

Best Served Cold

***Best
Served
Cold***



To the Memory

Of My Mother

Maxie Rene Holmes

The Lady of the Yellow Rose

She Encouraged

The Dream

PROLOGUE

This was his third Scotch.

Sitting alone near the back of the bar, Eric reached for the glass that was neatly sitting on a folded, paper napkin and welcomed the brown liquid that burned going down his throat. He flicked his tongue across his bottom lip to ensure no single drop would be wasted. He'd been drinking more often lately, but tonight was different and whether this was in celebration of events to come or foreboding of what might lay ahead didn't matter. His goal, for the moment, was to have a deep, rich numbness overtake him, to stop thinking, stop knowing or remembering any coherent thoughts at all.

He lifted his hand to signal the bartender and ordered another drink as he lit a fresh cigarette and brought it to his lips with a shaky hand. He swore to himself as he finished his drink, threw some loose bills on the table beside the empty glass and scrapped back his chair.

As Eric stepped from the pub, cool night air hit his face and almost worked like a sobering tonic. Several people were still on the sidewalk even though it was well past midnight and in that moment; he would have traded places with any one of

them. He saw more people exit the back of a taxi and go into the bar he'd just left. This was New York, the City that Never Sleeps.

He hunched his shoulders as he walked further down the street and found his car. This wasn't a section of town he normally frequented. His style was more upscale. That didn't matter tonight. Eric sat behind the wheel and took a minute to lean back against the headrest before finally sliding his key into the ignition.

The glare of oncoming headlights blurred his vision as he drove and despite the coolness of the night, beads of sweat began to coat his forehead. He wiped them away with the sleeve of one arm just before he swerved out of his lane and almost side swiped an oncoming car. His window was rolled down and he caught the tail end of nasty profanity that was hurled his way.

Eric glanced at the dashboard. The red needle was inching closer to the left and he grimaced. He should have stopped earlier for gas after leaving work, but there were too many important things on his mind and he ignored every station along his path.

Normally, he was the steady one, the level headed one and the one in control since that was something his father always insisted upon. What he'd been doing the last few months was exactly in line with that directive and the irony of it caused his foot to press harder against the gas pedal.

He shook his head and tried to clear his mind. There were things he could have done to make this right, but the end results might be the same. Thrown away would be the live of privilege he was born to lead and had denied as he sought to stake a claim of his own making. That lofty goal had been an abysmal failure.

Eric thought of calling his father to tell him everything, but dismissed that idea in the same about of time it took to make it. At this stage of the game, he wanted to tell him he'd changed his mind and sought to take his rightful place as the heir to

Best Served Cold

Kirkland's. Instead he'd taken other drastic steps and there was no turning back. He forwarded an overseas letter to his sister with all the instructions she would need to help everything move forward.

As these thoughts assailed him, he hadn't notice the car that was trailing behind him. He continued to drive and made several turns, hoping it was only a coincidence or his befuddled brain was playing tricks. The car continued to follow; then it flashed its headlights several times as if alerting him to move to the curb.

Eric changed lanes and increased his speed. The black sedan followed suit and kept pace with his car. He came to the harbor. It was black and menacing in the darkness with only the dim, pole lights above casting eerie shadows along the shoreline. The sedan passed his Lexus and cut him off. Eric skidded to the side and slammed on the brakes so hard, he was propelled forward, hit his mouth against the steering wheel and knocked out a front crown.

He spit blood into his hand and felt its stinky warmth against his skin. Things began to move in slow motion. In a daze, he saw two shadowy figures exit the car in front of him and the adrenaline started pumping in his veins. He opened the driver's door and sprinted into the darkness. He found himself in an alley that was sandwiched between two warehouses.

Eric heard his name being called and heavy footsteps against the pavement. His heart was beating so fast he thought it would jump from his chest. It was hard getting air into his lungs, but he kept running until he hit a dead end where a tall, wire fence blocked his path. He turned and was blinded by bright lights that flashed into his eyes. His arms came up to shield them and he squinted trying to see beyond the glare.

He suspected this was coming, suspected who was out to get him and make him pay. The only thing in the back of his mind now was not the end he knew would come, but his parents, his sister and all the things he wanted to accomplish with his life.

