

Chapter 1

I'VE HEARD THAT some people who stop breathing or whose hearts conk out sense they're being pulled down a dark tunnel toward a beautiful light at the other end. They say it would have been easy to let go.

It's true. I saw it when I died.

Of course, some of those who live to describe their deaths report only darkness. Maybe that's hell. Skeptical neurologists say the light is simply the last neurons firing in the dying brain. Catholics, like me, hope the light is heaven or leads to a short stay in purgatory for a little sin scrubbing.

But you can enter another tunnel without dying. That path leads to utter, complete despair where every dream you had of love, friendship, children, and honor dies. It's like being plunked into the middle of an ocean without a life vest, knowing you can tread water only so long. You yell and pray, offer Jesus all sorts of promises and deals . . . to no avail. No one helps.

Not even God.

For years I'd regularly experienced a nightmare—drowning with dozens of people on the shore watching, who are reluctant to get wet. A version of that nightmare became real for me. Unlike death, which can be sudden and painless, despair is slow and agonizing.

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"Kristen Kerry?" Someone shouted like my father used to when he was drunk and pissed at me. Only the accent was Texas, not Philly.

"Yes."

"Attorney Kristen Kerry?" Another voice, female, yelled Texas style, stretching each syllable to the breaking point.

Why the yelling? My suite only had three rooms—cozy, feminine rugs on cherry-colored wood planks. Pretty Delacroix prints. You didn't have to shout to be heard. It was practically a whispering gallery like St Paul's in London.

Three sets of feet pounded toward my office.

I stood, knocked my cup off my desk, splashing hot coffee on my shoes—my only slightly worn Jimmy Choos.

I looked up from my wet heels. A burly guy, with moon-crater acne scars and wearing a tweed jacket, flashed a gold badge. The taller, thinner cop leveled his 9mm pistol right at me, like he meant to fire.

Their gung-ho approach seemed quite unnecessary.

Holy Crap.

“You’re under arrest on the charge of murder in the first degree.”
I knew from experience the cop’s pistol magazine could hold thirteen rounds. But the really scary thing was how his wrist shook with obvious excitement. A retired detective once told me that most policemen never fire a weapon outside the range in their whole career. This cop looked like he hoped this was his chance. Like he was praying for a chance.

I prayed his finger wasn’t on the trigger.
A uniformed female cop, not much smaller than the men, parted the two goons and stepped toward me. She dangled handcuffs with relish. For a second, I thought I’d stumbled into a bondage porn movie.

“Turn around,” she drawled with authority. But I found myself nailed to the floor in fear. There had to be something smart to do or say, but I couldn’t think of what it could be. While my arrest was not unexpected, I pictured a more civilized event, not a film noir pinch. I would’ve RSVP’d had they simply invited me to the station. She must’ve tired of my rumination. Grabbing my shoulders, she spun me around and jerked one wrist into a cuff. An instant later, the other was snuggled into a matching stainless steel bracelet. She ratcheted me toward the desk and frisked me. In the window I caught the reflection of the two guys smirking, watching her hands roam under my skirt and over my chest. With a shove they hustled me out the door, to the elevator, not even letting me flip the lock. She jammed the button. We stood waiting. What do you say to cops who have just arrested you?

How are ticket sales to the Policeman’s Ball coming along this year?
Finally the elevator light went on. The four of us crowded in with two other women, who stared at me over lunches in Styrofoam boxes, likely wondering if I was the drug pusher at their kids’ schools. Really great for a lawyer’s reputation. I’d fallen lower than a used car dealer. Lower than a politician. Lower than shark shit at the bottom of the ocean.

I kept my gaze on my wet shoes until the doors opened again. Once through the lobby to more stares, and then outside, they steered me toward an unmarked car parked at the curb. People slowed, taking in the show. Every eyeball fixed on me. I felt stark naked, like everyone’s recurring dream of showing up to your second grade class in your underwear. The female cop jerked the back door, planted her palm on my head, and lowered me into the car, then bounced her butt beside me. The guys sat in front, their broad shoulders almost meeting. Terror generated the serious need to pee. Bad. But I doubted they’d accommodate me. I squeezed every Kegel God gave me, and prayed we went somewhere with a toilet. Soon. They could have taken me to the

Gulag, and I wouldn't have cared as long as it had a john. I'd been a complete fool to get myself in this position, but I wasn't dumb enough to start flapping my mouth, so we rode in silence the six blocks to the Dallas County jail. On the outside the place looks like something Hitler and Speer would've designed for the future Germania—steel and concrete. No hint of human warmth. And none expected.

The driver whipped the car into the garage and screeched to a stop, like he had Al Capone inside. He popped the locks.

