

Lover's Knot

CHAPTER ONE

By the time the *Law & Order* prosecutors had chosen their final strategy for another Wednesday night trial, Kendra Taylor had narrowed her own strategies to two. Either she could gracefully give up the ghost right there in front of her television set, or she could dress and drive to the drugstore to pick up the antibiotics and cough medicine her doctor had prescribed.

The first prospect was more tempting. If Isaac ever came home from work, her husband of seven years would find her lifeless body curled into the fetal position under his heirloom Lover's Knot quilt. Imagining that scene gave her some satisfaction. And oblivion was preferable to another coughing fit.

Unfortunately, bronchitis was rarely fatal, and she was too upset to let go. She was definitely too upset to follow the third and wisest course and let Isaac pick up her prescription first thing in the morning. Tonight Isaac had failed her, and she was in no mood for second chances. The pharmacy was open for another twenty-five minutes. Her prescription was sitting behind the counter. Life as she'd known it before this bout with flu was a goal to shoot for.

Kendra tossed the quilt to the back of the sofa and sat up, face in hands until the first wave of dizziness passed. Once she was on her feet and moving, she felt steadier. In her bedroom, she stopped at the window and parted a garden of hanging ferns to gaze down at the rain-glazed street. Fractured light from street lamps and passing cars was held captive by a cold mist rising from the pavement.

She lowered herself to the king-size bed she and Isaac shared, flattening the down comforter that looked so inviting, so soft. So incredibly warm.

She reconsidered until another coughing spell sent her into cannonball position. When the spell abated, her resolve hardened. Without getting up, she managed to slide out of her nightgown and into the jeans and Washington Capitals sweatshirt she'd abandoned after her trip to the doctor.

"Okay, world, here I come." She sounded less enthusiastic than the words, but at least her voice was still audible.

On her way out of the condo, she slung her purse over her shoulder, stuffed her feet into stretched-out Ferragamo loafers, and locked the door behind her. No one was in the hall, not an unusual occurrence in a building favored by childless workaholics who spent evenings bent over desks and weekends making up for sleep deficits. She and Isaac only rarely ran into their neighbors—a good thing, because, at the moment, she couldn't even remember names.

The elevator didn't stop on the way to the parking garage. A District cop might eye the wobbly line she navigated to her parking space with interest, but she managed to start the engine of her Lexus without difficulty.

By the time she pulled out of the garage, she was pretty sure she could make it to the drugstore and back without incident. Traffic on the Foggy Bottom streets seemed relatively sparse. Between the unseasonable cold snap that was wreaking havoc on the tidal basin's celebrated cherry blossoms, and the flu epidemic that had emptied local office buildings, most of the city's residents were already inside. Most important, George Washington University was on spring break, and the quiet streets were evidence that the students were celebrating in warmer climes.

She knew she belonged at home. That afternoon her internist had told her to go straight to bed and stay warm, start on the antibiotics immediately

and call him if her fever didn't go down in a day or so. She was this close, he insisted, to pneumonia, if not there already.

It wasn't as if she hadn't repeated the doctor's advice to Isaac. Once she arrived home, she had managed with difficulty to track down her husband at the offices of ACRE—Americans Conserving and Reclaiming the Earth—where Isaac was managing director. When he asked why she was calling—instead of how she was feeling—she had repeated the doctor's advice without a noticeable edge to her voice, and explained that she had just enough strength to drop off the prescriptions and not enough to wait for them to be filled. Then she had asked him to pick it up on the way home. She wasn't sure if his parting words had included good wishes or advice, because by then, the receiver had been hovering between her ear and the cradle. She had hung up, turned over and gone to sleep.

When she awakened at seven, Isaac wasn't home. When she awakened at eight, their condo was still empty and she'd dragged herself to the couch to wait for him. At ten-thirty, just as the *Law & Order* detectives turned their case over to the prosecutors, he had finally answered his cell phone, apologized curtly when she pointed out the hour, and admitted he wasn't going to be able to leave in time to get her medicine.

He would pick it up before he left for work in the morning. That was the best he could do. She'd been on enough deadlines to understand, hadn't she?

