

The Trailer Park Princess
and the
Middle Finger of Fate

by
Kim Hunt Harris

Copyright © 2013 Kim Hunt Harris Books, LLC
All rights reserved.

ISBN: **1492352993**
ISBN-13: 9781492352990

Acknowledgments

So many people encouraged me on the way to publishing this book, and they have my most sincere gratitude:

My Harvard-educated sister Kelly, who thinks I'm brilliant. She's Harvard educated. She knows these things. Thank you, Kelly, for constantly bolstering my confidence. And, you know, for being an awesome big sister.

Debbie Holt, critique partner and cheerleader. Everyone's opinion counts, but the opinion of a fabulous writer counts for a little extra. Your certainty that I am not a complete hack came at a time when I desperately needed encouragement.

Nancy Krebs, my former writing-group buddy, who is also a fabulous writer. You were the first person (besides me) to actually like this book, and I have not forgotten that.

Shirley Webb, editor extraordinaire. Writers need editors, most especially the self-published ones. Thank you for your enthusiasm, your expertise, and for telling people about my book.

And most importantly, my always patient, ever hopeful, ever encouraging husband Darryl. Without question, I would not be where I am without you. Thank you for helping make my dreams come true

TWO FREE SHORT STORIES – SIGN UP TO MY NEWSLETTER!



I'm so excited to offer two free short stories available only to the lovely, lovely people who sign up for my newsletter.

The first takes place immediately after *The Middle Finger of Fate*, called *Fight the Fat*. The second is *Get the Dale Outta Here*, and it takes place between *Unsightly Bulges* (book 2) and *Caught in the Crotchfire* (book 3).

Just go to www.FreeBooksFromKim.com to sign up!

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TWO FREE SHORT STORIES – SIGN UP TO MY NEWSLETTER!

CHAPTER ONE

The thing about finding a dead body is, you don't expect it to look so *dead*. On television, when someone finds a dead body, the first thing they do is start feeling for a pulse. But when I found the dead woman at the bottom of the basement steps outside the First United Methodist Church, I knew without a doubt that she was deader than my split ends, and I couldn't even see her that well.

Knowing she was already dead didn't stop me from flapping around the courtyard and yelping like I needed to do something quick, when any idiot could see there was no need to hurry. I yelled these goofy, useless yelps, and hopped around long enough to see that the woman had one arm flung over her head, and her neck crooked in a very disturbing fashion. It occurred to me that she could possibly rise up from her basement resting place and look at me with her dead eyes. We were, after all, on holy ground.

Running anywhere suddenly became a stellar idea.

The closer I got to the heavy wooden doors of the church, the more certain I was that not only had the woman risen, but she was floating right behind me, *reaching out a bony finger to touch the back of my neck* –

I yanked open the door and spewed forth a string of words I promised I would never say again when I became a Christian. At high volume.

Don Chambers, the associate pastor, and Viv, my octogenarian Alcoholics Anonymous buddy, were passing down the hallway. They stopped and stared at me.

I gulped back the obscenities and focused on conveying what was most important.

“Dead body! Dead body outside! Dead!” I realized my feet were still running in place and I tried to get them to stop, but I had very little control over anything at that point. I did get one nailed down but the other stomped along by itself a couple of times. I jabbed a finger at the door. “Dead body outside.”

“What?” Don and Viv said in unison.

“Dead body at the bottom of the stairs. Dead.”

“Is it Merline Wallace?” Viv asked. “She looked gray last time I saw her.”

Don moved past me toward the door. “Show me.”

I shook my head. “Uh-uh. I'm not going back out there.” My heart was beating so hard I saw spots. “You can't miss it. It's the only dead body at the bottom of the bell tower.” I wrapped my arms around my waist and moved away from the door, in case there was a ghastly surprise waiting on the other side.

“Use the phone in my office to call the police,” Don said before he opened the door.

“I want to go too.” Viv shuffled out after Don.

My legs shook as I hurried down the hallway to Don's office. I grabbed the phone and slid into his chair.

“9-1-1, what's your emergency?”

“I'm at First Methodist Church. I need to report –”

Unfortunately, at that moment an image popped into my head of Don's face when I yanked open that door and screamed the F-word.

Now, something you should know about me: I giggle when I get nervous. And man, was I nervous. Plus, it *was* kind of funny. Not the dead body, of course, but Don's expression.

I felt the laughter bubbling up and I cleared my throat. “I found a de-he-he—”

I bit my lip to stifle the giggles.

“Ma'am? Are you there?”

I nodded, my teeth still clamped to my lower lip like I was holding back a tidal wave with a rubber band. It did no good to nod, but I knew the moment I opened my mouth I was going to really let loose. I gripped the edge of the desk so hard my nail beds turned white and I took a deep breath through my nose. There.

"I'm sorry," I said calmly. "I have found a dead – a dead...*body*." My throat closed and my voice shot up on the last word, and uncontrollable giggles overtook me.

"A dead body?" the operator asked, calm as you please. "Male or female?"

"Fe –" was all I could get out.

"And who is calling?"

I cupped my hand over the phone and fought back the giggles to catch my breath. "Salem Grimes." I stood and paced behind the desk, twisting the phone cord tight around my fingers. I bit my lip again and told myself to breathe in through my nose, out through my mouth. Or did I have that backwards? I tried it the other way and ended up snorting into the phone. "Sorry," I said again.

A fresh wave of giggles threatened to engulf me and I focused on the picture of Don's family on his desk. His blue-eyed wife and red-haired daughter, the teenage son with his foot propped on a stool behind them, one arm draped across his raised knee, his own brown hair just long enough to say that he might be a preacher's kid but he was still cool. And behind them Don stood with his arms around them all, looking like he had the best family in town.

I pictured him going home that night to tell them all about the dead body, and later whispering to his wife that Salem Grimes had been so upset she'd screamed the F-word so loud the trustees probably heard it in their meeting on the second floor.

I let out a hoot of laughter and slapped my hand hard over my mouth.

"Ma'am, are you there? I need you to stay on the line. Ma'am?"

I lifted the phone to answer but only got out a strangled noise, so I clapped my hand back over the mouthpiece and fell on my side, helpless and pathetic and just plain weird, giggling because I'd found a dead body. I'm telling you, I'm not all there sometimes.

"Police are on their way," the dispatcher said. "I need for you to stay on the line, ma'am. Are you in any danger? Salem? Is anyone there with you? I know it's scary, Salem, but I need you to stay with me."

I pounded the heel of my hand against my forehead but that didn't do anything but make my head hurt. I've learned that there really isn't much you can do when one of these laughing fits hit. It's like what everyone says about a stomach bug. You just have to let it run its course.