I wondered if they'd put me on suicide watch, because hanging myself sounded like a great option. Unfortunately my pumps had no shoelaces.

My backseat buddy levered herself out and grabbed my arm. I bumped my head on the roof. She didn't apologize and hauled me into a kaleidoscope of flashbulbs and microphones. Shouted questions jumbled together. Somebody had leaked to the media that a lawyer, and a fairly notorious one, was going down. A perp walk is perfect for local TV news.

Hardened criminal arrested. Streets now safe. Details at six.

"Are you innocent, Ms. Kerry?"

"Can you explain why a gun—"

"No statement," I hollered.

Determined to stare straight ahead, I thought of Saint Beatrice heading for incineration in the Roman Coliseum. Not sure I wouldn't have traded places with her.

Inside, we turned a couple of corners until we reached a holding area. I got handed off to a jail deputy, who slammed the steel door shut. She gave me another pat-down, then unlocked the cuffs.

"Everything off."

The jailer's bark was hoarse, full of phlegm. Her breath ruffled my hair and told me she had had onions, corned beef, and deli mustard for lunch. Her dark hair had been chopped an inch long. Probably had it done cheap at a beauty college. A short-sleeved uniform shirt stretched across her flat chest and displayed a skull tattoo on her bicep. Her leer was as penetrating as any I'd experienced from a drunk in a bar.

"Can I use the toilet, please?"

"When we're done, sweetheart. They're gonna test your clothes for gunpowder residue. Even your undies. So peel off. And they're fixin' to search your darlin' little house too."

Crap. My sister and I had just cleaned the place. The cops would probably track in mud on the pretty new Berber carpet that my lover on probation, Michael Stern, had bought for me after I bled all over the old one last year.

You're worried about the rug, dummy? How about the rest of your life?

I returned my attention to my fingers, fumbling with the buttons on my blouse. I once visited a *pro bono* client in jail, a mother of four arrested for bogus checks, and remembered the fashionable orange jumpsuit and flip-flops. Maybe my charge was serious enough that I'd be kept alone. I doubted a roommate here would provide much stimulating conversation.

Another smirking female deputy strolled in to the room, redirecting my thoughts. Gangly like an awkward basketball center who'd grown too fast, she desperately needed a mustache wax and had neglected moisturizer on her face for the last thirty years or so. The way the slender woman tugged the latex gloves on without a hint of reluctance made me realize that, unfortunately, she enjoyed her work. "Look close. Lawyers always hide somethin'," the big one said. I hadn't killed the man whose murder they were charging me with. Absolutely not *that* guy. But suspicion lingered around me for the unsolved murder of a miserable shit who had implicated me in the murder of Stern's wife. So I guessed my new friends thought I deserved whatever treats they could dish out. I had to be guilty of *something*.

Security cameras stuck in the ceiling likely recorded the peep show, later to be replayed for the amusement of the male deputies. I'd probably be on YouTube the next day and would put to the test P. T. Barnum's adage that there's no such thing as bad publicity.

The bigger jailer finally let me piss. Thoroughly intimidated, I thanked her profusely and sounded ridiculous.

Thank you, sir, may I have another?

Their stares and the lack of a door in front of the toilet didn't deter me. I think Marie Antoinette had to go in front of her jailers, so I was in royal company.

Feeling a bit better, I got up from the filthy pisser and unhooked my bra with all the dexterity of a high school boy on his first hot date and tossed it into the wire basket the jailer had plopped on the floor as the repository for my clothes. An air conditioner vent in the ceiling blew cold air in my face. The painted concrete sent a chill from my bare feet up my body, as goosebumps erupted.

I'm pretty tough—played some college basketball, have an advanced black belt, and three times fought for my life—but the big girl, her shoulders pulling her uniform shirt tight across her chest, could probably mop the floor with me. Only my shaky pride kept me from bawling. That probably would've made their day.

The bigger one grabbed my neck and shook me like a bottle of Pepto-Bismol.

"Come on, sweetheart. We ain't got all day."

The mug shots would be next, on file permanently, a public record for anybody to obtain for laughs. Prints, a DNA sample, and my chance

for a phone call. I just hoped my sister, or Michael, answered the phone. And would still talk to me.

A heroine splashed over every Dallas news outlet less than a year earlier for revealing a fraudulent defense in the biggest malpractice case ever in Dallas, admitting her own client had lied, rescuing fourteen-year-old Sarah Stern in the dead of night from a kidnapper, and later killing the psychopath, was going to hit absolute rock bottom—a body cavity search at the county jail.

In ancient Rome, a slave would stand beside a triumphant general who was driving his chariot through the forum to the cheers of the crowd and the waiting senators. The slave's job was to whisper continuously to the hero: *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

All glory is fleeting.