

A Valentine Mystery, Book Five

To Love, Honor and Kill



Jennna Harte

Unedited Excerpt from *To Love, Honor and Kill*, Book 5 in the Valentine Mysteries

Note: This excerpt has NOT been professionally edited yet, so it's likely you'll find errors. Further, revisions may still be made by the time the final book is released.

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For excerpts and information about upcoming releases from Jenna Harte visit JennaHarte.com.

To Love, Honor and Kill: Valentine Mystery Five: Tess finds herself in the middle between her best friends, journalist Kate Wells and Detective Daniel Showalter as they each seek information about a 15-year old closed murder case. The more they learn about the case, the more they believe someone has gotten away with murder and is willing to kill again to avoid getting caught.

If you haven't read them, check out the Valentine Mysteries books one through four.

Deadly Valentine: Valentine Mystery Book One: Tess Madison walked away from her two-timing fiancé, a multi-million dollar trust fund and a cushy corporate law job to pursue the single life indulging in chocolate and fancy French underwear. That is until murder and sexy, blue-green eyed Jack Valentine come into her life.

Old Flames Never Die: Valentine Mystery Book Two: The husband of an old flame of Jack's is murdered. He thinks she innocent. Tess isn't so sure. Pitted against each other, Jack and Tess risk their love and their lives to solve the murder.

With This Ring I Thee Wed: Valentine Mystery Book Three:- Wedding bells are in Jack and Tess' future, that is, if the people trying to kill them for Tess' engagement ring don't succeed.

'Til Death Do Us Part: Valentine Mystery Book Four - Tess and Jack are living in wedded bliss, until Jack's childhood friend, famous actress Ava Dumont shows up in town to film a movie and is accused of killing her nemesis. Will they be able to discover the murderer or will 'til death do us part' come much sooner than they'd dreamed?

Chapter One

Tess looked up into the brilliant blue-green eyes of her husband and saw unease. He'd tossed and turned throughout the night, so it wasn't surprising he was up before the sun had barely peeked over the horizon. He'd sought refuge on the sun porch off their bedroom.

"Did I wake you?" His arms wrapped around her, pulled her to the warmth of his body. She loved how safe she felt in his arms, but she got the impression his holding her was more to comfort himself than her.

"You had a long night. Worried about today?"

"Not worried so much as feeling like after today, everything may change."

"Were you like this the night before our wedding?"

He smiled, showing his one sexy dimple. "Not quite."

"After that day everything changed."

"Yes, but that day was a dream come true."

Her insides turned to mush. Being married to a hopeless romantic meant her insides went gooey a lot. She wondered if she ever made his insides go gooey too. Probably not as much. There was no doubt she loved him with all her heart, but she hadn't yet mastered all the romantic talk.

"How about you? Did you second guess yourself?" he asked.

Of the two of them, she would have been the one to get cold feet, but she hadn't. By their wedding day, Tess was ready, without hesitation, to be Mrs. Jack Valentine.

She shook her head. "Not one. Being your wife couldn't come fast enough."

He looked at her as if she'd given him a gift. Maybe she could make his insides go to mush after all.

“And,” she added. “Whatever repercussions that come from today, we’ll deal with it, together.”

She must have said the right thing because the unease disappeared from his eyes, replaced with gratitude. She thought he might say something, but instead, he lowered his head and kissed her, soft yet thorough. Then he held her.

“It’s still early,” she said, savoring the feeling of being in his arms. “You can get another hour or so of sleep before we need to get ready.”

“I don’t want to sleep.”

The suggestiveness to his tone had her looking up at him again. The desire in his eyes told her she’d judged his tone correctly. “What *do* you want?”

“You.” With his arms wrapped around her waist, he lifted her off the floor and made his way back to the bedroom. His ability to let go of negative thoughts and focus on what was important was one of many things she loved about Jack. She knew the events coming later that morning would weigh on him again, but he could put it aside and instead celebrate what was good and pure in their lives.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed him, knowing memory and instinct would help him navigate back to their bed. He laid her on the bed, settling over her and taking the kiss deeper, hotter.

It was the first week of November and the winter chill had had her swaddled in an unflattering robe and slippers. But Jack didn’t seem to mind as he pushed her robe aside and she kicked her fuzzy slippers to the floor. Technically, his robe wasn’t particularly flattering either,

except that it showed just enough chest to look like he should be on the cover of a men's magazine. Tess slid her hands over his chest, pushing his robe aside. Despite the chill in the air, his body was warm as it pressed into hers.

He rolled, pulled her over him so he could toss away the robe and slip off her night shirt. Her breasts responded to the cold, puckering and hardening. As if he thought they were beckoning him, Jack sat up, pulled a sensitive tip between his lips. Her hands threaded through his hair, holding him to her as he suckled. The things he could do with his mouth never failed to impress or please her. She let out a long sigh, letting him know he was touching her just right. After a moment, he switched to the other breast. Tess found her wits enough to push his robe off his shoulders. He let go of her to pull his arms from the sleeves, but his lips remained fastened to her breast -- another great talent of his.

They rolled and wrestled as they removed the last of their clothing, until finally, they lay flesh to flesh. Jack never failed to take a minute to study her, to watch as his hand slid over her breast, down her body along her hips and over her thighs. There was always an awe in his love making that made her feel beautiful, desired. His fingers slid between her thighs, played there for a moment and then pulled away as he moved his hips over hers. She gave a silent thanks to the Gods that he wasn't in one of his long, slow moods. She usually preferred to get to the good stuff faster than he did. Not that she didn't enjoy leisurely love making, but Jack could take long, slow sex and turn it into torture.

This time she didn't have to wait as he slid inside her in one long glide. She sighed, wrapped her legs around his hips and held him there. He found her lips, kissing her deeply, as they savored that first moment of being one.

There was a time she didn't believe a love like this existed. Certainly not for her. But Jack had made her a believer. She still had moments of wonder about it. How had she earned the love of a man like him? How had she fostered a love so deep and pure? And she hoped to God that he understood just how much she loved him and how much his love meant to her.

Their bodies moved in sync, slowly at first, increasing in speed as urgency built. Their kiss broke only when the need for breath took precedence.

"Tess." Her name escaped his lips, letting her know he was close. Good thing, because she was already there as pleasure rolled through her like a summer storm. She felt him tense, pulse and he was with her, riding the last waves of pleasure together.

It was several minutes before Jack could catch his breath. Making love to Tess was always wonderful, but never more needed than this morning. Until Tess, he hadn't realized that there could be moods in sex, or that it could calm a troubled soul. Jack had a gift for letting go of the negative, usually. But sometimes, the unknown could nag at him in a way that made letting it go difficult. Uncertainty of what would happen after his meeting with the Senator settled into his brain, keeping him up most of the night. That and worries about how his grandmother would respond. And there it was again, the negative rolling through his mind.

He gathered Tess close, kissed her and let her love sooth him again. He pulled the comforter over them, cocooning them.

"We could stay here all day," he suggested. It would certainly beat what they had planned. Not only did they have a meeting with the Senator, but afterward, Jack would drive to Northern Virginia to visit his grandmother. A trip Tess was opting out of. Not that he blamed her, but he'd sure like to have her with him.

“Hmm. That would be nice. But then you’d miss all the fun at the Worthingtons and whatever Cora plans to do.”

“You’re mean.”

“I don’t know, I was pretty nice a minute ago.”

He grinned. “Yes, you were.” They lay a few minutes in silence. “You’re sure you don’t want to come to Northern Virginia with me?”

She tilted her head up to look at him. “I’ll go if you need me there, but I feel this is something you and Cora need to deal with on your own. I’d end up distracting her.”

He nodded in agreement. “And be a target.”

“I’d have to sleep with one eye open for sure.”

He laughed even though she was probably right. His grandmother was old and small, but she was feisty and unpredictable, which is why she wouldn’t be at the meeting today. But Jack knew he should be with her when news of the meeting broke.

Tess shifted, laying her body over his and looking down at him. “Whatever happens, I’ll be here. We don’t know what people are going to think or do. Or what Cora will do, but I’ll always be here.”

He grinned. “My safe place to fall?”

“I doubt you’ll fall, but yes. There isn’t anything anyone can say or do to change us.”

Tess hadn’t ever been one for romantic gestures or words, so when they came out of her mouth, they were like a gift. He reached up, resting his palms on her cheeks pulling her down for a kiss. “I love you, Tess Valentine.”

She grinned down on him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m thinking about being nice again.” She straddled his thighs.