Alyce Holmes

Eric dropped to his knees and every prayer he'd ever learned suddenly flashed through his mind as the lights came closer and with the most profound sadness, he accepted his fate.

Best Served Cold

The view outside Police Headquarters held no particular allure for the young woman who stood staring through a third floor window. Foamy, gray clouds blocked the sun and sent a hazy mist across the city. This time two weeks ago, Laurel was living in Paris with her fiancé and had recently completed final studies at the Cordon Bleu. Her plan had been to return to New York and work as a chef in her father's restaurant, continuing a legacy that was two decades old.

She and her brother, Eric, grew up in *Kirkland's*, but she'd been the one who ate, slept and breathed the place long after the days they'd spent summer vacations working in the kitchen and waiting tables. Everyone was certain Eric would follow in their father's footsteps. Therefore, it came as a surprise when he decided to move in a different direction. He enrolled in college with major studies in Business Management.

After receiving his Masters, he secured a position with an accounting firm. A few years later, he switched gears again and became the Operations Manager at *Duvall Beverage and*

Distribution. In the end, Avery seemed to understand his son's choices and had been supportive. He didn't believe turning Eric into a carbon copy of himself would make him a better man. No matter what Eric decided to do, he would have tough shoes to fill. Their father was the classic success story and with that came a certain amount of respect; not only from his family, his peers and associates, but also within the business community.

It had been three weeks since anyone heard from Eric. He hadn't been to work, at home or in touch with his family. He was never the type of man who abandoned his responsibilities and as weeks wore on, the family made the decision to formally declare him a missing person. That same afternoon, Laurel boarded a flight home to lend her support and be with her parents. She turned from the window and saw their hands locked together. Avery's thumb rubbed across his wife's knuckles in soothing reassurance.

Captain Lawson saw the trio of people waiting in his office. He'd been told to close a case he'd rather not. He worked for the people of New York as a sworn officer of the law, but he also answered to the Commissioner and the Mayor and both those men ordered him to end it. The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth especially since two of his best detectives logged hundreds of man hours when the order came to stand down.

Now he needed to find the right words to tell the family. One of the hardest parts of this investigation was dealing with the victim's family, especially his sister. He didn't like the woman and was quite sure the feeling was mutual. As he walked into his office, he could see her eyes harden as they met his.

Police officer or not, Laurel didn't trust the man and hadn't been highly impressed by his detectives either. Maybe Lawson had a problem with strong, independent women. Truth be told, she was very much like her father with a steadfast belief in her own ability. In other ways, she was similar to her mother. They had the same chocolate eyes and smooth, brown skin.

Best Served Cold

"Morning." Captain Lawson sat behind his desk and the man with him took the chair next to Avery. "First of all, I'm very sorry for your lost. I can't imagine how difficult this must be for you," he began. "This is Dr. Braxton. I've asked him to join us since he handled the forensics and I'd rather the report came directly from him."

The doctor turned toward Avery before he began speaking. "My team brought back your son's car and we spent the last few days examining the vehicle inside and out."

Eric's Lexus had been pulled from the murky depths of the harbor days earlier and the family was immediately notified.

"I don't understand," Avery said. "You examined the car. I thought we were called here today to identify his body."

"The car was empty," Braxton said, quietly. "We weren't able to locate his remains."

"No," Miranda screamed, before her hands clamped over her mouth. Avery's arm circled his wife's shoulder and he shot the doctor a harsh stare, cautioning him to watch his words.

"We found blood evidence on the steering wheel that was a match to his blood type. The pattern was consistent with the driver being propelled forward. We also found a loose crown and we were able to match it with dental records. Based on our evidence, we have every reason to believe Mr. Kirkland was in the car when it went off the pier."

"I don't believe you and without a body, you can't be sure." The words were forced from Avery's lips.

"The window on the driver's side was open and we think his body escaped that way since the seatbelt wasn't fastened," Lawson cut in.

"That doesn't mean he's dead," Miranda insisted.

Dr. Braxton shook his head. "With the amount of blood staining we found on the driver's seat, I don't believe he could have survived in the water."

"Eric always wore his belt. He insistent on it," Laurel urged. "Blood stains? This has to be some kind of mistake."

"Would he wear the belt if he'd been drinking?" Dr. Braxton asked, further and a hushed silence filled the office. "You need to know that the blood samples also showed signs of high alcohol content."

