

Best Enemies

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DEDICATION

This book is for all of the smart, strong, creative, and sassy women I've known, and the men who loved them- or foolishly crossed them and lived to regret it..

Chapter 1

Willa stared at the pile of papers on Jack's desk and started crying. Not dignified dainty tears. Willa's face quickly became a soggy mess as the one tissue she could find in her purse became soaked then shredded. No matter how she tried, Willa couldn't pull it together. This was crazy since she'd threatened to kill her estranged husband more than once.

Four days ago someone had done just that. Willa tossed aside the destroyed tissue then glanced around. Jack's office reflected his personality, controlled chaos. Piles of books, manuals and papers were stacked around in what looked like no particular order. In frames along one wall hung Jack's pride and joy, his degrees and licenses. On the opposite wall were framed pictures of Jack with various famous and infamous people of influence. Shining success mixed in with unsavory choices.

Jack Crown had paid for one last bad decision with his life, wandering around late at night in a bad neighborhood. Not smart, and not the way Willa's mother had predicted either, by an outraged woman he'd screwed literally and figuratively. As if on cue the screen saver on Jack's notebook clicked on showing a woman in a sexy pose. Swearing, Willa broke a fingernail hitting the keys changing it to a bland picture of daisies.

Willa stared at a photo of Jack standing next to his prized car, a metallic green Jaguar. Four days ago an unknown executioner had killed him for a few dollars on a dark street. So unfair. So horrible. Willa clenched her hands into fists. She had not even had the satisfaction of a farewell knock down fight. Some no good murderer had deprived her of one last chance to nail him with a piece of his family's fine China. She snatched up a plaque on his desk and threw it. The sound of it hitting the wall sounded good, but didn't break. She'd broken quite a few plates during their marriage. Her sobs dried up. And yet...

The sight of his usual stack of files, his messy office habits, reminded her of their brief period of good times. His flair, wicked wit and grace enthralled her within five minutes of meeting him for the first time. His mess used to be cute. And the way he teased Willa about her penchant for color-coding and organizing everything used to be cute. Jack Crown could tilt his head to one side and make a woman believe he only had eyes for her. And God what beautiful eyes, clear and the color of honey. Willa sighed. Of course he knew his own power. The bastard. Willa started to cry again.

"Damn you, Jackson Phillip Crown." Willa gave her nose one last determined swipe. Tackling her purse again she found a fresh pack of tissues. She dabbed her eyes then took a deep breath.

"He did have that affect on people," his secretary said from the doorway.

Only her head was visible at first. When Willa nodded the rest of her came into view as she entered Jack's office. Kayosha Singletary, who liked to be called Kay, walked in, but did not sit down. Her smooth young face appeared eager to help. Still she was reserved around Willa, her deceased employer's almost ex-wife. Today was the first time Willa had stayed in the office more than a few hours. Being there had felt eerie and she'd had to adjust to the fact that she was still Jack's next of kin.

"This office is a hot mess," Willa said around a few more snuffles. She pulled herself together so Jack's secretary wouldn't think she was completely nuts. "How he got anything done is a miracle."

"Actually his system sorta made sense. Everything that he was working on stayed piled on his desk. Cases on hold for any reason are stacked over there." Kay pointed to a corner near the window facing east. "Closed files got dumped in this stack next to the filing cabinet. Once a week I filed things away."

"Okay." Willa glanced at the folders. She still only saw chaos despite Kay's explanation. "I'm surprised he let you into his office."

Kay laughed. "We had an understanding. I only touched what he told me to touch, and he didn't touch the files I put in order." Her smile faded slowly. "It's a shame the way he—"

"Yeah," Willa replied.

Neither needed to finish the thought. Crime in Baton Rouge since The population surge after Hurricane Katrina seemed to be an unstoppable force. Yet it was unreal that someone she'd known and at one time loved was a victim. One more senseless murder added to grim crime stats for the city. Jack had been murdered for what amounted to pocket change while withdrawing cash from a convenience store ATM machine.

"Now what?" Kay said, breaking into Willa's bleak train of thought. She studied Willa as though looking for clues.

Good question, Willa mused as she rocked back and forth in Jack's expensive leather executive chair. Crown Protection Services employed forty-five full-time employees and almost as many part-timers. Kay was posing the question on behalf of them all Willa felt certain.