Immediately his body responded. A quick recovery was something else that only happened with Tess. His hands went to her hips, guided her to him.

“I like it when you’re -” His words were lost as she sank over him, rocked against him. He let her take him wherever she wanted to go. Savoring these last moments before everything in their world might change. And he held on to her promise that no matter the outcome, she’d be there for him.

Chapter Two

Several hours later, Tess stood with Jack in the parlor of Senator Worthington's mansion. Sarah, the Senator's maid, had showed them in and said the Senator would be with them shortly. Jack's discomfort had returned, but he was doing what he could not to show it.

"Who'd have thought in February while we sat in this room after Asa's murder, that today you and I would be married?" Tess said, hoping to distract Jack from his worried thoughts.

It worked. His blue-green eyes gazed down on hers in amusement. "Me. I think I even told you so that night. Not that you made it easy." His hand stroked her arm, as if he was thanking her for helping him focus on what was important.

"Yeah, well, you get cocky when things go your way too easily. I was worth it, though, wasn't I?"

"Absolutely." He used the crook of his finger under her chin to guide her lips to his.

"Ah newlyweds," Tess heard the Senator say. Jack gave her one more quick kiss before releasing her and turning his attention to the Senator.

"Good morning, Senator," she said.

"It is a good morning." The Senator strode over to Jack, giving him a firm handshake. "How you holding up Jack?"

Despite what it could do to his career, the Senator was thrilled about what was about to happen. Not that he wasn't concerned about his career. It was his idea to wait until the week after the election to have this meeting. Even so, he was more excited about it than Jack was.

"Very well," Jack lied.

The Senator kissed Tess on the cheek. “You’re looking lovely as ever, Tess. Marriage agrees with you both.”

“Thank you.”

Another man, who she’d seen before, but didn’t know, came to stand next to the Senator.

“This is Randall Gray,” the Senator said by way of introduction. “He’s in charge of publicity, PR and all that stuff that can get me trouble if I say or do the wrong thing.”

Randall shook Jack’s hand and then Tess’. “You’re the attorney who has referred my son some work recently.”

“Lance? You’re Lance’s father?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yes. He says you referred him his most interesting cases yet.”

“Yes, well...” So far she’d referred Jack’s murdering ex-girlfriend and then his gorgeous childhood friend who was now a famous actress. Fortunately, she wasn’t a murderer. Lance had also dated her best friend Kate Wells, although Tess wasn’t sure how serious the relationship was.

“Tess owns Cezarier’s boutique now,” the Senator said.

“Really?”

Randall’s expression suggested he wasn’t sure what to think of that. Selling couture lingerie was a far cry from legal work, but it was more fun and in Tess’ case, more lucrative too.

“Good morning, Dad.” Helen breezed into the room followed by her husband Tom.

“Good morning,” the Senator said. After giving her father a hug, Helen went straight to Tess to give her a hug. It was a gesture Tess always treasured. Her own parents had, at best, been indifferent to her. But Helen and Tom treated her like their own daughter since she was 16 and had come to boarding school in Jefferson Tavern, where Helen had been a teacher.

After everyone exchanged pleasantries, the Senator asked if Jack would go with him and Randall to talk in private for a moment. Tess gave Jack's hand a quick squeeze to show support as he left.

"Jack looks a little green," Helen said, going to get a cup of the coffee Sarah had poured.

"He's worried about his grandmother," Tess replied, hoping they could avoid a discussion of Jack's state of mind. Helen wasn't always understanding or kind when it came to Jack.

"She isn't here?" Tom asked.

Tess shook her head. "No. She's... unpredictable."

"I liked her," Helen said. "She doesn't take any guff, which I suppose is why she isn't here."

"Right," Tess said remembering Helen had met Cora at the wedding.

A loud rumble sounded outside and Helen's eyes widened. "Oh God, don't tell me he's on that monstrosity again! Why did he have to buy that thing? He'll kill himself. Wasn't getting shot close enough to death for him?"

"It's just a phase," Tom said, patting Helen on the arm. "When you nearly die, it causes you to reflect and make changes."

"He should get married, not buy a motorcycle, to give meaning to his life."

Tess hid her amusement behind her coffee cup.

"Talking about me again," Daniel said entering the parlor. Six weeks ago, Daniel nearly died when a murderer shot him in the chest. Since then, he'd made changes in his life, one of which was the motorcycle in question. Since he still hadn't gone back to work as a police

detective, he'd let his blond hair grow longer and was more likely to be wearing jeans than slacks. Today was no different, except he wore an Oxford shirt under his leather jacket.

“That’s what you’re wearing? Daniel... I swear...what happened to all that good sense and practicality you used to have?” Helen lamented.

Tess snickered, earning her a glare from Daniel. But his mother was right. Daniel had always been straight-laced and by the book. He'd also been wound up tight to the point of sometimes being unbearable to be around. Since nearly dying, he'd been less so, but Tess could see that he was often fighting his nature in an effort to make sure he was living life to the fullest. She wondered if that was why he still hadn't asked her friend Kate out. Or maybe he'd forgotten he said he was going to. He was loaded with drugs after being shot when he'd made the comment.

“I’ve got a tie,” he said pulling it from his pocket. He gave Sarah his leather coat and then put on the tie. “How ya doing, Brat?” he said to Tess.

“Better than you.”

He smirked, but winked. For many years, their relationship had been complicated, mostly because Daniel’s interest in her had been more than friendly. Over the last few months, and then finally when she thought he might die from a gunshot wound, they'd made their peace. They loved and cared about each other, but not in a romantic way. Since then, and with Daniel’s new outlook on life, they'd become more like siblings.

“Where are Philip and Shelby?” Daniel asked of his cousin and his wife.

“They’re not coming,” Helen said, disdain lacing her voice. “Although, it’s probably just as well. If they came, Lauren might come. What a disaster that would be.”

“What would Lauren have to do with it?” Daniel asked, letting his mom straighten his tie.

“You know that she’s always worried about Philip’s inheritance.”

“Yeah, but she’s afraid of Jack.”

Tess smiled. Jack had been the only one to reign in Lauren’s craziness. She’d been divorced from Asa, Philip’s father and Helen’s brother, years before his murder, but she continued to insinuate herself in family business. However, Philip was no businessman and without Jack’s help and mentorship, Worthington Corp would probably be in bankruptcy. Lauren knew this and when push came to shove, learned to stay out of Jack’s way for fear that he’d stop helping Philip.

“Mrs. Showalter?” Sarah called Helen from the entryway of the parlor. “The TV people are here.”

“Show them in, Sarah. And please let the Senator know, as well.” Helen turned to the rest of the group. “Show time.”

Kate walked in looking professional and gorgeous as always. It was a constant surprise to Tess that Kate had so much trouble in the love department. Her honey blonde hair and green eyes, tall, curvy body was natural, as opposed to the shiny glimmer and glamour often found in TV personalities. There was nothing artificial about her looks. It was the kind of beauty that men noticed, but for some reason in Kate’s case, none took the next step, although Kate didn’t appear to mind that much. She was focused on her career as a broadcast journalist. Or maybe it was because she’d been waiting for Daniel, whom she’d had a crush on since she was 16 years old, to make a move.

Daniel for his part never seemed to notice Kate, which was odd considering how stunning she was. And then, a few months ago he did notice and even made a comment about possibly asking her out. But he never had. There were times when Tess thought she’d intervene, give

Daniel a push toward Kate, who she was certain would accept, even if she was still seeing Lance Gray. But Daniel and Kate were her closest friends and she didn't want to end up in the middle of something if it went wrong.

"Good morning Mr. and Mrs. Showalter," Kate said giving them both a hug. Kate and Tess had been friends since their days at the Jefferson Academy, so she was familiar with Tess' surrogate parents.

"Kate, thank you so much for agreeing to do this."

"Of course. Although I'm not sure what I agreed to."

"I know. It's all very cryptic, but we know and trust you, so we're glad you agreed to it."

"Is this the room you want to do the interview in?" Kate asked.

"Yes. It's the most homey and comfortable."

"Great. Kyle." Kate turned to her camera man who was loaded with equipment. "Why don't we set up to have them on the couch. Maybe turn the couch slightly so we can have the fire in the shot."

He nodded, and started setting the lights up.

"Would you like some coffee?" Daniel asked Kate. Tess studied them closely. She saw interest in Daniel's eyes. At first, Kate appeared bewildered by him, which wasn't surprising since Daniel had, for most of their lives, ignored her. But if she still had an interest in him, Tess didn't see it. Did that mean she'd transferred her affection to Lance? Had Daniel lost out?

