

CHAPTER ONE

The handsome couple's sudden burst of laughter rang out and bounced from pillar to pillar as they entered the silent parking garage. He was an elegantly dressed man with a long, black cashmere coat—tall, golden, with glorious green eyes and black hair. She was a rich, chestnut brown woman with a sleek, glossy haircut and seductive red lips, wearing red spike heels and a full-length silver fox coat. As their laughter subsided and they walked toward his car, he remotely disarmed the alarm system and released the locks. He encased her arm in his, and their footfalls on the cement floor were all that could be heard. Before opening the passenger door of his gold Mercedes-Benz CL500, he cradled her chin in his hand and placed an intimate kiss on her lips.

The muffled thud of the Mercedes' handle nearly obscured the metallic slide and clack of the 45. The couple looked up in surprise in the direction of the unfamiliar sound. The first bullet tore through her chest and violently thrust her back into his arms. The second bullet tore through her skull,

exited, and bore into his throat. The final three bullets riddled the couple's bodies as they crumpled and danced to the cold, gray floor. His body struck the panel of the car next to them and the shrill car alarm echoed through the wide, flat, steel and cement structure.

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Watching the eleven o'clock news, Samoa Tate lay in bed clutching her white terry cloth robe, shivering, sneezing and sniffing. Samoa dabbed at her beet red, sore nose with a tissue and swore she would never again be lured out on a window ledge in the middle of the winter with another patient—no matter what. They would just have to jump and if they survived, she would counsel them in the cozy comfort of a hospital. Never, that Samoa could recall, had anyone ever mentioned pneumonia being one of the hazards of psychiatry.

As usual, the news began with the goriest local news. The only thing that could possibly change the opening format would be if something exceedingly gory had happened elsewhere in the world.

The pretty female commentator flashed a cosmetically perfected, glossy smile and said, "Tonight there has been a gruesome shooting of an affluent couple in the parking garage of the posh Tilton Condominiums. Kay Spencer, a fashion designer, was pronounced dead on the scene. Her date, David Bass, owner of Exquisite Wheels, a national Mercedes-Benz dealership chain, is in critical condition at Samaritan Hospital. The two were attending a party hosted by Theodore and Barbara Leland of Leland Furnishings in Society Hill. Detective Hall Hawkins reported that there were no known witnesses or motives at this time."

A cursory shot of Detective Hall Hawkins and his partner, Detective Edward Clark, examining the scene filled the screen, and the commentator quickly moved on to the next

equally gory report. As the commentator continued, “The drug war has claimed three victims in our city tonight . . .” Samoa clicked the mute button, rolled over, and sniffed. The ringing telephone interrupted her greatly anticipated fall into unconsciousness.

An unbelievably cheerful Christine Hawkins, Samoa’s best friend since childhood, chirped into the telephone, “I know you saw my big, fine husband all over that corpse on the television just now.”

Samoa sneezed and replied, “Yeah, I saw him. Hall kneels over a dead body like no one else I know, Chris. He will surely be nominated by the academy this year. Who was the new guy with him?”

“Oh, that’s his new partner, Eddie Clark. He’s not bad at all either, girl. Kneeling . . . standing . . . walking . . . whatever. Not bad at all. Just don’t tell Hall I said that.”

“What happened to Hall’s last partner, Mack?”

“Promoted to captain. They wanted to promote Hall too, but he says he’s not ready to sit behind a desk and tell everybody else what to do all day just yet. Hall swears that twenty-five pounds are hidden in the armrest that will wrap around his waist and fifty pounds are hidden in the seat of the chair that will attach to his ass permanently if he sits down in that office.”

“Is that what happens? Jesus, I don’t blame him. It would take more than a prestigious title and a few extra dollars to let someone do that to me too.”

Chris sucked her teeth and said, “Honey, you’re a psychiatrist. All you do is sit on your butt all day and listen to folks tell lies on their parents, and your butt looks just fine to me.”

“If you were a guy, I would really appreciate the compliment.”