Laurel felt a burning sensation that started at her fingertips, extended into her arms and by the time it worked its way to her chest, it was a boiling heat. "Wait a minute. Hold it." She pushed back her chair. "This can't be right. Are you sitting here telling us my brother is dead, you have no body and all this was his fault? He would never drink and drive and put himself or anyone else at risk."

"I'm afraid that's what the evidence shows," Lawson replied. "Due to the information we've uncovered, we're forced to close the case."

Avery couldn't sit still any longer. He stood up and moved to the back of his empty chair. "You're not closing anything. I want a full investigation and I don't think that's what you've done," he groaned.

"We have conducted the investigation already, Mr. Kirkland. We've been on this almost a month."

Laurel turned angry eyes toward Lawson. She wanted to strike out at something and this arrogant sounding man would be the perfect target.

"Then work another month or two months or three. Do whatever the hell you need to," Avery shouted. "I can go over your head and call the Police Commissioner or the Mayor. I'm friends with both."

"Word on this came directly from the Mayor," Lawson told them before he felt the shockwave that reverberated through the office, as well as, the look of horror on Avery's face.

"What did you say?"

He tried to put himself in their position, but he couldn't possibly feel the depth of their emotions in that moment with Avery's biting anger, Miranda's shocked silence and Laurel's blatant antagonism. He reached for a manila envelope. "We

Best Served Cold

have the personal effects we were able to recover." He passed Avery the packet.

He opened it and looked inside. It contained Eric's wallet, a gold necklace and a plastic bag containing what was left from the glove compartment. Avery stuffed everything back inside. "This is all wrong."

"His death is being classified as an accident. There's no need for further inquiry." Lawson didn't dare add the fact that if Eric had survived, he would be facing criminal charges for a DUI.

"I don't care what your evidence shows. If you incompetent stack of idiots won't do your job, I can find someone who will."

"I've been here before and I've listened to people just like you go off half-cocked," Lawson warned. "Believe me when I tell you that going out on a limb trying to create a scenario that doesn't exist would be a bad idea. Accept our findings, grieve your lost and move on with your lives."

"Thank you very much, Captain. Fortunately, I don't care what you think since I don't take orders from you," Avery spat. "We've heard enough. I'm in charge now. Count on it."

Avery slammed his phone against the desk so hard, he shattered the screen. "I don't believe this. The Mayor isn't accepting my calls. His office has relayed a message that they're going to accept the final version of Eric's case." He reached for the glass of Scotch his brother-in-law handed him.

Jack McCain had been his in-law and business partner for the better part of thirty years and he valued his integrity, intelligence and above all else, his opinion.

"It's an election year. You'd think he'd want to get on board," Avery surmised. "Especially in what should be considered a high profile case. You can be sure my checkbook will stay in my pocket and my support will never go his way again."

"I don't know why you're surprised," Jack ventured. "I always thought the man was a horse's ass and wondered why you endorsed him in the first place."

"He had sound business strategy that he parlayed into tremendous political clout."

Jack noticed how glassy Avery's eyes were and he looked more tired than he'd seen him in a long time. This last month aged him in body and spirit. He also saw how it was affecting his sister and his niece. He felt he should be the voice of wisdom and get all of them to accept reality. The fact remained the same. Eric was gone and they should have been going through the various stages of grief that began with denial and finally ended in acceptance.

Instead he saw the stubborn set to Avery's mouth and the hardened edge of his jaw and knew that wasn't going to happen. His frustration was made increasingly worse as the betrayal set in from a man he considered a friend and who had just turned down his plea for help. The disappointment Jack saw was intense.

"I'm not sure where to turn next," Avery said. "I need to set the record straight on this and I have a feeling in my gut that Lawson is a liar. Miranda and Laurel agree with me on this."

Jack's eyes locked on the spasmodic muscle flexing at the corner of Avery's mouth. "Tell me everything they told you again."

"Those aren't words I want to repeat. My son is..... they said Eric was....." Avery's words fluttered to a whisper as his head dipped toward the desk. He had a hard time focusing and there was a blurry imagine as he tried to concentrate on Jack's face.

"Avery! Avery!"

He heard a voice shouting his name before another sharp pain shot up his arm until he found relief in unconsciousness.