"I'm not sure. My lawyer will have to advise me on what I can do legally. We were about to sign the final divorce judgment when... this happened. Jack may have changed his will in the last six months since we separated."

"Uh, I'm not trying to get in your personal business, but—" Kay stopped as though waiting for a signal.

"I realize that my personal business affects Crown Protection. I just don't have any solid answers yet," Willa replied.

"Well what I'm saying is Mr. Crown never changed his will." Kay sat down in one of the two chairs facing Jack's desk. Then she moved a stack of papers so she and Willa could see each other better.

"How do you know?" Willa stopped rocking and leaned forward.

"Okay, I may have only worked here for a couple of years, but we clicked fast once he hired me. Not like that I mean," Kay added quickly. "Strictly professional. He wasn't my type."

"Right." Willa wondered if she meant arrogant, lying womanizers weren't her type. But she didn't want to speak ill of the recently departed, at least not out loud.

"Right," Kay said, her lips curving up slightly for a few moments. "Anyway I took care of some of his private business, too. His lawyer advised Mr. Crown to change his will, but he didn't."

"That's weird. I would think cutting me out would have been his first priority. Jack may have kept a messy desk, but he was meticulous about his bottom line." Willa gazed at a framed photo of Jack on the wall. He wore a custom suit and proudly held up a local business award he'd won seven years earlier.

"Despite what it looks like Mr. Crown could put his hands on anything he needed like that." Kay snapped her fingers.

"True," Willa agreed. Administrative assistants and wives knew men best. "So I'm shocked he didn't carve me out of his will the minute he realized the old charm wouldn't work anymore."

"He used to talk about you a lot."

Willa gave a snort. "I'll just bet he did."

"Okay, not all of it was, er, complimentary. But he also said you were one of the few women he'd trust with his money and his child."

In spite of everything he'd put her through Willa's heart skipped at hearing that. Damn that Jack Crown. Just when she thought his magic had lost its hold. One simple statement brought back the happy memories. They'd shared six months of blissful courting followed by seven good years of marriage. And Jack had embraced Anthony like he was his son. Willa cleared her throat and closed her eyes to fight off a crying jag.

"He wasn't all bad when it came down to it. He bragged on Anthony all the time." Kay pointed to one wall of the office covered with pictures of Anthony. "He called that Anthony's wall of fame."

Willa laughed hard, and Kay joined her. Seconds later they both took a deep breath as they exchanged a glance. "So you think he put off changing his will because he trusted me?"

"Mr. Crown respected you as a person, Mrs. Crown."

"Call me Willa."

"Sure." Kay smiled at her. "And yes, he definitely trusted you unlike, that string of hoochies he had in the last year or so."

"Terrible taste in women, present company excluded of course," Willa said with a grin.

"Actually he agreed with you about his taste in women based on a couple of comments he made about being too stupid to stay married to a good woman." Kay nodded.

"Thanks for telling me." Willa wanted to shed more tears but managed to stay dry.

"Anyway, one of his last lady friends came here and made a scene. After she left Mr. Crown was cussing like crazy about crazy heifers and how he needed to get his you-know-what together, etc."

"Uh-huh. Notice he never changed," Willa snorted. "Oh well. That was Jack up and down."

"He said something about how the only smart thing he ever did was to not marry to any of them or change his will." Kay smiled at her and shrugged when Willa's mouth fell open.

"Considering I was wife number three that's saying something." Willa rocked the chair back again.

"So you're in charge. Boss." Kay gazed at Willa as though expecting to get a set of instructions.

"I have good news and bad news then. The good news is you won't have to work for one of Jack's crazy mistresses. The bad news is I don't know a damn thing about running a security business."

Kay waved a hand as though Willa had mentioned a minor detail. "Cedric may be a bit full of himself."

"What an understatement."

Cedric Robinson was Jack's chief of operations. He'd let it be known he expected to be left in charge. He even dropped hints about buying the business. Aside from that he seemed a bit too starched. Maybe being ex-military accounted for that. In any event Willa had decided she didn't like him. He was condescending and humorless.

"I'm surprised he and Jack got along. Jack was Mr. Charm and had that dry sense of humor. Cedric doesn't have either," Willa said.

"Yeah, but opposites not only attract they make good working partners."

"I'll try to remember that," Willa replied with a grimace. In just a few short weeks she'd butted heads with Cedric over several issues.