“Be glad no man talks about your butt, Sam. The

things Hall says about mine sometime make me wish I could pass it off to someone less fortunate. And what about booty-call Kevin? You do make him say it's cute first, don't you?"

"No. The less said, the better we like it. Silent sex reinforces our illusion of not needing anything more than the physical friction from another human."

"That turns you on?"

Samoa sneezed, reached for a tissue, and Christine added, "Hey, you sound awful. Are you taking anything for that cold, Sam? Your mother will never forgive you if you die from a cold, you know. You can go from anything else and she'll accept it."

"Please don't mention her. I'm ducking her right now. She will want to know exactly how I got a cold in the first place, why I was risking my life and limb on a ledge with an obviously unstable person who could have jumped and held onto my foot—hence, making her identify a big red spot on the sidewalk."

"Your mom is dramatic, but you've gotta love her. I'll let you get some rest. Call me."

Samoa hung up the telephone, pulled the cover up over her shoulders, snuggled down, and drifted off to sleep. Her drug-induced dreams were filled with people jumping from ledges, being shot in parking lots, and Hall, his new partner, Eddie, and her mother examining one spot after another on the ground.

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The following day, at the law firm of Stiles and Pennypacker, a perfectly wrapped package lay in the Parcel Express outbound mail bin with about ten other packages scheduled for a four o'clock pickup. It was from the office of Samuel Stiles and addressed to Nathaniel Dawes in the lower east side housing development called Hayward Homes.

CHAPTER TWO

Samoa was greeted by an unbelievable pile of mail on her desk when she returned to her office three days later. She sniffed and attacked the pile like a true professional—she swept it all into a giant manila envelope and put it in her briefcase for later scrutiny. Samoa sat in the high back burgundy leather chair at her highly polished cherry wood desk where she signed the checks that lay before her and initialed the request forms and insurance bills without checking the accuracy of any of them. Samoa quickly surveyed her modified schedule for the day and sighed. Her first appointment was two hours later. Still feeling under the weather, Samoa rose from her desk and walked over to the comfortable floral sitting area, fluffed out one of the plush lavender pillows, stretched out on the sofa and drifted off to sleep.

The repetitive buzzing finally roused Samoa from a wonderful nap. She jumped up from the sofa, smoothed her clothes over her five foot seven inch, slender, chestnut brown frame with her hands and touched her smooth black hair that

was too short to ever muss again. Samoa checked her reflection in the mirrored wall, picked up her purse, pulled out the tube of red lipstick and touched her lips lightly with it, hoping it made her not look so sick.

Feeling composed, Samoa picked up the telephone and her receptionist, Lauren said, "Welcome back, Dr. Tate. You have an emergency request out here that was referred by Dr. Tomas. Are you up to seeing her?"

"Sure, Lauren." Samoa paused and cleared her throat before adding, "Do we have any herbal tea out there? I sure could use a cup right now."

"I'll send Mrs. Bass in and make you a cup pronto."

"Thanks. Make two please, Lauren. We wouldn't want to offend a client."

A few seconds after Samoa hung up the telephone her door opened and in walked a statuesque honey colored woman with tossed blonde highlighted sandy brown locks and hazel eyes. Her elegant soft cream leather coat, trimmed in rich chocolate mink, was met mid-calf by a magnificent pair of cream leather boots. Samoa smelled Mrs. Bass' soft perfume when she extended her hand toward her. Shaking hands, Samoa observed Mrs. Bass' rigid body movements, the puff around her eyes and their redness. She wore no make-up or jewelry. Mrs. Bass neither smiled nor spoke. She simply removed her coat and took a seat on the sofa.

Samoa smiled and sat in her brocade wing chair opposite her new client, and asked, "How might I help you this morning, Mrs. Bass?"

In a whisper, Mrs. Bass responded, "Please don't call me that. My name is Taylor."

"Fine. Taylor. How might I help you?"

"Dr. Tomas said that I should talk to you about my feelings concerning my husband's death. He was murdered three days ago. I buried him yesterday."