Jack snatched his cell phone from his pocket and called nine-one-one. At the same time, he yelled through the house and both Miranda and Laurel ran into the office. It took twenty minutes for the paramedics to arrive, get Avery stable and loaded into the ambulance.

Best Served Cold

Laurel jumped into the car with her uncle, leaving Miranda to make the trip with her husband. The drive to the hospital was traveled in stoned silence as the hard grip around Laurel's chest tightened and all she could remember later was traffic lights that seemed to pass in a rapid blur, followed by the blinding, white lights of the hospital entrance and people rushing forward as the ambulance pulled under an archway and the doors were burst open.

That was followed by forms to be filled out and hurried questions to be answered before Laurel caught one last glimpse of her father being pushed away through a set of automatic doors and she felt torn between following behind him or running in the opposite direction.

She saw three police cars. Each one had its own array of flashing lights that sent off a colored spectrum. The entire area was blocked off with rolling ribbons of yellow, plastic tape that billowed in the evening breeze.

"Officer," Laurel yelled, flagging down one of the uniformed men, before she grabbed the yellow barricade and scurried under it.

"Where do you think you're going? You can't be here," he shouted.

"I know Captain Lawson. What's he doing here?"

"I don't care if you know the President. Get back behind the tape."

"Tell him I'm waiting to talk to him."

"I'm not your social secretary," the officer sneered. "Now move it or I'll arrest you for trespassing." He grabbed her arm.

"Please," she pleaded.

"Laurel!" Heavy hands gripped her shoulders. "Laurel. Wake up."

"Uncle Jack," she jumped. "I was having a nightmare." Laurel sat up in her chair. "What am I saying? The last month of my life has been a living nightmare."

"Take this." Jack handed his niece a cup of coffee. "Miranda is finally getting some sleep so I don't want to wake her. As

soon as the hospital cafeteria is open, I'll get us all some breakfast."

"I can't eat anything."

"You have to. Making yourself sick won't help," he cautioned. "You're one of the strongest young women I know. You got it from her." He nodded in his sister's direction. "And from your father. He's back there fighting for his life and he'll win it back."

"Uncle Jack. Always the voice of reason and hope." She took another sip from the cup. "Don't worry about me. Who's looking out for you?"

"Oh, I'm fine." He patted her hand. "I can manage if you can."

She raked her hand through her hair. "There's so much to think about now."

"I've been wondering about things myself. I'll take care of *Kirkland's*."

"I haven't been able to think about the restaurant since I've been back. Dad and I haven't discussed it. The only thing on his mind was Eric. I don't believe the police report anymore than Dad. Driving drunk wasn't like Eric at all."

"He told me you all discussed it and I agree. Some things were different with your brother just before he disappeared."

"Like what?"

"I can't put my finger on it. He was off his game. I tried to get him to talk about it. He was evasive and brushed me off."

"What are we going to do? It will take a stick of dynamite to get Mom out of here?"

"I know," he affirmed. "We have to be the ones to step up and take the lead."

She squared her shoulders. "I'm going to make some calls and plan the memorial service."

A sad gleam darkened Jack's eyes before he added. "Miranda received a call yesterday from Raymond King at *Duvall Beverage*. They're going to rush the process and have a

Best Served Cold

check issued from the insurance agency for the corporate policy Eric had with the company."

"We don't need it," Laurel smirked.

"It's standard practice. It's not meant to be insulting."

"I suppose so," she agreed. "I can make a trip to Eric's apartment and see if there's anything else we might need. Eventually we'll have to start clearing it out, but I'll worry about that later."

"I'll stay here and keep a close eye on your mother."

Laurel took a deep breath. She knew he was right as she stared across the room.

"I won't leave her side and I'll call you the minute we know something."

"Promise."

"Absolutely."

The housing director left stacks of boxes piled next to the front door. He told her the rent was paid in advance for the next two months so there was no need to hurry cleaning out the place. Laurel remembered when Eric first moved in. It was a nice, luxury condo on the Upper East Side and she offered to help decorate. All he wanted was a big sofa, a flat screen television and a table for his beer and chips. The memories washed over her as she walked from one room to the next and finally down the hallway to the bedroom.

The door was standing slightly ajar. She laid one hand against the panel, pushing it back to the wall. This room had southern exposure and it was bathed in sunshine that poured through the blinds.