"Oh, no thank you, detective," she said. She turned away. "Hey Tess." She walked to where Tess stood by the fire. "Where's your Valentine?"

“He’s talking with the Senator.” Tess looked past Kate to see Daniel’s reaction to Kate’s dismissal. He was talking to his mother, but she caught him glancing their way. Not able to help herself, Tess asked. “Are you giving Daniel the cold shoulder on purpose?”

“Huh?” Kate glanced toward him. His head lifted as if he knew she was looking. She turned back to Tess. “No. I just didn’t want coffee.”

“Oh.”

“Is he back at work?” Kate asked.

Tess shook her head. “I think he’s got another week off. How’s Lance?”

Kate shrugged. “He’s alright. We have a good time, but it’s not love and all that. I swear Tess, I think you got the last great available, not-gay man.”

Tess couldn’t help but grin. “I hit the jackpot.”

“Yeah, well don’t rub it in. It makes the rest of us peons feel bad.”

Tess wanted to tell her that her time would come, but she knew it wasn’t necessarily true. Until Jack, Tess didn’t believe in true love, fairy tales and all the mushy romance stuff. Now she knew it was possible, but so few actually found it. As much as she wanted to see Kate and Daniel happy, she wasn’t sure they’d find it together.

“Listen, I know you know what’s going on here, but won’t tell me, so I’m going to help Kyle get set up so we can get started.”

“Sure.”

As Kate went to help Kyle, the Senator walked back in followed by Jack and Randall. Tess was glad to see that the tension in Jack, while still there, wasn’t any worse than when he’d left the room.

“Ah, Ms. Wells. It looks like we’re about ready,” the Senator said.

“Yes sir.”

“Dad, why don’t you and Jack sit on the couch and the rest of us will fill in around you.”

Tess didn’t want to “fill in” and instead sat next to Jack on the couch while the Senator sat on his other side. Tom, Helen and Daniel stood behind the couch.

“How’s the lighting?” Kate asked her camera man. He gave her a thumbs up.

Kate pulled a chair closer to the couch and sat. “I don’t know why I’m here so I guess I’ll let you say whatever it is you need to say.”

The Senator cleared his throat. “Are we ready?”

Kate nodded. Another bright light lit the room as the camera began to film.

“Good, okay, well as you know back in February, my son Asa was murdered.”

“Yes, by your butler, Walter Jamison,” Kate confirmed.

“That’s right. He wanted to stop my son, Asa, from revealing information that would have linked Walter to another murder many years ago.”

“Your aide, Delia Jackson?”

“Yes. But Delia was more than just my aide. I loved her. I wanted to marry her. My wife died many years before and Delia came into my life like a ray of sunshine.” Tess thought the Senator’s statement was sweet even if a little clichéd.

“But Mr. Jamison’s act took her from you,” Kate said.

“Not just her, but our child. You see she and I had just had a son.”

Kate’s eyes immediately went to Jack. Tess had long wondered if Kate suspected something was up with Jack and the Senator, but she’d never asked, probably because she knew Tess wouldn’t tell. But that one look let Tess know that Kate had her suspicions.

“We thought he died in the fire with Delia, but we discovered in February that wasn’t true. His grandmother saved him. He has grown into a wonderful man and I’m proud to finally be able to recognize Jack Valentine as my son.”

Kate’s eyes widened to show surprise, even if it wasn’t genuine. “Mr. Valentine is your son. How does that feel, Senator, to find a son you thought was dead?”

“Wonderful of course.”

“Mr. Valentine, did you have any idea that the Senator was your father?”

Jack’s body tensed next to Tess. “No. Not until February, the same time the Senator learned about it.”

Kate’s brows drew together. “How can you be sure Jack is Delia Jackson’s son?”

“His grandmother placed him for adoption. And we’ve had the appropriate tests that show I’m his father,” the Senator’s voice sounded slightly agitated.

“Adopted. Did you know?”

Jack shook his head. Tess knew he didn’t want to discuss the Valentines or his grandmother. She rested her hand on his thigh, hoping it offered support without making him look weak.

As if she could see his discomfort, Kate moved on. “This is an amazing story, Senator. It’s wonderful that you two have found each other, but do you worry about how this will affect your political career?”

Kate was kind enough not to bring up the fact that his announcement was coming three days after the election he’d just won.

The Senator shook his head. "I've got nothing to be ashamed of. Ms. Jackson was my aide, but she became more than that. I loved her. I wanted a life with her but that was stolen from me."

"You haven't ever remarried since your first wife's death?"

He shook his head. "There hasn't been anyone I've loved since losing Jack's mother."

"How is it that Jack ended up with another family?"

"Unknown to me, Jack's grandmother had been visiting and had Jack with her when Delia died. Thank goodness. She knew, even when I didn't that Delia's death wasn't an accident and to protect him, placed him with the Valentines."

"You're not angry at her for keeping him from you? For letting you think he was dead?"

"Do I wish it were different? Yes, absolutely. But Jack is a fine man and he's here now. I'm focused on that."

"And what about you Mr. Valentine? That must have been a shock to find out about your adoption."

Tess remembered Jack's reaction. The anger. The hurt. The effects of which still lingered even as he worried about betraying his grandmother Cora and the Valentines by officially announcing his relationship with the Senator.

"It was a shock." He took Tess' hand. She placed her other hand over their joined hands to give him strength. "But as the Senator said, I can't complain about the life I had and what I have now." He glanced at Tess and squeezed her hand. "And I'm happy for the chance to get to know the Senator and his family."

"How will your family feel about this announcement? I notice they aren't here?"

“My parents are both deceased. My grandmother is elderly and prefers to stay in her home in Northern Virginia,” Jack said, leaving out the part in which Cora was spittin’ mad to have Jack announce his relationship with the Senator since she still believed the Senator was responsible for her daughter’s death.

Kate asked a few more questions, and the interview wrapped up soon after.

“Well, I guess I can officially call you my brother,” Helen said, as she and the others moved to stand together near the fire.

“That’s right,” said Tom, as if he only just realized what being the Senator’s son meant to the rest of the family.

“Does that mean I can call you uncle Jack?” Daniel said, in a rare moment of levity between the two of them.

“No.”

“And this makes you my aunt,” Daniel said to Tess. “Aunt Brat.”

“Daniel!” his mother chastised. “I swear I don’t know what’s gotten into you, Daniel Irwin Showalter.”

“Irwin?” Tess smirked at Daniel.

Daniel’s gray eyes narrowed. “Don’t.”

“What?” Helen asked. “Irwin is my mother’s maiden name.”

“Have a good day,” Kate said over her shoulder as she and Kyle left the room.

“Excuse me a minute.” Daniel left the group, following Kate out of the room.

“Now what’s he up to?” Helen said. “I’m glad he’s decided to live a little. He was always strung a little tight, but that doesn’t mean he can forget his manners.”

“Or ride motorcycles?” Tess asked.

“Right. Or ride motorcycles.”

“Sometimes when life throws you a curve ball, your reaction can be severe,” Jack said.

“You talk like someone who knows,” Tom said.

Jack nodded. “I engaged in some outrageous behavior after my mother died.”

“And how did you regain some equilibrium?” Helen asked.

Jack put an arm around Tess. “I found Tess.”

“I wonder if there is a woman out there for Daniel?” Helen said. At one time, many thought Tess was the woman. Fortunately, those days were past.

“Maybe you should ask Ms. Wells,” the Senator said from the doorway. “I do believe Daniel is asking her on a date.”

Chapter Three

“You don’t need to walk me to the shop,” Tess said as Jack slipped his hand in hers and strode with her toward her boutique.

“Yes I do.” They had dropped Tess’ car off downtown before going to the Senator’s home. Tess expected Jack to drop her off at work and then head up to Northern Virginia where he’d spend the day with his grandmother and watch the interview with the Senator on the news with her. Tess opted not to go. Cora was in her eighties, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t lethal when she wanted to be. Tess was often the target of Cora’s venom and since Cora blamed Tess for revealing the truth about Jack’s history, Tess decided it was safer to stay home.

“You’re just trying to put off seeing Cora.”

“Absolutely. She scares me.”

Tess snorted. “She worships the ground you walk on.”

“That doesn’t mean she won’t box my ears.”

“Poor baby.”

“At least I’m going, Coward.”

Tess grinned up at him. Jack opened the door to the boutique, stepping aside to let Tess step in first.