So I thought about Don and Viv outside, peering over the iron railing to the bottom of the basement stairs, looking at the woman below. I thought about her, wondered if she had any family.

That did the trick. Nothing funny there. I wiped my eyes and caught my breath. The operator asked me a few more questions that I managed to answer. I heard sirens outside and told her the police had arrived.

I figured as the Finder Of The Body, the police would want to talk to me, so once I'd caught my breath I went back outside. I told myself I had no reason to be nervous about talking to them. I hadn't done anything wrong – this time.

Still, it's natural instinct for me to run the other way when I see a cop uniform.

As soon as I rounded the corner, I wished I had run the other way. Of all the people I'd prefer never to see again, Bobby Sloan was at the top of the list. And there he stood, in jeans and a powder blue button-down shirt, next to a patrol officer.

Bobby was one of the reasons I had a fear of the police. Well, that's not entirely fair. The reason I had a fear of the police is because I had a history of screwing up, and the police had a history of catching me. It wasn't their fault they were better in their role than I was in mine.

I would rather have seen just about any cop in the world than Bobby, though. We had a history, too, starting with the crush I had had on him from the fifth grade through the eighth grade. Little girls really should be taught not to write notes of undying love and devotion. They always come back to haunt.

The love notes and unreturned adoration would have been reason enough for me to want to duck and hide when I saw him, but unfortunately for me, mine and Bobby's story didn't end there. Two years ago, Bobby had been serving arrest warrants and came to my house to pick me up for passing hot checks. I had been drunk and had decided to hide under the bed. It might have worked if I hadn't had a waterbed. Not one of my brighter moments, but fortunately, not one of my dumbest, either.

So there I had been with Bobby's hand around my ankle, pulling on me and laughing at me wedged up in the four-inch-wide space I was trying to hide under and hanging on for all I was worth. He tugged hard right about the same time I decided to give it up and let go.

He fell back, which would have been kind of funny, except he fell back into a big pile of dog poop from my roommate's Rottweiler, and so it was really only funny to Bobby's fellow officers. While one of them was outside hosing Bobby down and I was being led in handcuffs to the squad car, I tried to explain to him that it wasn't my dog and that that dog and his nasty habits were one of the reasons I was looking for another place to live. But the look he gave me told me he didn't really care. In fact, the look he gave me told me he hoped he would never see me again. That hurt, considering I'd pledged my undying love to him practically every day for three solid years.

Now, I just hoped he wouldn't recognize me. After all, it had been two years, and since I'd quit drinking, I'd replaced Jack Daniels with super-size french fries and gained about thirty pounds. Or forty. Or so. I used to wear my hair long and bleached blonde, but after my last arrest I let the brown grow out and stuck with an easy-to-maintain chin length bob. On a good day, I told myself I could resemble Katie Holmes' fat cousin.

Bobby took one look at me and said, "Oh no."

So much for that hope.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I didn't do anything, Bobby. All I was doing was walking up the sidewalk, I swear."

"Walking up the sidewalk to a church." He crossed his arms over his chest.

"I can go to church."

"I know you *can*." He looked back over the railing. "Seriously, Salem, what were you doing here?"

"I was going inside. You'd think I was going inside a bar." Which I was actually not allowed to do. A condition of my probation.

"I would be less surprised."

I scowled at him. This was one of those times when it was better just to keep my mouth shut.

"Did you see anyone?"

I shook my head.

"Do you know her?" He didn't take his eyes off me as he motioned with his head toward the stairs.

Again I shook my head. "Why aren't you wearing a uniform?" Let him be the defensive one for a change.

"Because I'm a detective now. Stay put." He walked over to a uniformed officer and they talked for a minute.

The uniformed cop came over. He had that same passive, no-need-to-worry-I'm-in-complete-control face that every cop has. "I'm going to need for you to go back to the station with me."

I took a step backward. "Me? Why?"

"We need to get a statement."

"I gave my statement to the operator. I found a dead body. End of statement."

"We need for it to be written down."

"Fine." No need to panic. I hadn't done anything wrong. But I'd made a promise to myself that I was never going to see the inside of a jail again. "I'll be happy to give you a statement right here. I'm sure Don won't mind loaning me some paper."

He put a hand on his hip and looked back at Bobby. Bobby narrowed his eyes and lifted his chin and I knew that whatever passed between them wasn't in my favor.

The uniform turned back to me. "Ma'am, I'm going to need you to come to the station with me."

I looked at my watch, then read his nametag. "Officer Walters, I have to be at work in half an hour."

"You can call your boss from the station. I'm sure they'll understand."

I was beating a dead horse but couldn't keep from asking, "Do I really have to?"

Walters nodded. "Are you going to come willingly?"

I bit my lip and looked at Bobby.

"Go, Salem. It's just a few questions. I'll be there in a little while."

I made a face at Walters. "Fine."

"Thank you." He touched the small of my back and steered me toward his car. "This way, please."

Two more patrol cars drove up as we pulled away, followed by the Channel Eleven news van. I sat in the back of the squad car and tried to wrap my arms all the way around my body.

"So this is what these things look like when you're sober," I said.

Walters caught my eye in the rearview mirror but didn't say anything.

I have to say that, all in all, being taken in for questioning is a lot better than being taken in for driving under the influence. I didn't have to go through the whole fingerprint, smile-for-the-camera, now-blow-into-this-hose routine. I figured I would be taken to one of those little rooms with a table and four chairs and a big one-way mirror like you see on cop shows. Instead, the cop took me to Bobby's office.

"Detective Sloan should just be a few minutes. Have a seat."

I sat on the edge of the rolling chair across from Bobby's desk. "Are we going to wait for him?"

Walters nodded.

"Is that necessary? I mean, isn't there someone else who can take the statement?" Sitting across the desk from Bobby and facing probing questions wasn't high on my list of wishes at the moment.

He raised his eyebrows. "You have a problem with Detective Sloan?"

I chewed my lip and didn't answer. Yes, I had a problem, but not one I wanted to discuss.

“You’ll probably want to call your boss now.” The officer slid the phone across the desk.

I looked at the phone and frowned. This was all so wrong. Now I had to call Flo at Flo’s Bow Wow Barbers and tell her I was going to be late because I was in jail. And no matter how much I assured her I’d done nothing wrong, I was just a witness, she would automatically think I’d been busted. That’s what *I* would believe.

I raised my chin. “You do it.”

Walters raised his eyebrows again. “I’m sorry?”