She opened his closet doors and grimaced. There was no need for any clothing. It would all be packed later. She sat on the bed and absently reached for the nightstand drawer. Sitting in the corner of it was a stack of pictures fastened with a rubber band. Several were pictures of them as children, family holidays, their high school years and Eric's college days. Others were more recent photos of him with a woman. They both

looked happy. She was very beautiful, breathtaking in fact. In one picture, they were sitting close, his arm was wrapped around her shoulder and one of her hands rested on his leg. Holding it closer, she noticed the woman's necklace. It looked identical to the one they'd been given as one of Eric's personal effects. Each was made with the same thick, herringbone pattern.

All the pictures had an intimate quality about them. It was apparent in the way they touched each other and their body language that appeared all too personal and familiar. She'd told him about Hayden, but he hadn't mentioned he was seeing anyone. If they were dating, where was she and why didn't she come forward when Eric went missing? Laurel located the other insurance documents she'd been looking for and stuffed them in a bag, along with his laptop and a stack of unopened mail.

She worked the next few days. That's all it took to reduce Eric's life to an hour long service that would illustrate the years of his existence. Finally dropping from exhaustion, she pressed her knuckles against her eyes trying to clear her thoughts and dialed the overseas operator. "Hayden. It's me."

"Hello, Laurel. How's everything going there?"

"Horrible," she admitted. "My family has started to arrive and the house is full. I can't seem to find a minute alone. I wish you were here."

"I'm not good at sad occasions."

"This is something more. It just doesn't feel right," she told him. "The police did a pitiful job on the investigation. I think they're brushing everything aside and it doesn't make sense. To add insult to injury, all this caused Dad's heart attack."

"Didn't you say your father's attack wasn't as severe as they first thought? I'm sure everything will be fine."

"How can you say that? He's still in the hospital and my mother can't say Eric's name. I need you."

"You know the Calloway gathering is Saturday. I couldn't be back in time and I have to go. It's important."

Best Served Cold

Laurel ground her teeth together. "You mean to tell me the Calloway party is more important than I am?"

"Be reasonable. It's not as if I can do anything."

"Never mind. I'll handle it myself."

"That's my girl," he said. "I'll be here when you get back."

The line went dead before Laurel had the chance to answer him. She stared at the phone in her hand. She needed Hayden's support, but he made it plain that her needs were not important to him. In the end, she did manage alone. The service was dignified and when it was over everyone gathered for dinner at *Kirkland's*.

The restaurant was crowded. It looked like any given day with the exception of the dark clothing and the somber tone. Laurel hated every minute of it. She'd been standing with Miranda and Jack as they accepted condolences and Laurel longed to make an escape. She started to slowly move away before her footsteps faltered as her eyes locked on a couple at a table on the other side of the room.

The man was handsome and dark and the woman with him was absolutely gorgeous with straight, black hair that hung down her back to lightly brush against her chair. There was a regal quality about her that caught the eye. There was no doubt in Laurel's mind that she was the woman from the pictures she'd found in Eric's apartment.

She leaned close to her uncle as she nodded in their direction. "Do you know them?"

"I know the man," Jack admitted. "That's Damon Duvall."

"Eric's boss," she sputtered. "And the woman with him?"

"I assume that's his wife."

The blood in Laurel's veins suddenly ran cold. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Do you want an introduction?"

"No." She grabbed his arm, before he moved toward them. "Maybe later." She didn't remember seeing them at the church and wasn't sure if they'd seen her. Could Eric have been having an affair with his boss' wife?

All the implications of that ricocheted in her mind. She couldn't confront the woman at her brother's service and certainly not while she was with her husband. Before the crowd began to thin, she broke away to the one place she always found solace.

The kitchen was busy. It was very well organized and ran like a fine tuned machine. Sonny was plating a meal when he saw her. Her black dress was silhouetted against the metallic background of the immaculate cabinetry that circled the walls. He finished dripping sauce over the grilled tuna, added the garnish and called for one of the waiters to serve the elegantly prepared dish that was artistry on a plate.

He wiped his hands on a napkin and walked to the rear of the kitchen. "What are you doing back here? You should be out front with your family."

"I couldn't handle it anymore. I was starting to feel suffocated and I needed a smoke." He followed her into the back alley and Laurel pulled a pack of cigarettes from her purse.