“Hey boss,” Regina, Tess’ right-hand woman, said from behind the counter. “Valentine.”

“Regina. How are things in my wife’s lingerie empire?”

“Very sexy.”

“You may have to franchise,” Jack said.

Tess turned to him. “You can go now.”

“You’re trying to get rid of me.” He stepped closer to her. “Aren’t you going to miss me, Mrs. Valentine?”

“I can’t miss you if you don’t leave.”

“Regina, I don’t know- oh...”

Jack looked toward the unknown voice and then back to Tess.

“She’s my new hire,” Tess said by way of explanation. “She’s ogling you, so you should go.”

He grinned, the one that showed his dimple making him look mischievous. “You’re jealous.”

“I just don’t want to have to fire her. She has a couple of kids to take care of.” Tess turned toward Regina and the new girl. “Bonnie, this is my husband, Jack Valentine. Jack this is the newest addition to Cezarier’s Boutique, Bonnie Bailey.”

Jack turned on the smile wattage as he strode to Bonnie and shook her hand. Like all women exposed to Jack’s presence, she nearly swooned. “Mr. Valentine.”

He turned back to Tess, “Well, I guess I better go. Walk me out?”

“It’s about time.”

When they reached the door, the time for banter was gone. Tess looked up into his memorizing eyes. “You going to be okay?”

“I won’t deny that I wish you were coming with me, but I think you’re right. Cora and I have never fully resolved this.”

“There are chocolate truffles in the freezer if you need them. Sometimes they tame her. At the very least they should distract her so you can make your escape.”

He smiled. “Tell me you’ll miss me.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“Good.” Using the crook of his finger, he tilted her head back. “Because I’m going to miss you desperately.” He dropped his lips on hers and kissed her in a way that made sure she’d miss him. She would have been embarrassed to be kissed like that in front of her staff and in full view of patrons on the street outside her shop, except that Jack’s kiss was too potent for her to feel or think of anything but him.

“Wow, he’s something,” Bonnie said under her breath.

“He sure is,” Tess thought as she watched Jack making his way up the sidewalk. She was sure she looked like a blushing schoolgirl. How he could still turn her mind to mush she didn’t know. But since she liked it, she wasn’t going to worry about it. She turned back toward Regina and Bonnie.

“How about we sell some lingerie?”

“I’ve got the web orders printed and had Bonnie started on filling them.”

“Yes, I had a question about some of these.” Bonnie held up several order sheets.

“I can answer your questions,” Tess said. “First let’s to go my office and get the paperwork for your job settled. Can you manage the front, Reg?”

“Sure thing.”

Tess entered the small doorway separating the main part of the store from the back. On the right was her office, which was big enough to hold a desk, a couch and her single cup coffee brewer with hundreds of coffee pods. Beyond her office was a storage area that held the inventory and the resources for shipping items bought online, an area Regina called the shipping department.

Tess entered her office and gestured for Bonnie to sit on the couch.

“Your husband is very handsome,” she said taking a seat. “I’d seen pictures in the paper and once I think there was a magazine interview, but it’s different in person.”

Is it ever, Tess thought. “Yes.”

“He doesn’t mind you working?”

Tess looked at Bonnie in surprise. It was hard to believe the sentiment that married women should stay home still existed in the 21st. “No. In fact, I think he likes what I do.”

It took a moment for Bonnie to get what Tess was hinting at. “Oh yeah...the lingerie. Men do like that.” Her face turned sad for a moment, but then she looked up and smiled. Tess wondered if she was thinking about her own marriage, which apparently had ended recently.

“I need you to fill out these papers. One of the perks is that you can get a discount on purchases in the store.” Although Tess knew that even with the discount, the wage she paid would still make it difficult to afford a \$600 set of underwear. “And as a bonus, you can have one bra and panty set for free.”

“Really?” Bonnie’s eyes lit. “I’ve always worn basic underwear. I’ll feel so ... sexy.”

“Sexy starts from the inside, so if you feel sexy then you can be sexy,” Tess said.

“Too bad I don’t have anyone to show it off to.”

“Good lingerie isn’t just about having someone to share it with. It can help you feel pretty and confident, which will show on the outside even though no one will know what you’re wearing. And wearing it will help you sell it.”

“Right.”

“You take care of the paperwork now, and when you’re done, we’ll go find something for you to take home. And I’ll help you with those Internet orders.”

Daniel stood outside the Java Joint and wondered for the umpteenth time what he'd been thinking by asking Kate out for coffee. He was a man who liked order and played his hand close to his vest. But a near death experience made him reflect on life and what his past behaviors had cost him. Tess was one of those expenses. For several years after she moved back from Washington, DC, he'd been attracted to her. At first, he couldn't understand why. She'd been a brash, silly young woman who didn't have a filter between her brain and her mouth before she'd left to attend law school in Washington. But events in D.C. that included a cheating fiancé who also happened to be gay, and his family's ability to blacklist her from work in the area, had broken her a bit. She'd returned reserved, closed off, which, Daniel supposed, is what attracted him to her. He understood now that even if Jack hadn't entered her life and swept her off her feet, she wouldn't have ever returned his feelings.

When death stared him in the face, he realized that while he was content, he hadn't been happy and he wanted a little bit of that for himself. But he knew he'd have to get out of his own way to achieve it. That meant stepping out of his comfort zone. Kate was out of his comfort zone by a million miles. Like Tess, she was outspoken and vivacious. He'd sometimes thought that Kate was attracted to him, although when he extended his invitation for coffee, she looked at him with wary, suspicious eyes. It was much the way he'd viewed her since she'd become a broadcast journalist. Coming from a wealthy family that included a Senator, Daniel learned long ago to be careful around journalists. Once he joined the police force and became a detective, he learned that lesson more deeply, especially around Kate who was able to weedle information out of just about anybody. He wasn't surprised, of course. All she had to do was smile at most men and they'd fall at her feet. Kate was a stunningly beautiful woman. Even Daniel, who prided

himself on not being moved by such things, would occasionally get ensnared by her beauty. What was most remarkable, was that she wasn't aware of her appeal. Sure, she'd occasionally flash a smile for the purpose of getting information, but for the most part, she didn't work what she had. He shuddered to think what would happen if she did. He was a man after all. A man, who had been able to stay out of her way to the point that Tess accused him of being rude.

He stepped into the crowded cafe taking in the smell of dark gourmet coffee. He saw her sitting at a table scribbling notes on a journalist's pad and sipping from a carry-out coffee cup. He looked at the long line to order and decided to skip it. He made his way toward her table trying to decide what it meant that the woman he asked for coffee had started without him.

"Kate."

She looked up, her green eyes stared at him with the same suspicion he'd seen that morning. "Detective Showalter."

His brows furrowed. Why didn't she call him Daniel? He sat in the chair across from her.

"I hope you don't mind I already got coffee. I have a very busy day today."

He shook his head. "You should have just said no if you didn't have time."

"I should have."

Daniel studied the woman who was not at all how he'd remembered her. "Then why didn't you?"

"Curiosity, I guess."

What was he, a circus freak? Daniel was no Jack Valentine, but he wasn't hideous either. He knew there were woman who'd be interested in him, but apparently, not this one. He decided talking about her work might lower her hackles. "The interview went well it seemed."

“I knew it!” She tossed her pen down onto her writing pad. “I knew it. You’re here to tell me how to do my job.”

“What?” He jerked back, taken off guard by her statement.

She leaned forward. “You can’t tell me what to do, Detective Showalter. I’ll present the interview the way I feel best.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re here to ask me to change something about the interview or to make sure I show the Senator in the best light.”

“No.”

“But you can’t tell me how to do my job.”

Now that the initial shock wore off, Daniel’s own hackles rose. “I didn’t come here about the interview.”

“Then why did you?”

“For coffee!”

“Yeah, right.” She blew out a breath. “Well, since you’re here, you can help me with another project I’m working on. Tell me, Detective Showalter, why did you pull Amanda Neely’s closed file right after you became detective?”

She couldn’t have shocked him more if she’d reached across the table and slugged him. He sat back in his chair as a wave of surprise followed by guilt washed over him at hearing the name of the young woman he’d dated in high school. It had taken years to come to terms with Amanda’s murder. Which was no easy task because he’d always believed there was something wrong about the case. It’s why he’d pulled the file not long after becoming a detective. But since it was closed, there was nothing he could do. And now, for some reason, Kate was looking into

it. He was reminded again about why he needed to stay away from her. It was her job to expose people, even if doing so hurt them.