“You do it.” I pushed the phone back toward him. “Call for me, let them know I’m going to be late because I witnessed a possible crime and you need to ask me some questions.”

He looked like he was thinking about it. “You really should handle it yourself.”

“If I call, she’s going to think I’ve been arrested and I’m making up some line to cover it up.”

“Why would she think that?”

I shrugged. Why indeed.

He frowned at me for a couple of seconds, then picked up the handset. “What’s the number?”

I gave him the number to the Bow Wow Barbers and he punched it in. “Who do I ask for?”

“Flo.”

He handled it perfectly. Confident, courteous, in command, and yet not overbearing. I wish I could go to the police academy just to learn how they do that.

He hung up and said, “No problem.”

“Maybe next time I have a head cold you could call in sick for me. Last time she wasn’t terribly sympathetic.”

He almost smiled. Then he bent his head over a piece of paper and got to work.

About three lifetimes later Bobby arrived. He walked through the door and Walters jumped up. They stepped out into the hallway and mumble-mumble-mumbled to each other for a few minutes. I looked around the room for an escape. If I could somehow manage to make myself half an inch wide I could squeeze through the air conditioner vent, but that seemed unlikely since I couldn’t even squeeze myself into a size fourteen anymore.

Bobby came in and sat down with an old man groan, which was a little weird because he was anything but an old man. He pushed some papers around for a few seconds as if this was just a normal day at the office and he had nothing pressing to get to. He laid his arms on the desk, clasped his hands together, and looked at me.

“Okay Salem. Tell me why you were at that church.”

“I had a meeting there this morning.”

“A meeting with whom?”

I lifted my chin. “My AA group.”

“Your AA group.”

It’s always a little awkward, telling people you’re an alcoholic. By the time you get to Alcoholics Anonymous you’re much more versed in telling people how you’re not an alcoholic. Then you say you’re going to AA and they get that uncomfortable, oh-that’s-great-but-now-I-have-to-look-away thing. So when I tell people I’m in AA, I automatically lift my chin and start thinking of what I’m going to say to fill the awkward pause after *The Revelation*.

But Bobby didn’t look away. He just kept staring at me with that same unreadable look. “What time did you get there?”

So that was that. Cat officially out of bag and we’re moving onward. “It was just before ten.” I couldn’t be entirely sure because the clock in my old car was busted.

“Just before ten.”

I nodded.

Bobby asked a lot of questions about who I’d seen, what other cars were around, did I talk to anyone, did I know the girl. I didn’t have a lot of information to give him because pretty much the extent of my involvement was a lot of jumping up and down and yelping.

I answered him as best I could, but I have to admit there was a part of me that was inappropriately studying him. You know how you idolize someone and then you see them years later and realize they weren’t anything special, just a regular person with normal faults? That was *so* not what I was feeling. In fact, Bobby seemed every bit as larger-than-life to me as he ever had. He still had that air of the supercool dude, confident, in charge, able to save old ladies and run down bad guys without ruffling his just-a-trifle-too-long hair.

Bobby studied some papers on his desk and made a few notes. It took everything I had not to ask what he was writing down.

Shouldn’t he have gotten gray hair and fat by now? I added the years up in my head. I was twenty-eight, so that would make him...thirty-five. I guess he wasn’t that much older than me after all. It had seemed like a lot when the seven years between us was fourth grade to twelfth grade.

Bobby didn't look older, though, just better. Those lines that bracketed his mouth were deeper, his neck was bigger around so his Adam's apple no longer stuck out like someone had thrown a boomerang through the back of his neck. He was bigger everywhere, more solid and more there, somehow.

I was bigger, too, unfortunately. I felt like Jabba the Hut spilling out of the chair and onto the floor.

"So you walked up the sidewalk and what happened?"

"I looked down and saw the body –"

"Why did you look down?"

His sudden question made me jump a little. "I – I don't know. Don't people just look down sometimes?"

"If there's a reason to."

Oh God. Was he saying I was a suspect? My heart began to race again and I felt my fingers clench together like they do when I really *really* want a drink.

"Did you hear something that made you look down?"

"No." I didn't think so.

"See something? Some kind of movement out of the corner of your eye?"

Did I? His intensity was making me nervous. I shook my head. "I don't remember seeing anything. I just walked by and I looked down because I always look down there when I walk by."

"Why?"

"Why? Geez, Bobby, you're making me crazy! Is there some law against looking down?"

He shook his head.

"Then stop it. I always look down at the bottom of those stairs because I've always wondered where the door at the bottom of the stairs goes to, that's all."

"Then why didn't you just say so?"

"Because I found a dead body and now I'm at the police station and I'm completely freaked out and not thinking straight!" I took a deep breath and thought maybe I ought to lower my voice since I was on the verge of shrieking. I was almost out of my chair, too, so I scooted my Jabba self back.

"Calm down. Go on," Bobby said.

But I was afraid to now. "That's it. That's all I have to say."

Bobby tapped a pen on his desk and looked at me.

I tried to cross my legs but with my big thighs that's kind of hard. I settled for crossing my ankles and raised my eyebrows at Bobby as if I could sit there and have a staring contest with him all day if he wanted to.

"So you're in AA."

"Yep."

He stood. I shot out of my chair and grabbed my purse. "We're done then? Great. I have to get to work."

He stopped at the door and stepped aside so I could pass. "So how are you doing?" he asked, his voice a little softer.

He wasn't asking about my health and well-being, I knew that much. "A hundred and forty-seven days," I said. "This time."

He nodded. "That's good, Salem. That's really good." He squeezed my arm.

I am so pathetic. For me, an arm squeeze and a solemn "that's good" from Bobby Sloan is like what getting a combination Grammy/Oscar/Nobel Prize For Saving The World From Total Destruction would be for anyone else. I felt myself actually grow two inches taller the moment he said that. I mean, can anyone be so needy for praise?

But I have to admit; getting Bobby's approval was worth finding a dead body.

He asked for my phone number, and for a crazy moment I thought he was asking me out, now that he knew I wouldn't get drunk and scream at the waitress. Then I realized it was probably just so he could call me about the dead woman. How shallow am I? There's a family somewhere about to be devastated with tragic news and I'm wondering what I should wear on my date with Bobby. I felt really bad then.

Walters drove me back to my car, and since he'd already told Flo I would be late I figured I had enough time to drive through Wendy's for lunch. I was supposed to be on a diet, but after the trauma of discovering a dead body and having Bobby see all my fat, I decided I deserved a Big Classic with cheese and french fries.