“I’m sorry for your loss, Taylor. Would you like to tell me about the murder?”

Taylor turned her sad eyes to Samoa and said, “No.”

“Well, what would you feel comfortable telling me right now?”

“I was there and he died with another woman.”

“You were there when he was murdered? Where were you? Did you see who actually did it?”

“No. There was a party at one of David’s client’s condos. The invitation we received from the Lelands was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. David Bass. When I asked David if he would be attending he gave me shrugs. I decided that since the children were away with his mother in California, I would treat myself by attending the party alone. Of course, I was surprised to see David’s gold Mercedes in the parking lot on my way up that night. I thought the element of surprise might ignite a little passion between us. We haven’t had any passion in so long that I’ve forgotten what passion consisted of with David.

“Anyway, when I walked into the party everyone in the outer foyer stared at me. I smiled and nodded to those I knew as I made my way through the room looking for David. I saw the pretty, smiling woman in the red halter dress and spike heels first. Then I realized she was sitting on David’s knee. She kissed David’s lips and just as he prepared to return her kiss, he saw me standing there. He smiled at the woman, stroked her back and gently lifted her from his lap. They stood, he whispered something in her ear, walked over to me, took me by the elbow and led me toward a vacant bedroom. That bedroom exploded the moment the door closed. I heard my husband say things to me that made me want to hack him into tiny pieces and finger feed him to wild animals. Dead would not have closed the books on the pain I felt in that room, or for the months leading up to it.”

A broken, angry woman sat on the sofa staring into Samoa's eyes. Taylor was losing her struggle to maintain her composure, but she waged a wonderful battle for it.

"Can you share some of the conversation between yourself and your husband from that night, Taylor?"

"Sure. I called him every kind of sorry son-of-a-bitch I could think of and, as calm as you please, my husband, Mr. David Bass, told me to go home. He insisted we could discuss this there. When I asked him how long it would be before he got home, he said, 'When I get good and ready, Taylor. I'm the man in my house, not you. I pay the bills, I've got the biggest fist and I call the shots. Now, take your ass home and wait until I get there. Don't make a scene out here in front of everybody.' He balled his fist and placed it close to my face.

"I looked at David like either he was crazy as hell, or he thought I was. A strange calm came over me after he threatened me. I spun around, walked out of there and went home."

"Had your husband ever struck you with his fist before, Taylor? Were you afraid?"

Taylor smiled for the first time since entering the office and said, "David knew better than to hit me, Dr. Tate. My brothers would have done things to him that can't even be said out loud. However, David's problem that night wasn't my brothers . . . it was me. I went home, loaded David's handgun and sat in the living room waiting for him. He wouldn't have to explain a damn thing to me. I had something to show him."

Stunned, Samoa stuttered, "You sat there with the gun waiting for him to show him what, Taylor?"

Taylor hissed, "That the bullet is mightier than the fist and that Mercedes don't sell well in the hereafter."

"Would you have killed him, Taylor?"

Tears streamed down her beautiful tortured face when

she wailed, “Oh yeah! I would have blown his pretty ass into kingdom come! How could he do that to the one person in the world who loved him?! I loved him more than my children! I turned my back on my family and friends for his sorry ass!”

Samoa moved from her chair, sat next to the weeping woman, cradled and comforted her until her tears subsided. She prescribed something to help Taylor get some sleep and to curb her anxiety. Samoa also made an appointment on Friday for Taylor Bass to continue their discussion, while the two women sat sipping the steaming herbal tea that Lauren had brought in for them.

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At the 30th Precinct, Detective Hall Hawkins and Detective Edward Clark looked at each other with bored expressions. Finally, Eddie said, “We’ve got zilch, buddy. No finger or footprints. No DNA. No weapon. No suspicious character lurking in the shadows or a shadowy figure that someone saw leaving the garage. We have a wife who, if I were her, would have blown a great big hole in his ass, but she had already left and her neighbor saw her park her car and enter the house at nine. That was clearly an hour and a half before good old David and Kay were loaded up with lead. Two other neighbors say the car was still there at ten-thirty. So, where do we go from here?”