Gathering his composure, he sat forward, scowled at her. “This was a mistake.”

He glared one second longer, just enough time to see surprise in Kate’s pretty green eyes. Then he stood and strode out of the cafe.

Chapter Four

Kate sat at the table, watching as Daniel left. He was pissed. She wanted to feel satisfaction about it, except she didn't. She'd hit a nerve bringing up Amanda Neely. Before he became angry, she saw grief and guilt warring in his steel gray eyes. She'd been so focused on knocking Mr. Aloof and Indifferent off his high horse, she didn't consider he had feelings, at least not for anyone but his parents and Tess.

He appeared surprised by her behavior, as if he were expecting a pleasant chat between the two of them. Was it possible she misread his invite for coffee? Had he really asked her out? She shook her head. No. Since she'd met him through Tess when she was 16, he'd ignored her or acted irritated by her. Only once had he shown any interest in the way a man appreciates a women, but he never did anything about it.

And, if he were asking her out, Tess would have told her, right? Given her a heads up that Daniel was actually going to pay attention to her. It didn't make sense. But maybe Tess could make sense of it. She checked her watch and decided she had a little time before she needed to get back to the station to finish her segment with the Senator. She stuffed her notebook and pen into her bag, left her nearly full coffee on the table and walked the few store fronts up the street to Tess' boutique.

She walked into the shop and Regina, who was working with a woman Kate guessed to be Tess' new hire, pointed her to the back toward Tess' office. Kate was happy that Tess was having success in her business and in life. She'd had a difficult time of it for a few years and then Jack Valentine entered her life and righted everything. Kate was thrilled for Tess, even as she was jealous. Still, she had hope that someone would sweep her off her feet as Jack had done with

Tess. One thing was for sure, it wasn't going to be Daniel. For all his good looks, Daniel knew nothing of love or romance. For years he'd been in love with Tess, but never did anything about it. Kate wondered if he regretted it now. If he was done pining for her. Lord knows she'd finally given up on him the day he'd given her his first and only appreciative look over, but did nothing about it.

"Knock, knock." Kate tapped on the door as she opened it and poked her head in.

"Oh hey. Come in. Want coffee?"

Kate realized she never drank the coffee she bought at the Java Joint. Knowing she'd need the kick, she nodded. "Yes."

Tess stood. "Flavored?"

"Whatever you have that's dark."

Tess put the pod in her coffee maker and pressed the brew button. "So what's up?"

"How long have you known about the Senator being Jack's father?" Kate asked as she sat on the couch.

"February. How about you?"

Kate smiled. That was the thing about their relationship. There had been many times they had to keep secrets. Tess in particular when she worked as a lawyer, like when she represented Jack when he was a suspect in the Senator's son, Asa's, murder. Kate liked that she could trust Tess with secrets. While Tess had encouraged her to approach Daniel, Kate knew she'd never told Daniel of her feelings. And Kate had known something was up about the Worthingtons and Jack, but respected that Tess had to keep the information to herself.

“About the same. It just didn’t make sense to have Jack involved in family business unless he was somehow family. But I didn’t know it was the Senator. I thought it was Asa since he was closer in age to Delia Jackson.”

Tess handed Kate her coffee.

“Jack looked uncomfortable,” Kate finished before taking a sip of the dark brew.

“It’s been a process of acceptance for him.”

“So he really didn’t know about being adopted?”

Tess shook her head. “That’s what bothers him the most. Cora and his parents knew and never told him. Planned to never tell him.”

“Harsh.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Tess sat next to her on the couch. The tone of her question had Kate wondering if Tess knew Daniel had asked her for coffee.

“I went to coffee with Daniel.”

“Really? How’d it go?”

“It was a disaster.”

“Oh Kate. I’m sorry. What happened?”

“I thought he wanted to give input on how I presented the interview today. So I told him to take a hike. And then I questioned him about an old case I knew he’d pulled the file of just after he became a detective.”

Tess’ wince told Kate that she’d known Daniel’s intention hadn’t been work-related, and that he wouldn’t have reacted well to Kate’s statements.

“What did he say?”

“He said it was a mistake. Not the pulling of the file, but of asking me out for coffee. But how I was to know it was a date? He’s never said two words to me except, ‘No comment’.”

“He’s changed a little since the shooting,” Tess said.

“Did you know he was going to ask me out?”

Tess blew out a breath. “Not exactly.”

“What does that mean? Did you or didn’t you?”

“I didn’t know he was going to ask you out today or ever. But he did make a comment once about asking you out, so I guess I knew it was a possibility.”

“When?”

“When did he make the comment? Back when he was in the hospital. He saw you on the news and said he should ask you out. Jack and I agreed it was a good idea.”

“That was over a month ago.”

“Yes, well, he had to recover.”

“He bought a motorcycle.”

“You’re scarier and more challenging than a motorcycle. And if you tell him I said that, I’ll deny it.”

Kate sat back, let out a sigh. “Well, it doesn’t matter anymore. To be honest, I can’t quite figure out why I carried a torch for him for so long. What’s wrong with me that I’m attracted to a man who ignores me?”

“I don’t know, you tell me.”

Kate laughed. “I guess I like the strong silent type. There is something about him that makes him seem safe, solid.”

“Maybe it’s his gun.”

“Maybe. But after he took that long look at me in your kitchen when Ava was there, but didn’t do anything about it, I realized I was wasting my time.”

Tess nodded. “No one can blame you for moving on. Besides you’ve got Lance now.”

Kate shrugged. “Lance is fun, but it’s not serious.”

When Tess was silent for a moment, Kate looked to her. “What?”

“I’m trying to figure out if you want me to talk you into giving Daniel another chance or not. Daniel doesn’t do anything without a lot of thought behind it. He’s not impulsive. If he asked you for coffee, he’s interested. The question is, has he missed his chance?”

“Yesterday I would have said yes. The rational woman in me now says yes, and yet...there’s something about him.”

Tess laughed. “I remember having those same feelings about Jack.”

“Except Jack was always clear he wanted you.”

“Yes, but I was clear I didn’t want love or a relationship and yet, like a magnet I was pulled in.”

“Magnet, yes.”

Tess’ phone rang. Kate sipped her coffee as she answered it.

“Speak of the devil,” Tess said when she hung up. “Daniel is here. Want to make it a three-some?”

Kate smirked. “No. I’m not ready to face him yet. I know I have to apologize, but I’m still mad at him for all the years of ignoring me.”

“You can stay here. Enjoy your coffee. I’ll meet him out front.”

Daniel stood near the counter, patiently listening to Bonnie who was very actively flirting with him. Relief shone in his eyes when Tess appeared.

“What’s up?”

“Can we talk in private?”

“Kate’s in my office.”

He stared at her with cool gray eyes. She swore she could see the gears turning in his brain as he tried to make out what it meant that Kate was in her office. She decided to put him out of his misery. “She said coffee didn’t go well.”

“No. But that’s not why I’m here.”

It was Tess’ turn to be surprised. Not that she expected Daniel to tell her about his coffee date with Kate. Daniel rarely shared his inner most thoughts and usually only in dire situations. The last time they’d discussed feelings, he’d been shot and thought he was dying. “Okay. Why then?”

“Would you have time to look over a case for me?”

“Sure.”

“It’s an old case. Closed case.”

That had red flags flying in Tess’ brain. If he wanted her to look at a closed case, there was probably something fishy about it. But closed cases weren’t easily reopened. Even if she could find fault in it, it didn’t mean it would change anything. “What is it?”

“The Amanda Neely murder case. She was killed about 15 years ago, just before you moved out here.”

“NO!”

Tess heard Kate's angry voice and turned to see Kate barreling toward them. Her gaze and finger pointed at Daniel.

"Amanda Neely is my story. You wouldn't even be thinking about it if it weren't for me and my asking you about it today."

Tess swiveled her head to see Daniel's reaction. She knew him well enough to know it wouldn't be good. Any budding romance they might have had was going to die on the vine right in front of her.

"This is no story. This is about a young girl who was murdered and the man who was probably unjustly accused. This is about justice, not ratings!"

Like a tennis match, Tess turned her head back to Kate. "It's not a news story, it's a book." And then as if she realized how shallow that sounded against Daniel's cry of justice, Kate added, "If you wanted justice, why didn't you seek it when you pulled the file?"

Back to Daniel. "There are rules, laws..." And a code, Tess knew. She didn't doubt that if fellow detectives got wind of his snooping, they'd discourage him.

"Yeah, well I'm not bound by your laws and rules."