I ate in my car – as I do a lot – and thought about the poor woman at the bottom of the stairs. When I left the church nobody knew who she was, or even if it had been an accident. That bell tower was tall, forty or fifty feet. If someone fell out of it, all the way to one story below ground level, onto concrete stairs, that would probably be enough to do the job. But somehow I didn't think it had been an accident. Not from the questions Bobby had asked me.

Who was she? Did she know she was in danger? Did she know today might be the day? Or was she just going along, thinking about what she had to do, matching up the days till payday against the days until the electricity was cut off the way I always was?

Nothing like contemplating sudden death to put you in touch with God. God's the only thing that makes the whole gruesome dying thing a little better. I know some people who even say they actually look forward to it because they're so excited about being with God. Myself, I'm a relatively new Christian and nowhere near that point yet. I'd still rather pretend I'm going to live forever. In theory, the idea of eternity in heaven singing God's praises sounds really good, but when I realize I have to go through the death part to get there, I'm not quite so enamored with the idea.

I was sitting at a red light about to put a french fry dipped in ketchup in my mouth when I was struck by a sudden gruesome image: dead fingers covered with blood. I stared at the fry until the car behind me honked and I realized the light had turned. I felt my stomach turn, not just because of the bloody-finger image but the whole scenario that morning, and dropped the fries back in the bag. I looked down at the burger with one bite gone and thought I was going to hurl right there. It was all I could do to wait till I got to Bow Wow Barbers and not toss it out on the street.

I gulped down bile as I tossed the food and thought that if I found a dead body every day, maybe I could finally stick to a diet.

Frank and Stump were waiting for me on the front deck when I rattled up. Frank is my neighbor and he babysits Stump for me when I can't take her to work. Yes, I know. I could leave her at home like any normal person would. But Stump has separation issues that cause her to howl and screech bloody murder and then destroy something of mine if I leave her alone. I have to pay Frank in free dinners when he keeps her, but that's okay. It's better than wondering all day what she's going to destroy.

Stump wiggled her short black body and barked hard enough to raise herself onto her back feet when I got out of the car.

"You're not going to believe what happened today," I said as I walked up. Stump flipped over onto her back so I could scratch her fat belly.

Frank is a very skinny Hispanic guy with shaggy hair and a mustache like Sonny Bono's in those old variety shows with Cher. "You killed somebody," he said.

I froze. "How did you know?"

"It was on the news. How come you're not in jail?" He didn't seem particularly worried that he was in the company of a murderer, just curious that I was on the loose.

"They said on the news that I killed somebody?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "I think so."

Frank had lived in Texas all his life and, although he spoke English, his family spoke Spanish at home. English was his second language. Sometimes he got a little crossways in his phrasing. I hoped this was one of those times.

"Someone said on the news that I'd killed someone? Or that I'd found a dead body? Because that's what actually happened. I didn't touch anyone. I swear."

"Maybe that was it, I can't really remember. Hey, Stump ate a bug today."

"Stump." I scratched her belly with both hands, which she loved. She wiggled against the deck and groaned. "You have to stop eating bugs. You're going to get one that doesn't agree with you." I looked at Frank. "What channel was the story on?"

"Eleven. Patrice Watson."

I don't watch the news much, so I didn't know who that was. I checked the clock and decided I'd better watch this, though, just to make sure Frank was mistaken.

I took a quick shower to get the Airedale slobber off me and started dinner while Frank made himself comfortable in my cracked Naugahyde recliner. He turned on one of those crime scene detective shows and I almost burned dinner because I was comparing myself to the woman on the show who was the witness to the crime. Everyone was really sympathetic to her. No one accused her of killing anybody.

After dinner I folded laundry and caught myself looking repeatedly out the window. I realized I was waiting for someone to come take me to jail. I filled Frank in on all the details and he looked sufficiently spooked.

"That's weird, man." He shook his head and his hair flopped. "I wonder what happened to her."

"I've been wondering the same thing all day." I shuddered. I'd been going to that church for less than a year, but it was weird thinking there might be a killer lurking around there.

The detective show went off and the news teaser came on.

"A grisly discovery was made today at a downtown Lubbock church."

"That's it!" Frank cried.

"Ssshh!" I ran over and turned up the volume. I expected to see the church or maybe the police spokesman.

Instead my picture flashed on the screen. "A woman was found dead today by *this* woman..."

I didn't hear anything after that. It wasn't just any picture. It was my arrest photo from a year and a half ago. I stared at the picture and for the second time that day and said a word I'd promised I would never say again.

CHAPTER TWO

“See, I told you,” Frank said. “She said you killed someone.”

A commercial came on and I dragged my attention away from the television. “She didn’t say that. Did she?” Amidst the roar going on in my head I couldn’t be sure. All I knew was the lowest moment of my life had been captured and splashed across the television in a completely inappropriate way. Somehow being accused of murder was no longer at the top of my list of outrages.

Why would they show an arrest photo from a year and a half ago? What did my last DUI have to do with the dead woman at the church?

I dropped back into the chair, numb and for some reason scared out of my mind. Everyone has heard stories of people being convicted of crimes they didn’t commit. I’d only ever been convicted of things I was actually guilty of.

The phone rang. It was my G-Ma.

“You’re on television. You told me you quit drinking.”

“I did.”

“Well, the T.V. station says you’re in some kind of trouble. What did you do?”

Normally I don’t get alarmed by anything G-Ma says because she tends to ignore minor details like facts and relies solely on impression, and that is always far to the left of reality. I was already freaking out and feeling guilty, even though I knew darned good and well I hadn’t done anything wrong.

“What channel are you watching?”

“The one with the man who looks like Lee Harvey Oswald.”

“That’s Eleven, the same one I’m watching. Will you do me a favor and flip over to Seven and record it for me?” Maybe it was just a Channel Eleven thing. If Seven had my mug shot too, I was going to grab Stump and flee the country.

Thank goodness I’d finally taught G-Ma to work the DVR. That had only taken two years. “I’ll call you back in a few minutes, I want to see what they say on Channel Eleven.”

“Wait till after sports. They’re going to interview the Cowboy’s new running back.”

So on G-Ma’s list of priorities I was directly under the Dallas Cowboys. That wasn’t so bad considering her fervent devotion to the Cowboys. Lucky for me it was the preseason.

The news came back on and I hung up. I had to sit through some junk about the city council meeting before they got to me. Or her, I mean.

“A gruesome discovery was made this morning outside the basement of the First United Methodist Church. The body of 22-year-old Lucinda Cruz was found at the bottom of the basement stairs by *this* woman –” There she went again with the “*this* woman” thing, and my arrest photo flashed back on the screen.