Hall made a temple of his fingers and said nonchalantly, “We interview all of those rich snits from the party and see what little flake falls out of their highbrows. Are you coming over for dinner tonight? I think Chris is inviting Sam. You might like her, Eddie. She likes picking brains more than anything.”

“What makes you think I want some woman picking my brain?”

“Who said you had a brain, bud? Hell, you might enjoy the tickle of being probed in that big empty spot.”

CHAPTER THREE

Samoa had stopped by her own apartment and changed for dinner at Christine's and Hall's apartment that evening. She didn't want to suffer any of Hall's horrible stiff psychiatrist jokes because she had on a gray, black or brown suit; or that her shoes were non-skid rubber soled. Of course, Samoa didn't dress anything like Hall's jokes implied, but with a color in the family or a shoe with a sole that he didn't immediately recognize and he would be off and running.

Samoa was dressed in hunter green slacks, a tan turtleneck and black boots when she rang Christine's doorbell at seven. She could hear laughter emanating from the other side of the door and wondered what the joke was. Knowing Hall, Samoa knew that the joke involved her.

Hall opened the door and his smile and greeting were the usual exuberant big hug and, "Hey, Sweet Potato! How ya doin'?" He looked behind Samoa and asked, "What, no

date?”

Returning the hug, Samoa said, “Hey, old dude! Are my eyes playing tricks on me, or has your hairline moved again?”

Christine wandered in from the kitchen, her five-foot full figure clad comfortably in black jeans and a gray sweatshirt with her shoulder length hair in a smooth, dark brown pageboy. She gave Samoa a kiss on the cheek and asked, “Are you still fighting that nasty cold?”

“It had me down for a minute, but I’m okay. Why? Do you think I can still give it to my little heartthrob? Where is she anyway?”

A deep voice that Samoa didn’t recognize answered for Christine, “She’s right here. And, if you’re still sick you cannot touch her. She’s way too precious to be sick.”

Samoa looked at the tall, muscular, wafer colored man with the great black, tapered haircut and back at Christine. Hall said, “Dr. Samoa Tate, meet Detective Edward Clark. She’s Chris’ best friend, and I don’t know why. He’s my partner because the department found him misbehaving with his last partner and he needed guidance.” Samoa and Eddie both gave Hall a look that included a frown.

Christine gave Hall a pop on his rear, and said, “You stop torturing the company, Hall. How many times do I have to tell you I’m not living on this planet with you and no friends? Samoa and Eddie, please accept Hall’s apology. Now, I hope you two will join us for a civilized meal. Eddie, give Goldie to her godmother or keep her to yourself and we’ll meet you all in the dining room in five minutes.”

Eddie looked down at ten month old Goldie who was trying to ascertain exactly what his eyes were made of with her fingers and over at Samoa who was holding her arms out for the baby. Eddie smirked, turned and headed for the dining room with Goldie carefully perched on his forearm. Hall

laughed at Samoa's stunned expression at the rejection. Christine comforted her friend and pulled her toward the kitchen.

In the beautiful gray and gold kitchen, Samoa asked, "Hey, Chris, why did he do that?"

"I'm sure Eddie didn't really mean anything by it, Sam. He just wanted to keep the baby to himself for a while. You know how folks who don't have babies of their own like to covet other people's kids until they're asked to baby-sit. You know, like you do."

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After dinner, in the living room, the tiny group sat around the coffee table playing Black Jack with an assortment of drinks on the table, rhythm and blues and good-natured barbs filling the air. Goldie, who was just learning to walk, held onto the table while circling it, drooling and destroying one player's cards and then the next. Hall hated moist cards and whispered in his daughter's ear, "Can't you turn that faucet off for just a little while, Missy?"

Sure her father was saying something wonderful just for her, Goldie grinned her brightest four-toothed grin and planted a big, wet kiss on his chin. Hall twisted his face, wiped the saliva overage, pointed and said, "Mommie Sam loves your kisses even more than Daddy does, Boo. Go give her one."