Now as she pulled into the parking lot, her answer still rang in her ears. *Isaac, you know what? Your best just isn't good enough anymore. I'm not sure your best is ever going to be good enough again.*

The drugstore lot was almost empty, but cars still took up all the places in front. A minivan filled with passengers was pulling out by painstaking degrees, but Kendra didn't have the patience to wait. Instead

she parked in a narrow asphalt strip on the side marked with six diagonal spaces, choosing the spot closest to the front door.

Anger had propelled her this far, and now it propelled her into a light rain just a few degrees short of sleet. She locked the doors and shoved the keys in her pocket, then she wrapped her arms around her purse, lowered her head to protect her face from the rain, and hurried around the building.

Once inside she was hit with a wall of heat, and for a moment she struggled to catch her breath. Another coughing fit ensued, the deep racking barks that had worried her doctor. For a moment the bright lights shimmered, and she instinctively closed her eyes.

"You okay, miss?"

She smiled wanly at the security guard who was keeping watch and keeping warm by standing where he could see both the lot and the video monitor installed above the register.

"Not okay, but I'll feel better once I get my prescription." She barked again in punctuation.

His brow wrinkled. He was a large man, narrow shouldered and wide-hipped. He was too large to be fast on his feet and too old to have superior reflexes. She wondered if it was time for the Post to do another article on rent-a-cops and whether the guards were really prepared to keep the peace.

She managed a wobbly path toward the pharmacy at the back of the store, telling herself she was almost halfway through her excursion. In just moments she could reverse the last fifteen minutes. She pictured it. She would travel home the way she had come, slip off the loafers, the sweatshirt and jeans and slip under the soft sage green comforter. There was a glass of water beside the bed. She could take her pills and close her eyes. If she was lucky Isaac would sleep in the guest bed to avoid contamination. By morning the antibiotics might have kicked in.

There was a short line at the counter. Under a flickering florescent light she stood at the end and imagined easing back into bed and closing her eyes. The clerks were working at top speed, all too aware that they had to serve everyone in line before the doors were locked. Such efficiency was unusual here. She told herself she should always arrive just before closing.

It was five of eleven before she took her place at the counter. She told the man her name and fished for her wallet when he went to the bins to find it. By the time he returned she had her credit and insurance cards ready, and he rang up the sale in record time.

On her way to the front door she passed the security guard. "You feel better now," he told her as he headed for the back of the store.

Mentally she cancelled the article and nodded her thanks.

A sari-clad clerk unlocked the door to let her out. The moment Kendra was over the threshold she heard the lock turn again. The rain was slushier and falling faster by the time she started back across the lot and around the building.

The anger that had brought her this far was fading, leaving a queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She was too weak to nurture anger and too sick to figure out what to do about her marriage. Isaac's preoccupation with his job was nothing new. In the past she had wondered if shared sixty hour work weeks were the reason they were still together. If they didn't have time to talk about anything more important than the latest headline or what patch of Mother Nature ACRE had saved from development, then they could pretend that time was their only enemy. They didn't have to face the truth, that enthusiastic sex and stimulating conversation were not the only building blocks of a good marriage. That most couples shared values, hopes, dreams. That most couples had plans for their future that did not begin and

end with “more of the same.” That most couples in their mid-thirties had found time to discuss having children.

She had been grappling with this for months. Unfortunately she had been grappling alone. Isaac liked things the way they were. They had challenging jobs, a healthy income, enough time each week for a couple of dinners out to catch up on what they were doing. They took trips every summer, received coveted invitations to some of the capital’s best parties, maintained enough friendships that their condo was always crowded when they gave the occasional party of their own.

She had tried and failed to make Isaac see they were nothing more than roommates who successfully slept together. But the idea of something more, of a relationship built on deeper emotion, a relationship in which they put each other first, seemed beyond him. In response he had reminded her about friends who had recently divorced. This couple because of infidelity, that one because the husband spent more on cocaine than the mortgage payment. Their own problems were inconsequential. Maybe Kendra needed a new challenge at work. Maybe she would be happier if she found a subject to investigate that was worthy of another series.