"Actually you are. You do it wrong, and there is no justice."

"So why not work together?" Tess said it even though she knew it was a bad idea.

"What?" They said together.

Tess looked at Kate. "He's right. If there is a chance to clear someone wrongly accused and get the murderer, there are rules and laws that need to be followed or the evidence can get thrown out of court." Turning to Daniel, she continued. "And clearly you need someone to work outside the system, which is why you came to me. Kate is a good researcher. She was able to learn that you pulled a closed file. Working together you can get justice and a book."

Tess looked back and forth at her fuming friends, waiting.

“No,” they said together.

Tess blew out a breath.

“I don’t have time for this,” Kate said. “I’ve got to finish up the Senator’s interview. I’ll talk to you later, Tess.” With a glare toward Daniel, Kate strode past him and out the door.

Well, that went well, Tess thought but didn’t say.

“So will you look at the file?” He went right back to his original request, like a bulldog to a bone.

Common sense encouraged her to refuse. She didn’t want to be in the middle of her two best friends. Curiosity won over. “Yeah, okay.”

“I have them in my car.”

“You drive around with old files in your car?”

He shook his head. “I picked them up from my home before I came here. They’re copies.”

“I’ll go with you and we can put them in my car.”

He nodded. Tess walked with him, desperately wanting to talk to him about Kate, but knowing he’d shut her down. Their chemistry had been undeniable, but unfortunately, combustible. So she didn’t say a word.

Chapter Five

Jack clicked off the television, set the remote on the coffee table and waited for whatever Cora was going to do. The only thing he knew for sure was that it wouldn't be good. It had taken him all afternoon and some of Tess' chocolate confections to finally get her to watch the broadcast of the interview with the Senator. She wasn't happy about it and he understood why. But it was her own damn fault and it was time they resolved the issue that had come between them in February when he'd learned the truth.

She sat as far away from him on the couch as possible, with her arms crossed and her face pinched into a look of distaste. "I can't believe you want to be the son of a murderer."

"First off, I don't have much choice about my parents. That was decided by Delia and the Senator and second, he's not a murderer."

She whipped her head to the side to look at him with dark eyes, "He killed my Delia. Your mother!"

"No, he didn't. He loved her. He wanted to make a family with her." Jack couldn't believe he was defending the Senator. The reality was that publicly coming forward about the situation was as difficult for him as it was for Cora. But he understood that it was better for him and the Senator to control the information than to let some tabloid expose it as something sordid. The Senator was a cliché, sleeping with his aid who was nearly 30 years younger, but Jack believed the Senator loved Delia.

"She's dead, isn't she?"

"Walter Jamison killed her."

“On whose orders? He would have killed you too if I hadn’t taken you to get groceries with me that day.”

“Walter had a sick level of dedication to the Senator,” Jack said, remembering when he’d realized that Walter, the Senator’s butler, had killed Delia, and years later, the Senator’s son Asa, to protect the secret. “The Senator didn’t want her dead.”

“So now you’re going to be his family and leave me behind. You’ve probably got some old folks home picked out. You know they harvest organs in those places.”

Jack rolled his eyes. It was frustrating how Cora viewed the world sometimes. He’d grown up thinking she was a close family friend. When he’d learned the Senator was his birth father, he’d also learned that Cora was actually his maternal grandmother.

“I’m not putting you in a home...yet.”

“Since you married that woman, you’ve been surly and mean.”

“No, since I learned you lied and betrayed me I’ve been hurt and angry.”

“You’re still harping on that.”

Jack stood, paced to release the energy building inside. “Yes. How is it that you don’t get how that makes me feel? Everything I believe about you, about my parents was a lie. You’re not even sorry.”

“I saved your life, so no I’m not sorry.”

“Maybe in the beginning, but you could have told me. They could have told me.” He turned away to look out the window, across the dark waters of the Potomac to the lights of Georgetown. Of all the parts of this situation that bothered him the most, it was that his adoptive mother hadn’t said a word. Not even on her deathbed. Isn’t that when people revealed their deep dark secrets?

Feeling betrayed by her was the toughest pill to swallow because he thought so much of her. He'd admired her strength and spirit, which remained intact through most of her two year fight with cancer. But she'd lied to him too.

"Lillian wanted to tell you."

Jack turned back to Cora. She looked small. In reality she was small, but her personality usually made her seem large. "Then why didn't she?"

"I talked her out of it."

Jack shook his head at the reemergence of hurt and annoyance.

"Her death was going to be hard on you Jack. It *was* hard on you. Imagine knowing the truth and having to deal with that along with the loss and grief. You nearly lost yourself when she died. Who knows what would have happened to you if she told you the truth then. You'd have drunk and whored yourself into the grave."

"I should have been told," he said, even knowing a part of her explanation was true. He'd gone off the deep end after his mom died. He'd already lost his father when he was twelve. Tess, whom he'd loved then even though she'd been engaged to someone else, had skipped town without a look back. The feeling of loss and aloneness swallowed him whole. He'd been making his way back when Tess re-entered his life in February, but he hadn't completely recovered until she'd returned his love. He wished more than anything Tess was there now. Not in the middle of the argument, but somewhere near so when it was over he could hold her. Soak in her strength. Let her humor wash away the tension.

"You need to stop your whining. Okay, so maybe we should have said something. Maybe you feel misled, but good criminy Jack, you act like someone stole your favorite toy. The Valentines raised you right, didn't they? They loved you as if you were their own, which you

were. You're rich and successful. You've got a wife, and while I think you could have done better, you seem to like her alright, so get over it." Cora heaved herself off of the couch and started toward her apartment connected to his, muttering how ungrateful he was.

He laughed. He still felt hurt and betrayed, but she was right. He couldn't complain about his life. And if being adopted and having it kept a secret was part of what led him to achieve success in his career and find love in his life, well then, he'd take it.

"Where you going?" he said, trying to keep his voice terse.

"Somewhere where the atmosphere doesn't stink."

"Wanna play rummy?"

She stopped, looked over her shoulder at him with suspicious eyes. "For money?"

"If you want."

"You still owe me."

"I'm good for it."

After losing \$200 added to the \$175 he owed her, Jack helped Cora to her apartment and then headed to his room, where he changed into sweats and t-shirt then pulled out his phone to video chat with Tess.

"Hey handsome," she said when she picked up.

"You're not in bed." The man in him hoped he'd catch her in some of that lovely lingerie she sold.

"Not yet. I'm reading over a case Daniel asked me to look at."

Jack frowned. "I thought he was on leave for another week."

“He is. But coffee went badly with Kate today, so-”

“Huh?”

Tess explained to him that Daniel had asked Kate out, which was news in and of itself, but apparently Kate didn't understand it was a date. Not that Jack could blame her. It always seemed to him that Daniel went out of his way to avoid Kate. He wasn't surprised to learn that Kate had given him an earful or that Daniel's response was to withdraw from her.

“Anyway, Kate is writing some sort of true crime book about this fifteen year old case that has haunted Daniel.”

“Wouldn't he have been in high school then?” Jack asked. Although it was completely possible Daniel was born a cop. That dark, broody, suspicious attitude that went with being a cop was innate in him.

“Yes. I suspect he knew her, but I haven't talked with him about it yet. You know I like to read all the material to get my own impression first.”

“Yes.”

“Speaking of police, did you need to call them to cart Cora off?”

“She told me to stop whining.”

Tess' eyes widened and then she laughed. She had a great laugh. It was one of several things that had originally drawn her to him. When they reconnected in February, she rarely laughed, much less smiled and he'd made it his mission to change that. He was succeeding.

“That was my response.”

“Really?”

She looked surprised by that, which he supposed was true. For the most part, he was a happy-go-lucky guy, but there were times when he could hold on to the negative.

“Then we played rummy.”

“How much did you lose this time?”

“Two hundred.”

She smiled and then her expression turned more serious. “But it went okay? You’re okay?”

He nodded. “I don’t think she’ll ever own up to how the lie affected me, but it is what it is, right?”

“Her intentions were good.”

“She said my mom wanted to tell me the truth before she died, but Cora talked her out of it.”

Tess’ eyes shone with sympathy. “It would have been hard to know that on top of everything else, don’t you think?”

“Why Mrs. Valentine, you sound just like Cora.”

“I’m not going to talk to you if you’re going to be mean.”

He smiled. “Sorry. Listen, Brad asked if I’d meet with him on Monday, so I’m going to stay through to then.”

“Is this about the situation with the Senator?”