I tried to focus on what was being said, but pretty much all I could see was *this* woman. I looked...well, I looked like I’d just been arrested for driving under the influence. I looked strung-out and skanky, pale and washed out with an inch and a half of mascara under my eyes. I had been at the end of my ill-advised blonde phase, at the point when I’d quit bothering with petty details like dark roots and conditioner.

The picture stayed behind the anchor for a few more seconds, then switched to one of a beautiful Hispanic girl with long black hair and lips that a model would pay good money for. She had chocolate brown eyes and smooth skin like I haven’t had since I was about five. Her mouth was open in a full laugh. She was breathtaking.

The picture switched to a bald man with a mustache, the police department spokesman.

“We’re obviously very early into the investigation, but we are treating this as a homicide.”

I listened really hard and didn’t hear him say anything that sounded like “Salem Grimes – *this* woman! – is our prime suspect at this time.”

Then the anchor went on to something about a car wreck on one of the farm-to-market roads. Something about the anchor’s voice was familiar, but I was too wrapped up in feeling humiliated and terrified to play where-do-I-know-her.

“Did you catch that name? Lucinda something.”

“Cruz.” Frank said it with the rolling “r.” Crrrrruz. I can’t do that.

“Why was my picture up there?”

Frank grunted. “Because you were *this* woman who found the body.”

“But they don’t usually do that, do they? I don’t remember ever seeing the picture of anyone else who found a dead body.” I stood up and paced. In my narrow trailer house that’s a three-step procedure. The fact of the matter was, I couldn’t call to mind a

single example of anyone else finding a dead body, but I'm sure it had happened lots of times. I didn't remember the finder's picture being shown, ever. Not once. "It makes me look like I'm the one who killed her, not the one who found her."

"See, that's what I'm saying," Frank said.

"That's not right. They shouldn't have done that. Should they?" Maybe they were just trying to give me credit or something, like a screwed-up attempt at making me a hero. But I didn't think so. I switched over to Channel Seven. What were the odds G-Ma would really be able to record it anyway?

Channel Seven had a better scoop: my 9-1-1 tape.

I watched my own words scroll across the bottom of the screen. That was weird. "I need to report," I said a couple of times. Then I garbled a bunch and the screen said, "unintelligible," so I looked like a complete idiot. We finally got to me blurting that I'd found a dead body.

The anchors on Channel Seven shook their heads in sympathy. The female anchor even tssked and murmured, "Bless her heart."

"Yes," said the male anchor solemnly. "Obviously, very upsetting."

"Right on," I said to the TV. "Very upsetting." They thought I was hysterical from crying, but that was okay. I mean, different people react differently to stress, right? So I giggle. Didn't mean I didn't deserve a "bless her heart."

They ran the same clip of the department spokesman saying it was being investigated as a homicide, then they added some new information. Lucinda Cruz was one of the custodians at the church.

I mulled that news and flipped back to Channel Eleven, but of course they were on to other matters by then.

"I ought to sue them or something."

"For what?"

"I don't know." I sunk down in my chair. As far as I could tell, they hadn't said anything that was an outright lie. I probably shouldn't try to claim defamation of character, because I'd handled defaming my own character with impressive skill and expertise. Surely it wasn't a good thing for them to show an arrest photo unless it was actually connected to the story.

"Call Patrice Watson and ask her why she did it. Ask her to go out with me while you're at it. I like chubby chicks."

I studied the anchor. When I was waiting tables I worked with a lot of college girls; probably I'd worked with her years before but –

"Hey!" I jumped up and turned up the volume. "What did you say her name was?"

"Patrice Watson. I think she's French," Frank said, although clearly the girl had as thick a Texas accent as I did.

"No, she's not. She's Trisha Thompson, from Idalou!"

I couldn't believe I hadn't recognized her, but in my defense she did look way different. She'd gained a lot of weight, too, as much as I had, if not more. She was blonde now, a really pretty, natural-looking dark blonde. She had on nice clothes, of course, the kind of clothes she'd always looked at in the magazines when we were in school. We'd look at those dresses that were supposed to "take you from the office to the party with a few simple accessories." Trisha focused on the office part while all I cared about was the party look.

We'd grown up together, spent pretty much every waking moment together all through elementary, junior high and the first couple of years of high school. Then I started partying all the time, and she decided she was too good for me. She *was*, but still...

And she pasted my arrest photo all over the news.

"No," Frank was saying. "Her name is Patrice Watson. See?" He pointed at the screen where the male anchor – who really did bear a slight resemblance to Lee Harvey Oswald, I think it was the chin – was saying, "Thanks Patrice. In other news..."

I wanted to curl up in a ball in my chair but I was too fat, so I just sprawled there and tried to figure out what was going on. It was like one of those times when I used to wake up in a strange place with people I didn't know. People telling me I'd done and said things that made no sense, and I couldn't argue with them because it was most likely true.

I lugged Stump into my lap and scratched her ears and belly while I tried to think. It had been ten years since we graduated high school, but I was fairly sure I'd seen Trisha more recently than that – within the last five or six years, anyway. But try as I might, I couldn't come up with anything concrete, just a vague uneasy feeling that we'd had some kind of run-in.

There was no telling what it was about. I did a lot of stuff when I was drinking that made people mad. I have kind of a smart mouth even when I'm dead sober, and when I'm drunk I mix in a warped sense of humor and turn the impulse control all the way down. It's a deadly combination.

I was still trying to remember what I'd done to make Trisha mad when the phone rang.

"I recorded it, I think," G-Ma said. "Were you laughing?"

"Of course not. I was crying hysterically. Why would I laugh about finding a dead body?"

"You know how you get."

The phone beeped (thank you, God) and I said, "I have another call. Hang on and I'll be right back."

She wouldn't hang on. G-Ma doesn't believe it's actually possible to put one person on hold and talk to another one, no matter what nonsense the phone company was trying to peddle.

It was Les. Les is...well, it's hard to explain. He's kind of an unofficial, self-appointed mentor. He's the one who found me in jail the morning after that infamous DUI picture was taken and introduced me to Christianity. That was his calling, he told me, to find the down and out and give them hope through Jesus Christ. Since I was fresh out of hope and seriously contemplating jumping off a bridge, I latched on to him with all I was worth.

I think there's some ancient Eastern proverb about if you save someone's life, that life becomes your responsibility. Les is a solid Bible belt Christian, as far from East as West can get, but he's bought into that philosophy from somewhere, and am I grateful for that. God knew I needed someone to look after me long after that morning in jail.

"Watching the news, Salem," Les said. "What's going on?"

"Oh, nothing. I just found a dead body."

