one on such a remote road?”

We were both quiet, working through the new information, and I was pulled from my thoughts as Kelli squirmed in my arms, nestling into me.

I looked down into her little face, and she up at me. Her eyes looked so intelligent. I have a friend who says when babies are born they hold all the answers to the world. As the babies get older, they forget and become more ignorant. By the time we're adults, we're stupid, making things like nuclear bombs and reality television.

“Maybe . . .” I said slowly, looking at Kelli and keeping my voice pleasant, “. . . maybe he thought by dumping her body along such an isolated road she wouldn't be found for a long time. *Maybe* he wanted people to think it was a different murderer because she was off the beaten path rather than the main highway.”

Kelli's eyes were huge. She liked that idea.

“That's a long shot.”

“But, otherwise, the MO is the same, right?”

“It looks like it.”

“A prostitute. Dumped late at night. Strangulation, right?”

“Yup.”

“Who found her?”

“A cyclist. He's into competition, in training.”

“So the killer strangles this women, just happens to be at his old stomping grounds and rather than dump her on a highway when the heat is on, he goes down a lane where no one will see or suspect a thing, dumps the body, and goes on his merry way. He figures no one will find this one for several days, at least. Hell, the way Route 21 is, it could be weeks. But along comes this bicyclist, who spots the body. That's still okay because he's long gone on the highway and won't be back in town for a while.”

“Uh-huh. Uh-huh.” I hear the clicking of her keyboard as she makes notes to herself.

*I'm on a roll now.*

“Maybe he even knows this one,” I said. “Because this is his hometown or where the headquarters for his truck is, however that works. He goes to a truck stop that he frequents a lot and hooks up with a woman he knows. He kills her and realizes that he has to dump her bo—”

“That doesn't make sense. If it's a place where he's known, he would be afraid people could ID the woman. Wouldn't he take her as far away as possible?”

“Unless, that's precisely what he wants the police to think. Instead, he dumps her right here, so the cops will be thinking she came from somewhere else or that he got lost, wound up on Route 21, and dumped the body.”

“I dunno.” The clicking stopped again.

“You need to find out where a really big truck stop is. Or not so much big,

but one where there are prostitutes.”

“Or maybe *you* could put in a word to Michelle,” Sandy said.

“Michelle?”

“Sure. Vice. They know all the joints like that. Ask her to find out.”

“Why don’t you?” I asked.

“Are you kidding? If they think I’m sniffing around on that angle, they’ll be all over it. Just ask her.”

Before I could say another word, she’d hung up.