"Hello," a deep male voice boomed from the foyer.

Yes, sir. I'll be right with you." Kay scrambled from her chair and straightened her skirt. "Probably our new client dropping off some paperwork. Jai won't be here until after lunch to man the desk." Jai Henderson was a full-time student with an undergrad degree in criminology. They always worked around her schedule

"Maybe we need to hire a temp receptionist to help you out." Willa frowned over one more decision she had to consider, and possibly fight with Cedric about.

"More hands around here would be a nice change. Besides Jai graduates in a week and she already has a job."

Willa sighed. Six clients had bailed on Crown Protection after Jack was murdered. Having the man who is supposed to provide protection die violently could shake your confidence. Luckily the agency had contracts that would cost the clients money if they tried to jump to another security firm. Willa's challenge was to inspire them to stay with Crown. To do that she needed experienced employees. She needed Cedric. And he knew it.

Two hours later Kay knocked once on Willa's half-open office door, said "I'll be right back," over her shoulder and came in. She shut the door firmly then crossed to Willa's desk. Her entrance combined with her wide brown eyes gave Willa a start.

"What the—"

"Police Detective Armand Miller is here to see you," Kay broke in. "Maybe they've arrested Mr. Crown's killer."

Willa doubted it. The last she'd heard from the police they had no leads, no suspects and a lot of other crimes to chase down. "Well let's hear what he has to say then."

Kay nodded then left. Willa heard her voice seconds later, high pitched with contained curiosity. A deeper voice thanked her then heavy footsteps approached. Willa worked hard to appear calm and in control, to fake her way through one more interview with him. She stood and came around the desk to greet him.

"Hello, detective."

Detective Armand Miller strode in wearing a serious expression. She judged him to be six foot two inches tall, two inches taller than Jack had been. Detective Miller didn't have Jack's smooth pretty boy good looks, but he definitely could hold his own when it came to appearances. Might help if he smiled more. It's not like he didn't have good teeth or anything. Willa liked his rugged "I can bench press two hundred pounds and catch the bag guys" aura. Detective Miller held out one wide hand. Yes, he definitely inspired a sense of confidence in law enforcement. She shook his hand feeling safer just at the solid heft of it. Before she knew it she'd smoothed back her hair with the tips of her fingers once she let go of his hand and wet her lips. When one of his dark eyebrows twitched up she stopped both actions. She blinked rapidly feeling a bit like one of Jack's hoochies.

"Good morning, Mrs. Crown. Thank for taking time out to talk to me last minute." He glanced around the office then his gaze settled on Willa. Detective Miller managed to appear alert and relaxed at the same time.

She crossed her arms to assume a business-like pose. "Don't worry about interrupting my day. I'm still feeling my way along. Thankfully Jack has knowledgeable and efficient employees."

"Is that right? Well, that must make things so much easier for you. I mean, taking over a business that your ex-husband started. Or did you work for him at one time?"

"Nothing more than answering the phones a few times while we were married. I had my own career of course." Willa gestured to a chair and watched him fold his hefty frame into it.

Detective Miller crossed his long legs. "Yes, paralegal and notary public. Interesting, working for that big criminal defense firm I mean."

Willa knew police officers had a tendency to like criminal defense attorneys as much as they liked their clients. "I'm afraid my job with them was quite dull, legal research mostly."

"Research that helped them build cases," Miller said.

"Right." Willa sat on the edge of the desk. Her light gray skirt inched up causing Detective Miller's eyebrow to go up once more. Clearing her throat Willa returned to the safety of her desk.

She had worked as a paralegal for the law firm of Craft, Mouton and LaPlace part-time after the divorce. The income from her small business as a notary didn't come close to paying the bills. She was sure Detective Miller knew all about her, including her family background. Willa sensed he was taking in every detail and building a mental file on her beneath that genial exterior. She smiled as she added to her own file on him.

"I see. I wanted to get a few more details from you about Mr. Crown's activities in the months before his death." Detective Miller pulled a small PDA from the chest pocket of his neatly pressed sky blue dress shirt.

"You made any progress on locating a possible suspect? From the evidence found at the scene, I mean." Willa kept smiling when he glanced at her sharply. His cocoa eyes sparkled as if to say, "Nice try, but I'm not talking."