"So nothing unusual."

"Same old same old."

"Talk to me."

So I talked. I probably sounded a little self-involved, but I'd gotten wrapped up in my own public humiliation and outrage and forgotten again about the poor dead woman at the bottom of the stairs. Talking to Les made me remember that there *were* actually bigger problems on the table than wondering why Trisha would take a picture of me looking like a hag and shoot it out to a few hundred thousand people.

"Want to explain why they had an arrest picture up of you?"

Ugh. So now we were back to my problem. That was quick. "I'd love to, and as soon as I find out why that was shown, I'll let you know." I chewed my thumbnail. "I have a nagging feeling, though, that the anchor who ran that story might have a personal grudge against me, and this is how she's dealing with it."

"Why would she have a personal grudge against you?"

"I don't remember exactly. I think I might have gotten into an argument with her while I was drinking."

"I see." He did see. He'd told me stories of bar fights he'd gotten into, and the family members who still refused to talk to him because of what he'd said or done while he was drinking.

A picture flashed in my mind of Trisha, face screwed up with rage, screaming at me. She shoved me and I fell, but that's all I could remember.

"Yep," I said with a sigh. "She hates me and she used that picture to get back at me for whatever I did."

Les was silent for a moment. I hated those silences.

"Sounds like a Step 9 day to me."

Step 9 of the famous AA Twelve Steps, Make Direct Amends to People We Have Wronged. Possibly the most awkward of all the steps. "Undoubtedly. I just don't know exactly what I'm making amends for."

"One quick way to find out is to ask."

One quick and painful way, yes. "You know, what she's upset about has nothing to do with the dead body." Maybe if I steered the topic back to the dead woman I could avoid dealing with my own ugly past.

No such luck with Les, though. "I'm sure it doesn't. But think of it this way. This has given you the chance to right a wrong and heal an old wound – a golden opportunity."

"Yay."

"You could ignore it and hope it goes away."

"That's worked so well for me in the past." I groaned and slumped in my seat. "I think I'll start tomorrow."

"Good idea. Keep me posted. Are you okay?" Meaning *do you want a drink?*

I did. I'd made it a hundred and forty-seven days. Some of those days had been good and some had made me want to rip my own hair out. But I hadn't had to go through a day when I found a dead body, faced an old crush, and then was humiliated on television. So this was a new test. I had a foreboding feeling I wasn't handling it very well.

"I'm okay," I said.

"Is your house clean?" Meaning no alcohol.

"Of course."

"Is someone there with you?"

"Frank. And Stump."

"Do you want me to come over?"

"No, that's okay. I'll be fine." I decided that more than a drink, what I really wanted was to go to bed and sleep for a couple of weeks. If I kept telling myself that, it might become true.

"Call me, Salem, if you need me. I mean it. No matter what time it is."

He *did* mean it, and I said one of a couple thousand thank-you prayers to God for sending Les into my life.

“Thanks. But I think I’ll be fine.”

“Okay girl. Get through tonight. Tomorrow you can deal with whatever you need to deal with.”

I hung up and considered that happy prospect. My memory might be fuzzy, but I knew there was something with Trisha that had to be resolved, and it undoubtedly involved me apologizing for something stupid I’d done or said. I’d learned in AA that a big part of moving forward with life was cleaning up and putting things right with the past. Things have a tendency to cling to you till you clean them up. Especially things that stink. And this had all the markings of something rank.

But that didn’t make the prospect of facing Trisha – Patrice, sheesh! – any more enticing. Standing in front of her so she could tell me what I’d done or said – or stolen, good Lord help me – to make her want to get revenge.

Frank went home and Stump and I went to bed. She curled up on the pillow beside me and shoved her big wide nose down in the space between the covers. She always slept like that. Maybe the near asphyxiation helped her sleep better, I didn’t know. I measured one time and learned that the width of Stump’s nose and the length of her legs was exactly the same. She was truly one of a kind. I told her every day that God made her special. No other dog I knew had such strong self-esteem.

I scratched her ears and told her goodnight. “Tomorrow is our early day,” I reminded her. We opened the shop for Flo on Tuesday mornings. I hated getting up so early but I was flattered that Flo actually trusted me with a key, so I made sure I didn’t screw up and oversleep or anything.

Stump’s not really a morning person either, so we reward ourselves on Tuesday mornings with breakfast burritos and extra-large coffees from PakASak.

I closed my eyes and said a prayer. “Lord, thank you for...well, okay, thank you for this day. It’s been a crazy one, as you may have noticed. But Les says to be grateful in all things, so I thank you for this day, weird as it was. Lord, please be with that woman’s family, Lucinda Cruz.” I remembered the picture of that beautiful young girl. “They’re going to need comfort, God. Please be with them.” I chewed my lip. “And I could really use some help, too. I know this isn’t about me but I’m still finding it a little hard to deal with.” I’d asked for so much help over the past year that I was in danger of wearing out my welcome. But Les insisted that God wants us to ask, and I really did need the help. “Keep me from screwing up. And please be with me tomorrow when I –” *groan groan groan* – “call Trisha. Amen.”

That night I dreamed I was back in jail and this time I wasn’t getting out. The judge came by and watched me through the bars, his arms over his chest and his face grim. After he stared at me for a minute, I realized it was Charles Pointer, the man that G-Ma said was my real father.

He didn’t say anything, but he didn’t need to put into words that I was a big disappointment to him. I wanted to hide, but of course there was no place to. So I just hung my head and wished I could die.

I woke up feeling awful, and had to remind myself that I really wasn’t to blame for the beautiful Lucinda Cruz’s death. Such a great way to start the day!

That’s not a good frame of mind to be in when you have to face the mirror in the morning. I studied my reflection. Ugh. The weight I’d gained didn’t exactly add to my overall appearance. I did still have my dimples going for me, and even with the weight gain, my skin and hair looked much better sober than they had drunk. The brown of my hair was a shiny brown, and my brown eyes didn’t have those nasty bags under them anymore. But still...could I lose a quick 30 or 40 pounds before the afternoon?

Trisha had gained weight too, I reminded myself. That made me feel only marginally better, since Trisha also had what looked like a pretty expensive haircut and tint, plus a fancy newsroom wardrobe. I sported a perfectly respectable, but not exactly impressive, combination of ProCuts and Walmart.