Sonny had been with *Kirkland's* for seven years. During that time, he'd become a head chef and worked closely with Jack who often said if he was Avery's right hand man; then Sonny was his.

"I thought you were giving those up," he grimaced. "You promised me before you went to Paris that I'd seen the last of them."

"You promised me you wouldn't stand on that leg too long. It's bothering you again, isn't it?"

"I have a stool I can lean on if it starts to stiffen up on me," he said. "And you changed the subject." Sonny took the cigarette from Laurel's hand and dropped it to the ground.

"I need that to help me relax."

"I think you've had a few drinks this evening. Let them help you," he chastised. "It's time to step back for a minute and catch your breath."

Best Served Cold

"That's easier said than done. This one is going to take a while." She didn't want to tell him what she was thinking and she hadn't said anything to Jack.

"I know, kid. It's a tough pill to swallow for me too."

"I don't think the police did enough for us. Dad tried to get the Mayor to reopen the case, but he hit a brick wall. I know there's more to this and I'm determined to find out what really happened."

"Are you insane? Avery would have your head on a plate if you went out and did something crazy. What ridiculous plan is circling around that head of yours that can land you in a world of trouble?"

Once again Laurel felt an unfamiliar nagging in the pit of her stomach when she thought of those pictures. "I don't know what you're talking about," she lied. "I'm not planning anything."

"Laurel Rebecca Kirkland. I've known you since you were a teenager and there haven't been many times that you weren't getting into trouble," Sonny offered. "Before you go off the deep end, maybe you should understand something. There are legitimate, honest ways of working around the police. I know someone. His name is Trent Broderick. He's one of the best private investigators around and he's a straight shooter. I'd rather you talk to him instead."

"Instead of what?"

"Instead of doing something by yourself."

"I hadn't thought of hiring an investigator," she admitted. "That makes a lot of sense. How do I find this man?"

"I have his number and I'll give it to you under one condition."

Laurel exhaled. "Such as?"

"Tell Miranda and Jack what you're doing. I'm going out on a limb giving you Trent's number. I don't want anything to happen to you and I'd like to still have a job when this is over." He pulled out his cell phone and strolled down the list of contacts. "Well?" he pressed.

She smiled. "I promise to tell them everything they need to know."

Trent had been up the last twenty-four hours sitting in his truck wearing a pair of headphones and monitoring his surveillance equipment. He couldn't hold his eyes open any longer and the heavy, tense feeling in his limbs prevented him from having the energy to drive home.

This wouldn't be the first time he'd slept in his office. There was a couch sitting against the wall and he looked at it with disdain. It was cluttered with file boxes and he didn't have the strength to move them. The leather chair at his desk would just have to do.

He shuffled a stack of loose papers into a bigger pile and pushed it to the side in order to create space in the center. Trent leaned back, propped his feet on the desk and slid his baseball cap down over his eyes. He was just beginning to slide between the misty realms of wakefulness and slumber when a voice shattered the calm.

"Excuse me," he heard someone say. "Excuse me. Hello."

He lifted the cap from his face and peered out under the brim. "Thanks for waking me up, lady," he yawned. His boots dropped to the floor and he sat up straight, wishing he'd remembered to lock the door. "Can I help you?"

"No." She shook her head. "Maybe not." Laurel had seen too many television movies. She thought she'd find a man in a cheap suit and hat with a cigarette dangling from one side of his mouth. Maybe she half expected some overzealous man with a holstered gun strapped to his body and a second weapon fastened around his ankle.

This man was Afro-American. His face would be clean shaven once he handled the razor stubble shadowing his cheeks. His eyes were hooded and dark since she'd awakened him from an afternoon nap. "You're not exactly what I was expecting."

He didn't bother removing the smirk from his face. "Is that so? Well, I wasn't expecting anyone at all." His tone was

dismissive despite the fact that the woman standing in his office was absolutely gorgeous with perfect, brown skin and a tiny mole near the left corner of bow shaped lips. She had smoldering, dark eyes and if a man was so inclined, he could happily lose his soul in them. At that moment, those eyes were glaring at him and he didn't like it.