“We’re following up on a few leads. Nothing I can discuss, of course.” Detective Miller held the PDA as though he’d forgotten it for the moment. He studied her.

“Of course. I’ll help in any way I can naturally.” Willa watched him nod in approval. Then he favored her with a smile for the first time. He took care of his teeth. Put that in the plus column.

“When we first asked his operations chief, Mr. Robinson, about the murder he said the business didn’t handle any cases that might be dangerous, mostly just security for private events and employee background checks.” Detective Miller used his small stylus to touch the screen of his PDA.

“Right. Actually Crown Protection did as much valet parking as protecting,” Willa quipped. “Not exactly high intrigue from what I’ve read through the files.”

“Someone who didn’t get a job or lost a job because of a background check might have become upset with Crown Protection.” Detective Miller looked up at her. “I’ll need a list of folks who might have had dirty drug screens or background checks that revealed unsavory histories.”

“Wow, that’s a good idea. I’ll have Kay pull the database and give you the list of our clients. You can contact them directly.” Willa picked up the phone and hit the button to ring Kay. “Can you come in?”

Kay blurted out a fervent “Yes” then seconds later appeared with a pad and pen. “What do you need, Mrs. Crown?”

“Detective Miller would like a list of unfavorable employee background reports. Someone who didn’t get or keep a job might have had a grudge against the agency,” Willa said.

“Sure. Mostly the employers didn’t tell us what personnel action or hiring decisions they made though. So I’ll give you the contact information for the businesses we contracted with. I’m thinking maybe go back at least six months?” Kay glanced from Willa to Detective Miller.

“That’s a start. Thanks,” he replied with a curt nod.

“Of course most of them probably wouldn’t know we were the source of the background checks. At least seven other agencies in town do that sort of thing. Not to mention freelancer investigators and New Orleans agencies,” Kay said.

“Really?” Willa was impressed with Kay’s knowledge. She decided to spend more time having Kay tutor her in the fine points of the business. That should take Cedric down a few inches from that high horse he was riding.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“But existing employees might know who their bosses use for security and background checks,” Detective Miller countered. His dark brows drew down as if unhappy that amateurs were trying to play cop.

“Good point,” Kay said as she aimed her ink pen at him. “I’ll pull that list together right away.” The phone in the outer office rang and she left like a woman on a mission.

Detective Miller watched her leave then turned back to Willa once the office door bumped shut. “By the sound of that ringing phone it might take her a few minutes. I can ask some other questions while we wait.”

“Sure. Let me get you some coffee.” Willa went to the credenza along the east wall of the office. A coffee pot with fresh Louisiana dark roast sat on a tray. She looked at him over her shoulder. “How do you like it?”

His staid expression relaxed. “Cream, no sugar. You seem to have settled in around here.”

“No choice. Of course Jack’s parents aren’t too thrilled about it. But then I’m sure you know they don’t like me,” Willa said as she handed him the cup of coffee. She knew Miller had already talked to her former in-laws. A good bet that Miller got an earful of “Miss Bea’s” ideas about Willa’s shortcomings, aka motives.

“I gathered.” Miller nodded his thanks for the coffee as he accepted it.

“As far as Miss Bea was concerned Jack hung the moon and stars. He was perfect in every way. But then mothers tend to have a blind spot when it comes to their sons.” Willa felt a sharp

pain in her gut at the thought of her child. At fifteen Anthony was trying to be tough, trying to take care of her. She bit her lower lip to keep it from quivering.

“Your son was close to his father?” Detective Miller had an eye for details as well. His smooth segue also showed he was good at following them.

“Step-father technically, but Jack and I had been together for two years before we got married. Anthony was just five when Jack and I met. But yes, they were close. Except for the last two years.” Willa inhaled deeply and let out a slow breath. “Kids always know what’s going on. Not that our fights didn’t get loud toward the end.”

“Anthony took sides, your side specifically,” Detective Miller said.

“Mrs. Crown told you that I suppose,” Willa replied with heat.

Miller’s impassive expression confirmed her guess. “Several family members mentioned some conflict between the two.”

“I didn’t want him to, but yes. Anyway, Anthony still loved Jack deeply. I’m sure of that. Jack was working hard to reach out to him.” Willa marshaled her defenses so she wouldn’t cry. “They were talking.”

“So Anthony was home the night Mr. Crown died?”