I brushed my teeth and hair and tiptoed past Stump – snoring into my pillow – on the way to the tiny second bedroom at the other end of my trailer. I’d made a kind of little chapel for myself there. My Bibles were in there – both the King James Version Les gave me and the New Living Translation I actually understood – my devotionals, and some big fluffy pillows I’d thrown on the floor. I had a small end table with a candle tower thing I’d bought at Garden Ridge, and during the past year I’d developed my own ritual where I read my daily devotional and Bible passage, then lit the candle while I meditated and prayed about how the devotional applied to what was going on in my life.

I had to admit lots of times I’m clueless as to that part of it – how the devotional pertains to my life – except in the vaguest sense. But Les says God speaks to us through His word and I’m determined to hear something. If I was going to do this Christianity thing, I wanted to do it as deep as I could.

I took my devotional out and turned to today’s date.

Matthew 5:23-24. “So if you’re standing before the altar in the Temple, offering a sacrifice to God, and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there beside the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God. Come to terms quickly with your enemy before it is too late and you are dragged into court, handed over to an officer, and thrown in jail. I assure you that you won’t be free again until you have paid the last penny.”

Yikes! So maybe God really *was* talking to me through his word. Dragged into court and handed over to an officer and thrown in jail? Come on!

Except I'd already decided to come to terms with Trisha. I couldn't help but think this might be a little overkill.

I flicked the long fireplace starter lighter and lit the twelve candles, taking deep breaths. That might seem a little...cosmic, lighting candles and centering my thoughts on God. But it works for me and I always feel myself become calm and focused as the candles take flame.

When they were all lit I sat back on my heels and bowed my head.

I prayed for Lucinda Cruz first, her family and friends. I didn't even know if she *had* family and friends, but I found it highly unlikely anyone that beautiful went through life alone. I hate to start my prayers with requests, but since it wasn't for me I guessed it was okay. I usually start out with thanks, though. I don't want to seem ungrateful. "Thank you for another day. Thank you for the roof over my head, a job to go to, a car to get me there." Saying that reminded me of something. "But it did get hot yesterday – the gauge went almost into the red. As you might remember I just put water in on Thursday. I don't know what the problem is but if it costs over twenty bucks to fix, I'm going to need a little help here. I've got two, maybe two-fifty in my checking account, and rent is five hundred. My check will probably be around three-fifty. So that leaves, say..."

I wrinkled my nose and tried to remember how much the light bill was. Plus I was almost out of groceries, and gas had gone up a dime a gallon over the last week, plus Flo's son was in Boy Scouts and they were selling those big tubs of popcorn and I promised him I'd buy one of the Butter Toffee Nut ones, and they were a ridiculous nineteen dollars and fifty cents. When did he say he had to turn the order in? Did I have another week?

I suddenly remembered where I was and what I was supposed to be doing. I grimaced and pictured God sitting there in his long robes, white beard down to his lap, tapping one foot and checking his watch.

"I'm sorry. I got a little sidetracked. Suffice it to say that, although at first glance it might *look* like I make decent money, things have gone up considerably since you were here. So if you could see fit to throw a blessing on either my car or my checking account, I'd really appreciate it."

I felt like an idiot, like a grownup kid asking her parents for money. My money problems were in large part due to the fines I had to pay every month, and that was nobody's fault but mine. Les assured me that if I needed something I should ask God, even if it *was* a self-induced need. Besides, where else was it going to come from?

I took another deep breath. "Okay, God. I really appreciate your reminder this morning. I already decided to go see Trisha this afternoon after work, but I suppose it can't hurt to have a little confirmation in that direction, you know? So...you might as well know I'm going to need your help there, too. I'm not exactly looking forward to this. It's going to be awkward." I thought again about the rage on Trisha's face when she'd knocked me down. The look on her face chilled my blood. Horror, hurt, betrayal. I felt sick, wondering what I'd done. "Whatever she's mad at me about, it's bad. I don't remember what it is but I know it's really bad."

I bit my lip and fought back sudden tears. I'd cried so much over the past year and a half, it was pathetic. I really did not want to get started again. But the truth was, I was afraid. And I hate being afraid.

"God, I don't want to go. I'm scared and I don't want to go."

There. I'd admitted it. And saying it out loud helped me see that although I didn't want to go, I had to.

"I don't want to see her, God. I don't *want* to know what I did to hurt her so much, and I don't want to feel guilty anymore, I don't want to think about what I've done. And I don't want her to see me so fat. So please be with me." I was really crying now, wiping furiously at tears as they raced down my cheeks. Geez, it wasn't even six o'clock in the morning yet and already I was exhausted. "Please...just, pour out some Holy Spirit or something on me and on Trisha and help us find some peace or agreement or something. Please give me a humble heart to approach her" – because whenever I thought about her using that picture I really wanted to slap her first and ask questions later – "and give her an open heart to receive me. And courage. Courage would be good right now."

I sat back and waited for that courage to sweep over me. But in the back of my mind, the clock ticked closer to opening time at Bow Wow Barbers, plus I had to stop and get a quart of oil and breakfast burritos for Stump and me. Maybe the courage would come later, when it got closer to time to see Trisha.

I started to stand then stopped. "In Jesus' name I pray. Amen." Sometimes I forget that part.

I got ready and dragged Stump – playing possum – out of bed and carted her out to my car. It started (thank you God) and we drove to PakASak. Stump woke up when we drove under the fluorescent lights at the gas pumps. She can smell a breakfast burrito at a hundred yards.

My friend Virginia worked overnight at the convenience store and she knew I'd be in on Tuesday mornings. She always had our food ready and she usually threw in an extra piece of bacon for Stump. I started to tell her I was feeling fat and maybe I ought to just skip breakfast altogether. But that burrito looked pretty good.

"Morning Doll," Virginia rasped. I've known Virginia a long time. She used to work at this hotel bar where I hung out for a while. I even worked at the bar for a while, but I got fired, probably because I thought it was a place to hang out rather than a

place to actually work. Virginia had tall blonde hair, long skinny legs and a big round belly. Kind of like Humpty Dumpty's bar-hopping, chain-smoking aunt.

She played guitar and sang in the bar's house band. I used to crack up over her songs, except I really couldn't because she didn't intend for them to be funny. She took her craft very seriously.

She looked tired this morning. "Almost quitting time?" I asked

"Yes, thank the good Lord," she said. She's the type who actually means it when she says things like that. "I've been up for almost twenty-four hours straight. It's time for me to go home and look at the inside of my eyelids for a while." She slid a couple little tubs of salsa across the counter to me. "So what's this about you killing someone?"

"Ugh! I didn't kill anyone."

"I didn't figure you did, since you're going to work, but some people were saying last night that you were at the police station and you'd been arrested for killing someone."

"I wasn't arrested. I was taken in for questioning."

Virginia raised a penciled-on eyebrow.