"I guess I got my signals crossed. I was looking for a man named Trent Broderick. I was told he's a very good private investigator. That can't be right." Her perfect, little nose was twisted in the air as she glared at the unkempt office and back to the man sitting behind the desk.

Trent bristled at the insults, both spoken and implied. He was tired and not in the mood to justify his office or his work, especially to this stranger. The hot words that sprang to his lips went unsaid and he replied instead. "Whoever told you that must have been mistaken so you have a nice day and lock the door on your way out." He leaned back in his chair, put his feet on the desk again and pulled the hat into place.

"Excuse me!" he heard her sputter.

"Correction," Trent amended. "Shut the door and your mouth on your way out."

"How incredibly rude. Not a problem." Laurel stomped across the tiled floor and slammed the door behind her. A picture dropped off the wall and crashed to the floor.

Trent jumped to his feet and snatched his office door wide. "Damn it. I'm rude? You just broke my picture frame and woke me from a well needed nap," he shouted, behind the woman who was already halfway down the corridor. "Lady, just what the hell do you want?"

"It's very simple," she hissed, turning around to face him. "I'm looking for someone to help find out who murdered my brother."

He exhaled a sharp breath and ran a hand over his face, feeling the prickly stubble on his chin. Suddenly he realized what an unprofessional mess he must look. This woman came

to him seeking help. He didn't have the option of turning down a potential client and risking his reputation.

"I think you'd better come back inside." He turned on the heels of his boots and waited for her to follow him. "Have a seat." He cleared a jacket and another stack of files from a chair and wiped it off with his hand. "First of all, tell me who sent you to see me."

"Sandino Buchanan," she answered. "He works for my father."

"Sonny," he nodded. "That means your father is Avery Kirkland."

"That's right."

"Eric Kirkland was your brother."

Trent read the newspaper. He knew about the recent loss suffered by the prominent restaurateur.

"According to what I read, his death was classified as an automobile accident."

"That's what the police told us. I know better."

Now those same brown eyes had become suddenly pleading and within their depths, Trent could see something more. Her anger was almost tangible, but the uncertainty he saw there was far worse.

"Money is no object. I'm willing to pay whatever you charge."

Trent could sum this woman up in sixty seconds. Most people who made that kind of sweeping statement did so because they had money to burn. At least he could have appreciated the significance of it if she'd been the one who earned it.

"What makes you think the police are wrong?" he asked.

"I have a million reasons," she began. "Will you help me?"

He recited his fees and required cost for daily expenses and wasn't surprised when she didn't blink.

"That won't be a problem." Laurel reached into her purse and pulled out her wallet. She wrote a check and handed it to him. "Is this enough to get started?"

Best Served Cold

"This is more than I'll need to begin nosing around." The check in his hand was four times larger than he'd requested.

"I also need to give you this." She reached into her purse again and pulled out a manila envelope. It contained a flash drive, a stack of pictures and a letter. Trent took them and read through the note.

"I received this in the mail after Eric's memorial service. It was forwarded to me from Europe and it's postmarked the day my brother disappeared. His letter mentions the woman by name and I know who she is," she said. "When Sonny gave me your number, I almost didn't come. Then this came in the mail and I was sure I had to do something."

"What's on this?" he asked, indicating the memory stick.

"I'm not sure. The letter alone tells the story. It's the first step in learning who had something to do with my brother's death. The files on the flash are password protected and I haven't been able to break the code. From the beginning, I suspected something wasn't right. After I got this, I was absolutely sure."

"That's one hell of a conclusion, but none of this information is proof we can take to a D.A." He stared at the envelope for a moment and then across his desk to her. "I think I can help you."

"I was hoping you'd say that. I thought of going back to the police. They made it plan they're not interested. Even with this new information, I didn't want to take the chance they'd tell me that again," she said. "There's one more thing. I have an idea in mind that's a bit unorthodox, but I'd like you to consider it."

Trent didn't like the sound of that and held her check as if it might catch on fire. He had a bad feeling he'd be dancing with danger. When the beautiful woman started telling him her plan, he liked it less with every passing minute and knew ten thousand dollars wouldn't begin to cut it.

You've just finished reading the first chapter of Alyce Holmes' Best Served Cold. If you want to know more about Nathan and Karen Wells, please purchase your choice of a Paperback or CD on our website. Thanks for becoming an Alyce Holmes fan.