“At a friend’s house. He and Greg are on the soccer team and...” Willa blinked back from her inward musings. She looked up to find Detective Miller gazing at her intently. He’d put the cup of coffee down and his pen was poised above a little note pad.

“And?” Detective Miller prompted.

“And he loved Jack. They were as close as a biological father and son,” Willa said through clenched teeth.

“Anthony has had some problems with anger. There was an incident where he actually punched Mr. Crown.” Detective Miller spoke in a steady yet relentless monotone.

“My son would never, never kill anyone. Certainly not the only man he ever regarded as his father.” Willa struggled to calm her own anger. She knew Detective Miller was looking for a reaction along with information that might become a lead. After a silent count to ten Willa lifted her chin. “Call Greg and his family to confirm where my son was that night, all night.”

“This is routine. He’s not a suspect.” Detective Miller’s tone suggested the “yet” was unspoken.

Willa picked up an ink pen on her desk. She wrote down the phone number, address and names of Greg’s parents. The strokes were so firm the notepaper had indentations. “Stephanie and Robert Bellmont will be happy to speak with you, as would Greg. We have nothing to hide.”

“Thank you. These questions are routine and need to be asked especially under the circumstances.” Detective Miller lifted his dark eyebrows. “The sooner we cover all bases with family and friends the faster we can proceed down all other avenues.”

“Hmmm,” was all Willa could trust herself to say. Having the detective check her alibi that night hadn’t caused even a twitch when he’d questioned her three days ago. Her protective instincts kicked into overdrive when it came to her child.

He took the lined note pad sheet Willa thrust out toward him. “I appreciate your not getting overly emotional about my questions. As I said—”

“Yes, routine,” Willa cut him off. She just wanted him to leave, now. “Do you need to know where my baby girl Mikayla was that night?”

Detective Miller smiled. “Your little girl was with your mother, ma’am. We talked to Mrs. Wilson when we—”

“Checked my alibi of being at Mama Ruby’s house for supper later that night,” Willa finished for him, though the detective had never used that loaded term “alibi.” He kept referring to placing everyone’s movements around the critical time.

Detective Miller rose to leave. He extended a hand. Willa barely touched the smooth brown skin before letting go. His unruffled expression indicated that he was used to hostility. The

antipathy radiating from Willa bounced right off his broad shoulders covered in crisp blue cotton.

“Yes, ma’am. I appreciate your time and patience. I’ll be in touch. Call me if you think of any information that could be helpful,” he said, pointedly not offering to keep Willa informed.

“I most certainly will be in touch,” she replied.

He nodded at her then smoothed down the front of his shirt. “Have a good day, ma’am,” he said the left.

Willa rolled her neck to ease the muscle tension Detective Miller had inspired. She knew her former in-laws still had connections despite the elder Crown’s past mistakes. Detective Miller would no doubt keep Mr. and Mrs. Crown informed. In the meantime Willa worried about Anthony. She only hoped that he had indeed stayed with his friend this time. Before she could continue down that bothersome path of Anthony’s troubling teenage defiance Kay appeared at her door again.

“Is everything okay?” Kay glanced around as though the office furnishings would give her a clue.

“Yeah,” Willa stretched her lips into a smile.

“I gave Detective Miller a printout of the recent checks we’ve done for employers. Here is a copy.” Kay came to the desk and placed sheets stapled together at one end on Willa’s desk.

“Wow, that many.” Willa leafed through six pages of neatly typed names with employers and contact information.

“Cedric kept working our same client list. I mean, you’ve had a lot to handle since... it happened,” Kay offered. “Cedric decided we should just keep doing our jobs like normal, if we could.”

“Right. Right.”

Willa no longer saw the pages before her. Instead she had an image of Anthony filled with rage the day he’d struck out at Jack. They’d been at a family picnic. Everyone could feel the strain between her and Jack, but as usual her family worked around it. However when Jack made a sarcastic comment about Willa’s wide hips she snapped something back at him. Jack patted Willa’s butt and she knocked his hand away. Out of nowhere Anthony appeared shouting at Jack not to touch her again. Three of her cousins and two uncles had to wrestle Anthony to ground. Jack tried to appear untouched, yet Willa saw the pain in his eyes. The next day Jack had moved out for the last time. After twelve years, six affairs and numerous lies neither of them bothered with the usual kiss and make-up ritual. Anthony as a suspect. Willa fought off the budding panic that tried to get a grip on her gut.

