

# 1

**S**ix pounds of pot, a .38 Special, and a by-the-book cop.

Teagan O'Rourke rolled the words around in her head. They sounded like the opening lyrics of a classic rock-and-roll anthem instead of evidence in a murder trial. Weary to the soles of her black pumps, she stared out the window of the San Antonio Police Department vehicle and watched small, unassuming homes built along a long, narrow city park whiz by. Park Boulevard failed to deliver on its grand name. Latino kids screamed and laughed on the playground. Seniors stretched on outdoor fitness equipment. Teenagers engaged in a fierce pickup game on the covered basketball court. Only the tennis courts stood empty and forlorn, their nets waffling in the breeze. *Play with me. Please play with me.*

No one looked up at the SAPD unit. Cop cars were as common as mosquitoes during a humid summer in this neighborhood. If her mother were here, she'd say, "*You reap what you sow, Teagan Catherine O'Rourke.*" Twenty awkward minutes in a car with a newbie wasn't so bad. Officer Moreno had unbent enough to tell Teagan she had plans to go to a movie with her fiancé that evening. After much debate they'd decided on a superhero action flick. Officer Moreno preferred dramas. Her fiancé liked what she'd termed "stupid" comedies. "A lot of bathroom humor and raunchy—that's his idea of funny."

Like a lot of men in the arrested development stage.

Maybe by the time they returned to Teagan's Prius in the parking garage across from the Paul Elizondo Tower downtown, she'd know

## KELLY IRVIN

the officer's first name. Most trials didn't require such an expeditious disposal of the evidence to SAPD's evidence room, but Judge Ibarra had ordered the immediate return of this evidence due to the nature of the trial and the involvement of opposing gangs likely to retaliate over its outcome.

Teagan didn't mind. It meant less evidence she had to worry about storing in her crowded office vault.

"We're almost there, Ms. O'Rourke." Officer Moreno came to a full stop at the corner of Park and Academic Court, where the glass-covered police department recruitment center and property room facilities glistened in the late-afternoon sun.

A smile brought out dimples on Moreno's cherub-cheeked face. Her assignment to escort a court reporter and the evidence to the property room was almost to the halfway point. Teagan had told Moreno to call her by her first name, but the patrolwoman couldn't seem to manage it. "I'll get us through security, we'll stow the evidence, and I'll have you back to your car in a jiffy."

Did people still say "in a jiffy"? Teagan's grandma might, but this woman was no more than twenty-four. A couple of years younger than Teagan. She studied the officer's face as she turned onto Academic Court and accelerated. The woman was for real. A straight shooter determined to be successful in a man's world.

Teagan smiled, but Moreno had already returned her gaze to the road, hands at the proper ten and two positions on the wheel. "I know there's plenty of other things you'd rather do than babysit evidence—"

The driver's side window exploded.

The force knocked Teagan's head against her window. Sudden pain pricked her face. Fragments of glass pierced her cheeks and forehead.

The car swerved, jumped the curb, and crashed into the wrought-iron fence that protected the academy.

## CLOSER THAN SHE KNOWS

*Was this what Mom felt the day she died? The inevitability of it?*

Air bags ballooned.

Teagan slammed back against her seat.

*I'm sorry, Max.*

*I'm sorry I never said it.*

A second later the bag deflated. The smell of nitrogen gases gagged her. Powder coated her face. The skin on the back of her hands burned.

Time sped up in an odd, off-kilter *tick-tock*.

Teagan struggled to open her eyes. Pain pulsed in her temple. Her stomach heaved. Waves of adrenaline shook her body as if she'd grasped a live electrical wire.

*I'm alive. Today's not my day to die.*

*The evidence. Protect the evidence.*

"Officer Moreno?" She tried to sit upright, but her seat belt bit into her sore chest. "Officer?"

Head down, Moreno slumped to her right, held back by her seat belt. Blood coursed down her face. A lot of blood, considering the air bags should have protected her from a hard hit from the wheel or the windshield with its safety glass.

Teagan struggled to lean toward the officer. Her seat belt clenched tighter. Her lungs refused to cooperate. "Officer?" The strangled word barely broke the sudden, ringing silence.

She wiggled toward the woman. She stopped.

Six years of slapping evidence stickers on crime scene photos and listening to medical examiners' testimony forced her to admit what she was seeing. Officer Moreno had a hole in the side of her head near the temple.

A bullet had pierced her skull and scrambled her brain.

Teagan forced her gaze from the dead woman's face. A warm, humid breeze wafted through Moreno's window, sending the smell of blood and human waste to assail Teagan's nose.

## KELLY IRVIN

She'd written official court records for dozens upon dozens of murders, attempted murders, and aggravated assault cases. She transcribed those court records. She proofread them. She added her official certification to each one.

Now she knew. Death stank. Murder stank.

Vomit rose in her throat.

"No, no, no." Teagan fought with her seat belt. Her hands shook. "Come on, come on."

*"Deep breaths."* Her father's Dallas drawl filled her rattled brain. *"Just breathe."*

Teagan inhaled and exhaled. She unhooked the belt. Gently, she touched Officer Moreno's wrist. Her pride in that navy-blue uniform had been so obvious.

Warm skin rewarded Teagan's efforts. Wisps of brown hair grew above the woman's wrist. The details flooded Teagan, trying to drown the one salient fact.

Officer Moreno had no pulse.

The baby-faced officer didn't have to worry anymore about potty humor.

She didn't have to worry about anything at all.