She was afraid she might be happier if she just walked away. From DC, from the condo with its sleek leather furniture and tinted glass tables, from the husband she had vowed to love and honor until death parted them.

She wondered how long it would take Isaac to notice.

She didn’t see the stranger crouching beside her car until she was right on top of him. The man was dressed for winter with a knitted watch cap pulled tightly over his head and ears. His coat collar was flipped to shield the sides of his face. Between the clothing, the rain and dim light, she couldn’t see enough of him to note race, age, or identifying features.

She had street smarts galore. She had pursued stories in some of the worst neighborhoods in the city and lived to tell them. Now she realized that

not thinking clearly was the most compelling reason for not venturing out when she was ill. Fear thundered through her, and knees already weakened began to shake.

The man stood and raised a handgun, pointing it directly at her chest. "Gimme your keys."

The keys were in her purse. Any other night she would have fished them out in the store and had them ready. She would have approached the car cautiously and used the remote to turn on the lights. Once she was certain all was safe, she would have unlocked her door with the keyless entry system. More important she would have parked under a light, out in the open. Or she would have waited for a spot in front.

She remembered that the security guard had been walking toward the back. Were there monitors there, as well? Please Lord, was someone inside watching?

"I said gimme those keys, bitch!"

"They're. . ." Slowly she slid the purse strap down her arm, careful not to make sudden moves. ". . .in my purse. Here. It's yours." She gathered the strap in her fist until she could hold the purse out to him, afraid if she swung it in his direction, the motion would set off a fatal chain reaction.

He gestured with the gun. "You think I have enough hands for that?"

"No. Sure. Look. . ." She unzipped the purse slowly, making sure he could see every move. It was bright orange, with Prada's logo in silver metal on the front. Isaac had given it to her on her birthday, an extravagant, flamboyant gift with a cartoon card he had drawn himself. She had loved both as a sign that there was a more playful man residing deep inside him.

Now she wanted nothing more than to grind the purse into the gunman's face.

He waved the gun, moving closer. "I don't got all day."

She spread the sides of the purse away from the zipper and turned the opening in his direction. "Nothing in here to worry about. I'm going to reach in and get them for you."

"Just do it!"

She slipped her hand inside. She was so frightened she swayed on her feet. She wondered what he would do if she simply passed out. Would he drive over her? Shoot her out of spite? Kick her body out of the way so that he could steal her purse and her car and leave her in a wet undiscovered heap in the lot?

Frantically she searched. She could not find the keys. She felt her wallet, the small hairbrush, a package of tissues. "I. . . I. . . Oh God, I forgot, I put them in my pocket." She slipped her hand out of the purse. "I'm sorry."

He grabbed the purse. "You gonna be dead you don't get moving!"

She reached inside her jeans for the keys. She always kept them in her purse, and now she remembered why. They didn't easily fit in a pocket. She had enough keys to unlock Fort Knox. Office keys, car keys, garage, storage locker, front door keys. Isaac teased her about them. Isaac. . . Isaac. . .

She edged the keys out of the pocket with trembling, sweaty hands, a few at a time, until only the keyless entry was still clenched tightly between the layers of denim. She slid it out and grabbed it to hand the keys over. As she clutched the pad, her thumb skirted wildly across it.

The car lights began to flash and the horn honked. The alarm screeched and the sound widened and escalated and tortured.

She had hit the panic button. Not on purpose. Please God, never on purpose. . .

The entire evening suddenly seemed like a dream. Her illness, the rain, the unfamiliar sensations of a fever-wracked body, her decision to come here. The fear that was like an electric current sizzling over her skin and melting all her connective tissue, so that she could no longer move or think or breathe.

When she heard the first explosion she wasn't sure exactly what it was. Yet another in the cacophony of noises meant to alert the world to another carjacking? The front door slamming as the security guard lumbered out to stop the crime in progress?

She didn't have time to consider that the explosion, or the one that followed, might be gunshots. Blessedly Kendra slid to the ground and finally found the oblivion she had wished for.