“Sure you’re all right? Maybe you can leave the rest of this stuff for another day. I can organize everything.” Kay gazed at Willa with concern in her cinnamon brown eyes.

“Fine. Uh, call Cedric and ask him to meet with me Wednesday at 10 AM. Please,” Willa added when she realized Kay was eyeing her dubiously. Take control, Willa said, mentally repeating the mantra her Aunt Ametrine favored.

“Sure. I’ll also run over to the accountant’s office and pick up the paychecks for your signature. One more thing Mr. Crown took care of, instructions in his will. Lord, bless his soul,” Kay said quietly. She sniffed a couple of times as she went out the door.

“Humph,” Willa retorted once Kay closed the door. She looked around the office feeling Jack’s aura in the baseball memorabilia and photos from his days of playing the game in college. “Jack Crown, if you want some kind of divine second chance to redeem yourself and avoid the fires of hell you’d better send me some kind of message about your murder now, because they’re questioning Anthony.”

Silence. No rush of wind lifting up a page with a promising lead. No eerie whisper with a cryptic message containing a clue. Nothing. Willa picked up the phone to call Stephanie Belmont and check Anthony’s alibi. As she tapped the keypad Willa silently prayed that Anthony had not picked that night to sneak off and get into trouble again.

Ruby Wilson stood behind the waist high bar in her nightclub on Alligator Bayou. She wiped glasses, popped her gum and nodded her head to an old Bobby Blue Bland song blaring from the speakers above her head. At sixty years old she didn't look a day over fifty, as her husband Elton loved to brag. Willa entered the cool dark room with a sigh of relief. She crossed the bare wood floor then sat down hard on a bar stool with a red cushioned seat.

"Fix me the usual, Mama," Willa said and slapped her purse down onto the scarred dark wood that topped the bar.

Ruby reached behind her and turned down the volume on the sound system. "How you holdin' up, baby?"

"Other than dealing with my mean as a snake mother-in-law, a business I know nothing about and a cop who thinks Anthony is a suspect, I'm doing good." Willa crossed her arms on the bar then rested her forehead on them.

"What the hell? That child wouldn't hurt a fly. Let me call my friend Judge Henderson. No, better yet I'll call Deputy Devine." Ruby already had the cordless phone to her ear.

Willa stretched across the bar and snatched the phone out of Ruby's hand. "Please. The last thing we need is a battle of the local politically connected Black families. That will only get our names in the newspaper. Again."

Ruby put her hands on both hips. "I hope you don't think that's the only phone I have, or that I'm gonna let them frame my grand-baby. Be damned if I will."

"You need to calm down." Willa heaved a sigh. As usual Mama Ruby lost her temper when it came to her "babies", no matter what their age. "You sit down and I'll fix us something to drink."

"I don't need no drink," Ruby huffed. Still she sat down as ordered on a carved oak stool behind the bar.

"We both need a drink." Willa walked around to the bar and pushed through the small swinging door on hinges. She reached inside one of two mini refrigerators. As she expected there were two pitchers of iced tea.

"It's just two o'clock in the afternoon. Don't be puttin' no liquor in my tea either." Ruby drummed her fingers on the bar. "Now tell me what idiot cop thinks Anthony would have killed Jack. He loved that man."

"He also hated that man." Willa found a store of fresh mint leaves and added those to each glass of sweet tea. "No amaretto added. You watched me fix it."

"I wasn't watchin' you. I'm thinkin' 'bout my baby. And he didn't hate Jack, he was just mad as hell at him for being a screw up and hurtin' you." Ruby frowned at the glass Willa put in front of her. Her nut brown face had few lines, which made her look younger than sixty-two by a good ten years.

Willa took a long slow drink of the tea savoring the sweetness. The kick of strong mint added just the right flavor. Sugar always soothed her nerves. She sighed again, this time with satisfaction. "Listen, Detective Miller—"

"Yeah, from up north? Now what does he know about us anyway? Just cause folks in Chicago—"

"Philadelphia," Willa corrected.

"Where ever. Just cause them people done lost their minds up there don't mean Black folks down here killin' their own daddies." Ruby pointed a finger at Willa.

"That logic perfectly sums up your bias, Mama Ruby." Willa shook her head.