“Yes. We’d already talked to the people who needed to know. I think they just want to see what fallout, if any, there is.”

“I can’t imagine you’d have fallout. Not like the Senator. You’ll probably get lots of media people calling though.”

“Thank goodness I have people to take those calls.”

“No one has called here, but it’s early yet. You’ll be home Monday, right? It’s someone’s birthday.”

He grinned. “Will you have something for me to unwrap?”

“You know I will,” she said with a waggle of her brow. It had been a long time since he’d looked forward to a birthday. It reminded him of another thing he’d learned about his adoption. His actual birth date was in October, but Cora had changed it to November when she placed him for adoption. The Senator had given him a little present in October, but Jack had decided he wanted to stick with a November birthday.

“I love you,” he said, feeling frustrated that while he could see her, he couldn’t touch her.

She blew him a kiss. “I love you too.”

Chapter Six

Tess woke the next morning missing Jack. She hated it when he was away. After hearing his account of Cora's response to the news broadcast, she wondered if she should have gone with him after all. And now instead of two days, he was going to be gone three. At least it would give her time to finish up his birthday plans.

She showered, dressed and was pouring coffee when a car pulled up in front of the house. Looking out the window, she saw it was Daniel.

"Why doesn't he ever call first?" she said to herself.

"Hey Brat," he said when she opened the door.

"If you want coffee, you need to be nice."

He grinned, which wasn't something anyone ever saw very often. "Is it fresh?"

"Come in," she said.

She got him coffee and they sat at the kitchen table.

"How long is Jack gone this time?" he said taking a sip from his mug.

"Monday." She'd considered getting the case file he'd brought her, knowing that was why he was there, but since he was starting with small talk, she thought she'd sit and chat.

Perhaps she'd find out something about his feelings about Kate.

"The grandmother didn't take it well? She still thinks the Senator killed her daughter?"

Tess shrugged. "I think she's more worried about losing Jack to his new family, that yes, she holds responsible for Delia's death. But Jack will work it out. He always does."

"Did you have time to review the file?"

Tess nodded. "I did."

“And?”

“Well, at first glance, nothing looks out of place. The cousin took police straight to her body and how would he have known where it was if he didn’t kill her? Unless he witnessed it, except wouldn’t he just say that? In this case he confesses.”

Daniel nodded, but she could see he wasn’t happy with her assessment so far.

“On the other hand, the cousin is developmentally disabled and later determined not mentally competent to stand trial. In his initial statement he talked about monsters killing her, so maybe he did witness it. Unfortunately, the police didn’t look at anyone else.”

“They interviewed other people.”

Tess knew he was baiting her. “Yes, but mostly they were asking questions to confirm the cousin was capable of murder, which everyone seemed surprised about and yet admitted he was obsessed with Amanda.”

“You don’t think there’s anything that can be done?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Daniel waited for her to continue.

“I was left with several questions that no one seemed to want an answer for.”

“Like what?”

“Like how did she get out to Caufields Mill? Even today, it’s out of the way. Her car wasn’t there. No one indicated they took her there. The cousin took a bus, but statements by the driver and other passengers say he was alone. And how did he know she’d be there? Did she tell him? She wasn’t sexually assaulted and she had \$400 on her, so it wasn’t rape or robbery. Why was she there? And why did she have \$400 on her?”

Daniel sat back, his fingers playing with his coffee mug. “I can answer some of that.”

“Okay.”

He looked at her then, apprehensive. “You need to promise you won’t say any of what I’m about to tell you to anyone.”

Tess had that sinking feeling that she wasn’t going to like what he said. “If it leads to opening the case and a new arrest, I’d have to tell.”

He nodded. “Only if it leads to something significant. Otherwise, you can’t tell anyone, Tess. I mean it. Not Jack. Not Kate.”

At first the sinking feeling was around the idea of keeping secrets. But now she realized that whatever Daniel was going to tell her was probably bad for him too. Like he’d done something wrong. Instinct had her wanting to protect him and agree to keep his secret. “Daniel, if you’ve -”

“I didn’t kill her,” he said. “It’s nothing like that.”

She took a deep breath. “If it doesn’t come to anything in the case, I’ll keep it to myself.”

He stared at her as if he was assessing the truth of her statement. “I drove her out there and I gave her the money.”

It was Tess’ turn to stare. She’d never known Daniel to do anything against the law, but this information wasn’t in the file. He’d kept it to himself. There was only one reason to keep information from the police; to protect oneself. Or maybe he was protecting someone else. She latched on to that. “Who are you protecting?”

He laughed derisively. “Me.”

“How did you know her?” Tess asked. “You went to Jefferson Academy. She was a Jefferson Tavern High School student.”

Daniel frowned and then understanding crossed his face. "I didn't board at the JA like you did. I lived at home and got out into the real world, which means I ran into kids from all the schools in the area." That made sense, Tess thought. She had boarded at the academy and only went off campus on holidays, which she usually spent with Helen and Tom.

"Were you dating her?"

"Not at the time of her death."

"But you did before?"

He nodded.

"So how did it happen that you gave her money and drove her to a place in the middle of nowhere?"

Daniel was back to playing with his mug. He looked like he wanted to drink something stronger. She thought about offering it to him, but it was still before 10 in the morning.

"She called and asked if I'd give her a ride to Caulfields Country Market and if I could lend her the money. She didn't say why."

"And you didn't ask?" Tess wondered if Amanda Neely had a Svengali effect on men that she could get them to do her bidding without answering questions. It was hard to believe that Daniel would allow himself to be manipulated, but Tess reminded herself that he was only 18 or so at the time.

"I asked. She wouldn't tell."

"But you helped her anyway?"

He blew out a breath. "At the time I thought maybe she was going out of town to have a procedure."

“Procedure? You mean terminate a pregnancy?” Tess thought back to the M.E. report, but didn’t remember seeing anything that suggested Amanda was pregnant.

He nodded. “Turns out I was wrong about that.”

“Were you sleeping with -”

“Not at that time. But Amanda got around, if you know what I mean.”

“She was promiscuous?”

“She was with only one guy at a time, but she was rarely without a boyfriend. The minute one relationship ended, she was on to the next.”

“Were you aware of anyone that wanted her dead?” It was the question the police should have asked Daniel and Amanda’s other family and friends, but didn’t since they’d determined her cousin had killed her.

“Nothing specific. I think there were other girls that didn’t like her, usually because she’d taken their boyfriends.”

“People kill for that.”

“Usually they don’t though. She had a tough home life and a part of me wondered if her father may have killed her.”

“Her father?”

“I think the reason she had me drive her and give her money was to keep her father from knowing what she was up to. She says he had surveillance cameras in the house and would follow her and her sister sometimes.”

“Spying on his family?”

“But, he does agree that Douglas Neely didn’t kill Amanda.”

“Who does he think killed her?”

“The government.”

Tess’ jaw dropped. “The government?”

“He’s definitely paranoid. He’s serving time for having guns and pipe bombs in his car outside the Federal Building in Richmond.”

“So you think his claim is bogus.”

Daniel looked at her like she was nuts.

“What? Weirder things have happened.”

“He’s crazy. Amanda was hit by a rock and strangled. That’s not how the government kills people.”

“Right. Okay,” she conceded.

“You don’t happen to know what Kate knows about this case, do you?”

Tess wondered for a minute if that’s why he asked for her help. To see what she might know or could learn from Kate.

“I didn’t even know she was writing a true crime book until yesterday. But I can tell you, she’s very good at getting information.”

“I know,” he said, annoyance lacing his tone.

“If you’re serious about justice for Amanda and Douglas, you should talk to her.” Even as Tess said it, she knew he’d dismiss it. Daniel would be happy to take Kate’s information, but he wasn’t going to share any of his own. Especially not the part about driving Amanda to the place she was killed.

“You know I can’t do that.”

Tess decided it was time to move the conversation away from murder to his love life, even though she knew he’d much rather talk about death than feelings.

“Why did you ask her for coffee?”

“Tess, I don’t want to talk-”

“I know you don’t. So listen and don’t repeat anything I’m about to tell you to Kate.”

“Since I’m not likely to ever talk to her again, I think your secret is safe with me.”

“It’s not my secret. It’s hers.”

His eyes showed interest, even if he didn’t want them to.

“Kate treated you the way she did yesterday because she didn’t realize it was a date.”

“That’s not a secret. She was clear about that yesterday.”

“The reason she didn’t realize it was a date is because usually you ignore her.”

He sat back in his seat as if considering.