"Because I'm the one who found the dead body."

"Bless your heart. Who was it?"

I shrugged. "Some girl named Lucinda Cruz. I don't know her."

"Was she murdered?"

"I don't know. All I know is I was walking into the church and I saw her there and I called the police." I checked the Marlboro clock behind Virginia and jumped. "I'm late."

CHAPTER THREE

After I finished my dogs that afternoon I called Channel Eleven to see if Trisha was there. I almost didn't get an answer because I forgot to call her Patrice. The girl on the phone said she'd just gotten there. I hung up and thought about going home to change clothes. After seven hours of wrestling with dogs I didn't look or smell like I was ready to step onto any red carpets, but I knew if I went home, I'd find some excuse to put it off another day. When you put something off once, it's twice as easy to put it off again. It's the exponential law of procrastination.

Besides, God had told me that morning to go clean things up with Trisha, right? I drove across town, my mind mulling the concept of God talking to me through some story about two ancient guys I'd never met. Was he really speaking to *me*? Maybe and maybe not. I mean, who was to say? Maybe I just thought that was God speaking to me because the situation with Trisha was on my mind. Maybe that's what everyone did when they thought God was speaking to them. We all just want to believe so much that God gives a flip about the pitiful details of our lives.

I was always curious when everyday people say God told them something. I wanted to know what that sounded like, what that felt like, how they could be *so sure*. And so far no one had been able to give me a solid answer. It made me crazy.

And if it wasn't God, if it *was* my conscience, wouldn't it be as effective to send Trisha a card? It didn't have to be face-to-face stuff, did it? Trisha was probably busy and maybe seeing me at work would only make things worse. I'd probably be disturbing her.

I almost had myself talked into a card and a little gift, maybe a gift certificate for a manicure or something, by the time I got to Channel Eleven, but I didn't go home. I pulled into the parking lot around to the side so Stump would be in the shade. I sat there and debated with myself about going in or going home until I finally turned the key and ground the gears into reverse. I backed out of the space.

Then I pulled back in. I knew that if I left now, I would spend the rest of the day arguing with myself about how I hadn't *really* chickened out, about how I was being perfectly reasonable. I've argued with myself enough for one lifetime. It's exhausting and gives me a headache and makes me want to drink.

Of course, I wanted a drink right then, too. I killed the motor, climbed out, and flapped my arms around a little to dry out the sweat and let the breeze carry away some of the dog smell. I prayed again for courage, then did a gut check.

Nope, still scared. Hmm. Courage wasn't working. So instead, I dragged up a little bit of outrage.

After all, who did she think she was, putting my picture on the news? Yes, I was there to resolve some conflict, but a part of me said that while I was there I might as well get all that was coming to me, including an apology.

That got my feet moving. I *did* make a feeble effort to remind myself to stay calm, but truth be told, I didn't try very hard. Righteous indignation is a lot more appealing than approaching someone with hat in hand, begging forgiveness. By the time I got to the front desk, I was practically stomping.

You would have thought I had asked to see the Pope or the President or something. While I was standing there trying to convince the girl behind the desk that I meant no harm – I guess the fury tactic had its drawbacks – three or four people came and went through a swinging door to my left. I figured Trisha was probably through that door.

Finally the girl paged Trisha. “She's not answering her phone,” she said after a second. As if that might make me give up and go away.

I sat on the padded chair across from the desk. “I'll wait.”

She looked at me like she wanted to get her fly swatter and swat me away. Then a guy with white Ken doll hair poked his head out an office behind her. “Amy, can you come in here for a second?”

“I'll be right back,” Amy whispered to me.

“Okay,” I whispered back.

As soon as she was gone I hopped up and hustled through the swinging door.

I followed a narrow hallway until I found a room with people in it. I don't know what I was expecting; maybe the set from *All the President's Men*, with Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford types running through, dodging desks and waste baskets with their hot scoop that would ignite a national scandal. Then I remembered that was newspaper, and this was television. This placed looked just like any other other big office, with four or five desks and people milling around.

I saw Trisha toward the back of the room, angled toward a bank of televisions that lined the wall.

“Trisha!” I said, not quite a shout but loud enough to get the whole room's attention. I wanted them all to know that Patrice wasn't her real name.

She spun around, eyes wide.

I gave her a goofy grin and a wave. “Surprise!”

Her face closed up so fast you could almost hear it slam. She crossed the floor, her lips thin and her nose in the air.

“Can I help you?”

“I don't know, Trisha. Can you? Don't act like you don't know why I'm here.”

“What do you want, Salem?” She folded her arms and smirked, looking up and down my body. “The friends-join-free coupon I just got from Fat Fighters?”

“You know what I want. Do you want to talk about it in front of all these people?”

She shot a look around the room. A couple of people were watching but not exactly staring. I could change that, though, and she knew it.

She pointed back the way she'd come. “Back here.”

I followed her around another corner and into a room the size of a closet, with one wall of fancy looking equipment with a few thousand buttons, switches and knobs.

Trisha closed the door behind me. “Before you begin, you should know I have the station's full support. We have unlimited resources to defend me through any legal action you might try. I was very careful to say only what I knew to be factual. You have absolutely no chance of winning a lawsuit, or of getting the station or our parent company to settle for so much as a *penny*.” Her eyes flashed as she spoke.

I blinked. She actually thought I was here to threaten a lawsuit. “All I want is an apology.”

She stared at me for a second. I swear she looked almost disappointed. “You're not getting one.”

“Why did you put that horrible picture of me on the news? People think I actually killed that girl!”

Her teeth clenched so that she had to spit every word through her teeth. “I did it because I *could*. Because I wanted the world to see your trashy face and know what kind of person you are. And believe me, if I ever get the opportunity to hurt you again, I will take full advantage of it.”

Ugh. I really wanted to hang onto that righteous indignation. But clearly the time had come to get to the root of the problem.

I took a deep breath and told myself I couldn't fix it if I didn't know what was wrong.

“What did I do, Trisha?”

Trisha rolled her eyes. “Go to hell, Salem.”

“I'm serious. I need for you to tell me what I did. All I remember is a fight and you pushing me.” She'd been crying then, I suddenly remembered. Red face, red eyes, tears streaming.

I was so scared. My heart thundered and I felt a little queasy. I did *not* want to hear her answer.

Suddenly I remembered something else. “Was I - was I putting my clothes on?” That had to be it. I remembered her pushing me and I fell because I had one leg inside my pants, trying to tug them on. I remembered scooting across the floor, trying to get my clothes on and dodge all the things Trisha was chunking at me at the same time.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