"Humph, I lived up there back in the sixties. Most folks thinkin' moving north was like goin' to the promise land." Ruby's face took on the strained look talking about her time in Chicago.

Ruby had been seventeen with a singing voice that rocked Sweet Home Missionary Baptist Church. In defiance of her parents she'd run off with a boyfriend to become the next big singing sensation. Seven years of hard times had knocked those dreams down. Mama Ruby still had

never told Willa the details of what she'd gone through. Yet Willa knew some of the story from Aunt Ametrine, the family historian. Family gossip was a more accurate description.

"Detective Miller is just doing what police officers do, look at the family and friends first. Most crimes are committed by someone close to the victim," Willa said, repeating what she'd learned by watching police reality shows.

"Girl, you have lost your mind! The man is tryin' to pin a murder on your first born and you up in here defendin' him," her mother's voice boomed.

Used to Mama Ruby's "bark worse than her bite" ways, Willa faced the anger head on. "Will you stop freaking out, please? I'm not defending him. Once I stopped trippin' I realized his tactic. He wanted me to get upset and blurt out something revealing, a promising lead. Miller knows about that time Anthony punched Jack at the family picnic. You remember. The one where you invited Jack hoping to get us back together."

"And?" Mama Ruby ignored Willa's dig at her failed attempts to help them reconcile.

"What I should have done was keep cool and find out why they don't think Jack was killed by a mugger." Willa sipped more tea.

"What the— " Ruby picked up her glass and sipped from it as well. She lowered the glass. "Yeah, you got a good point. This detective what's-his-name— "

"Miller," Willa replied. She watched the wheels turning behind her mother's black coffee eyes.

"Right, Detective Miller would have questioned Anthony if he thought that the child really could have done it. Did he start out asking about Anthony or lead up to it?" Ruby glanced at Willa.

"He led up to it."

"You're right. He's fishin'. Which makes me wonder. Jack had just been to one of those ATMs when he was shot. His wallet was gone." Ruby blinked as she considered the few facts they knew.

"Along with his 18k gold Rolo link bracelet and gold Kappa Alpha Psi ring," Willa added and let out a loud hiss. "After everything that happened he was still wearing that damn bracelet." A gift from his mistress and the links that led Willa to find out about the latest in a string of women he'd had.

"Yeah, so somethin' has Detective Miller goin' down another road. We just need to find out what he's found out." Ruby nodded.

"No."

"What?" Ruby arranged her cute features into a look of pure innocence. "As members of the family it's only natural that we should have questions. After our terrible loss I mean."

"Do not make phone calls or start snooping around," Willa said stabbing a finger in the air between them. "We're going to stay cool, let the police do their jobs and take care of business."

"You're right, baby. I'm just sayin', if you get a chance call up Detective Miller and ask if there's been any progress on the case." Mama Ruby gave Willa a sweet maternal smile. She got up and went back to arranging glasses on the shelves behind the bar.

"You gave in too quick," Willa replied. She crossed her arms as she watched her mother. "So you're promising me that you won't use your connections or get mixed up in Jack's murder investigation. Even if they bring up Anthony's name again."

Mama Ruby's mouth twitch at the mention of her beloved Anthony was the only sign that she might be lying. Still she kept her voice steady. "Naturally that frightens me, but I won't get all in a tizzy and make a move without talkin' to you."

"Good." Willa had to be satisfied with that much. Yet she knew Mama Ruby well enough to suspect she had a game plan in mind anyway.

"What did this Detective Miller say about Anthony anyway?" Ruby kept her voice calm. She glanced at Willa sideways.

“He wanted to know where Anthony was that night. I told him he was with his best friend Greg.”

“And was he?” Mama Ruby stopped polishing the over-sized glass beer mug in her hand.

“The Bellemonts are on vacation in Orlando. I left a text message on Stephanie’s cell.” Willa looked at her glass of tea and considered adding a dollop of peach schnapps to it.

“And she’ll get back to you with the assurance that Anthony was at her house all night. He was most likely playing video games and doin’ whatever kids like to do these days,” Ruby said.

“Yeah, what kids like to do,” Willa repeated. She tried not to think of less childlike activities that attracted Black teenage boys these days, including Anthony. With a final prayer that Stephanie would call her back soon with good news, Willa helped Mama Ruby set up for the Friday night crowd.