“Except for that long appreciative glance you gave her in my kitchen a few weeks ago, she’s felt invisible to you.”

Daniel’s cheeks colored, which he tried to hide by blustering, “I did not take an-”

“Yes you did. It was the first proof I had that you’re not an automaton.”

“You’re a brat.”

She grinned at him. “The point is, you’re a hard man to read and she read the situation wrong. But if you like her, it might be worth another try, now that she knows you asked her on a date, not to influence how she presented the Senator’s interview. I bet she’d love a ride on the back of your motorcycle. Kate likes adventure.”

“I don’t know.”

“Daniel, are you attracted to her?”

“I don’t like talking about -”

“I know you don’t, but tell me anyway.”

“I can’t imagine there is a man alive that wouldn’t be attracted to her.”

“Yes, but it’s not just about looks with you. There must be something about her that had you asking her out.”

He downed the rest of his coffee. “Just trying to live life, Tess.”

She nodded because she knew behind his statement was the idea that sometimes you had to venture into unknown and scary territory to feel like you were living. It’s exactly how she felt when Jack came into her life and turned it upside down and the righted it in the most perfect way.

“It’s worth the risk,” she said. “You and I aren’t that different.”

One blond brow rose.

“Well, now we are. But when I came back from Washington, I wanted a safe, quiet life. At least I thought I did. I didn’t want Jack in my life.”

“Yeah right.”

She smiled. “I didn’t. You can ask him. Fortunately, cupid had other ideas and I’m glad he did.”

“I’m not you or Jack.”

Tess sighed. “I’m not saying you need to marry Kate. I’m just saying that letting go, loosening up is worth it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He stood. “I’ve gotta run, but before I do, I have some things on the case in my truck.”

“You didn’t give me everything?”

“I gave you everything the police had. These are my notes, thoughts, and findings. Maybe you’ll see something I’ve missed. It includes the information I told you today, so keep this information away from other people’s eyes.”

“Okay.” She didn’t like keeping secrets from Jack, but felt she could in this case by calling it confidential information. She followed Daniel out to his truck to get the paperwork.

“You didn’t bring the motorcycle.”

“It’s getting a little cold for that.”

“Your mother will be thrilled to hear it.”

“Have I told you you’re a brat?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

Chapter Seven

Daniel parked his truck in front of Kate's craftsman style home and contemplated restarting the engine and going home. He and Kate were like oil and water. Even when he tried to be nice, things didn't go well. And yet, here he sat in front of her home, thinking about walking up to her front porch and knocking on her door.

He hadn't planned to visit her. The only difficult task on his to-do list for that day was to visit Tess and reveal his secret. She'd taken it well. Not that she wasn't surprised. He couldn't determine if her surprise was that he'd kept information from the police or that he'd opened up to her about it. Probably both. Tess knew him well. Better than anyone, he suspected. It's partly why he'd been attracted to her. That and she had been different when she returned from Washington. She was calm, guarded, predictable, everything he felt he needed in a life companion. So it was even stranger to find himself drawn to Kate, who was the opposite of calm, guarded and predictable. Daniel felt ready for a little adventure in his life, but he wasn't sure he was up to whatever Kate would bring, assuming she'd be interested in going on an adventure with him.

At the very least, he needed to apologize to her. Maybe he could even get information about what she'd learned about the Amanda Neely murder. But that's all he'd do. Tess may think it was worth the risk to allow yourself to be vulnerable to another person, but Daniel wasn't ready for that kind of risk. He wasn't sure he ever would be. He supposed that meant he'd be alone forever. Shaking the thought away, he exited his truck and made his way up the walk of Kate's home.

“Detective Showalter.” Her voice was cool, suspicious. He couldn’t ever remember seeing her in jeans with her hair pulled back in a messy pony tail. She was stunning.

“Kate.” She didn’t respond and he realized he needed to say something. “I...uh...came to apologize.”

“Really. For what?”

Was there more than one thing he needed to be sorry about? “For walking out on you during coffee.”

Her eyes narrowed. “That’s the thing you’re sorry about? Not that you’re poaching my story?”

He sighed. “I’m not poaching your story. I’m not in journalism. At the moment I’m not even a detective.” He saw interest in her eyes and knew he was about to become the subject of an interview. Instincts warned him to turn around and leave. Something else had him accepting her invitation to come in and have a cup of coffee.

He followed her straight back to her kitchen with the eat-in-nook sitting in a bay window. He wasn’t sure what to expect from Kate’s home, but quaint and cozy hadn’t been it.

“I suppose I should apologize to you as well,” she said, putting a coffee pod into her brewer.

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

She looked at him and at first, he thought he was being too flippant. But there was an amused smirk on her face. “I don’t have a problem apologizing or letting people know how I feel, like some others I’ve met.”

Touché, he thought.

“I’m curious though. I’ve known you since I was 16, and you’ve never paid any attention-”

“When we met, you were in high school and I was a college graduate. It wasn’t appropriate or legal for me to pay attention.”

She studied him with those amazing green eyes as she handed him his coffee. “I haven’t been in high school for a long time.”

“No.” He agreed. He knew what she was asking. It was basically the same thing Tess had asked. But he didn’t have an answer as to why all of a sudden he was attracted to Kate.

He thought she might push him on the topic, but instead she said. “So you can see why I misinterpreted your invitation yesterday.”

She continued to look at him. He was torn by dual instincts -- one to look away and the other to kiss her. Fortunately, she went back to her coffee brewer and made herself a cup. He took the opportunity to look around her home. Off the kitchen was an area he suspected was the dining room, but instead was set up like an office. She had a large white board with notes and a picture of Amanda Neely. A murder board, he thought. He walked toward it, wanting to see what she’d discovered.

All the information in the case file was written in blue and a series of questions written in red. She had many of the same thoughts as Tess, which meant her assessment of the case was the same as his.

“You don’t think Douglas Neely killed her.”

“I think it’s possible he didn’t.”

He studied the board more. She was thorough, that’s for sure. “What made you want to do a story on Amanda?”

“It’s not a story, it’s a book. My interest is that her death always stayed with me. It was one of those pivotal points in your teenage life when you realize death and bad people exist and can get you.”

“Why now?”

She didn’t answer, which meant she didn’t want him to know. “Did you know her?”

He took a deep breath. “Yes.”

“Did you know her like many of the other young men knew her?”

He turned, looked at her, surprised by how she asked the question.

“I dated her,” he admitted. “Not for very long.”

“You don’t think Douglas Neely killed her either,” she said. “Is that why you pulled the case file?”

He nodded.

“It’s odd that you’re not in the file. Didn’t the police talk to you?”

Daniel shifted. This line of questioning was moving quickly in an area he didn’t want to go. “No. By the time she was killed, she and I were long over.” Which technically was true.

“If you got this case today, would you have talked with you?”

“Yes.”

“So you think the police were a little quick to focus on Douglas and didn’t investigate enough.”

Daniel didn’t like discussing poor police work. All law enforcement personnel he worked with was dedicated, which didn’t eliminate mistakes, but in most cases, no one purposefully targeted a suspect just to be mean. He’d once made a mistake of focusing on Jack as a murderer because that’s where the evidence had led him. Still, it was clear from the case file that while the

investigators had talked to some of Amanda's friends and family, they hadn't asked the right questions.

"You should let Tess see this," he said.

"Why?" There was a tone in her voice that let him know he'd said something wrong.

"She can help you."

"You mean she can help you! Don't think I don't know that you're here to see what information I have...to take it for your own investigation."

"You have a problem with my trying to solve the murder of a young girl?" This was the second time she'd posited that her story was more important than justice.

"No. I have a problem with being used."

He thought about arguing, but what use would it be? Oil and water, he reminded himself. He walked back to her kitchen, set his coffee mug on the counter. "Thanks for the coffee."

"What, you're leaving?" She said following him as he made his way through her house toward the front door. "You come and steal my information and that's it?"

He stopped, turned to confront her. She ran into him and he felt the jolt of her body against his like a bolt of lightning. She looked up at him with angry green eyes.

"Why do you always treat me like I'm nothing. Like I'm insignificant? You're not better than me, Daniel Showalter-"

He pressed a finger against her lips to shut her up. "You talk too much."

Then to make sure she stayed quiet, he took her chin with his thumb and forefinger, tilted her face up to his and kissed her words away.

=====END EXCERPT=====

Watch for the release of the full book coming soon! Did you enjoy what you read so far? Let me know on the [blog](#), [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).

to-love-honor-and-kill-valentine-book-five-sneak-peek