Goldie's grin never wavered as she toddled over to Samoa, gave her a kiss and left the residual juices on her face. Goldie sat down on Samoa's lap and began to taste her godmother's cards. Samoa accepted the kiss and the taste test in stride. She didn't even wipe her face.

Eddie tried to ignore the stream of saliva on Samoa's face, but it intermittently drew his attention, until he said, "Samoa, please wipe your face."

Absentmindedly, she asked, "Why? What's on it?"

“Stuff. Just do something.”

Studying her cards intently, Samoa murmured, “If it bothers you so much, you wipe it off.”

Eddie picked up a napkin from the table and dabbed at Samoa’s chin, while looking as if he thought the infant drool were radioactive. She asked, “Feel better?”

“Yes.”

Christine and Hall watched the exchange with curious expressions and returned to the game they were playing. Cards hit the table with speed and enthusiasm. Goldie curled up on Eddie’s lap and fell asleep with her finger in her mouth. He stole glances at the beautiful baby girl from time to time. Samoa stole glances of him from time to time.

Looking at his watch, Eddie said, “Hey, it’s been a great evening, but I’ve got a case that needs my full attention early in the morning.”

Hall laughed and said, “Oh, I thought you solved cases in your sleep. At least that’s what you told me.”

“Yeah, I tell you lots of things, Hall, because I know you can’t process any of it. Besides, I want to look my best when I go out to the merry widow’s house tomorrow. I might be able to schmooze a Mercedes out of her while she’s in mourning.”

“You want to schmooze something out of her that you can ride, but it ain’t a Mercedes, Eddie.”

“Hey, you may be right. She’s a fine one.” Eddie said and felt Samoa’s gaze. He turned toward her and said, “Well, we have a homicide with a beautiful widow and Hall thinks that I want to sleep with every free woman I meet.”

Samoa asked nonchalantly, “Well, don’t you?”

“No. Traumatized women don’t excite me. Her husband was splattered all over a garage and his girlfriend for the evening. The last thing I would think the sister wanted was another man right now.”

“Are you talking about the couple that was shot last week? I thought only the woman died.”

“She was dead when we got there, but he wasn’t. He died in surgery.”

Truly interested, Samoa asked, “Did he tell you who shot him before he died?”

“No. Good old Mr. David Bass didn’t tell anybody anything that night.”

“Did you say David Bass?”

“Yeah. That’s our boy. He was out with another woman when they were shot. Personally, I think they were ambushed by a frustrated lover. My partner feels like one of the rich folks bought a top of the line Mercedes from him and the sucker stopped in front of the theater and embarrassed them.”

Shaking her head slowly from side to side, Samoa said vacantly, “I don’t know how you work with him. He’s such a wise ass.”

Feigning indignation, Hall pointed at the door and said, “See both of you later. Eat my food, drink my liquor, play with my cards and my baby then call me names. I don’t need friends, Christine. You can have them.”

Samoa frowned, looked at Hall and asked, “Don’t you all question the wife first in a situation like this? Why is he visiting her tomorrow if the guy died nearly a week ago?”

“We did interview her first, Miss Know It All. Her story was airtight and she had a witness. But, she’s got some brothers we might want to talk about. And there are the guests at the party that she also attended.”

An astonished Christine interjected, “What are you saying, Hall? The wife was at the party with the husband and his girlfriend for the evening?”

“Yeah, honey. She didn’t take it well, but he persuaded her to leave without making a scene.”

Christine threw her head back and laughed. She looked at Hall through squinted eyes and said, “You try that and you’ll die right on the spot, Hall Hawkins. I wouldn’t carry that kind of crap from here to the other side of the room quietly.”

Stroking his wife’s shoulder, Hall said, “You wouldn’t create a scene if I asked you not to . . . would you, Sweetheart?”

“Yes, I would. It would be ugly, too. Hair pulling, punching, eye gouging, scratching, biting and kicking until I couldn’t take another breath.”

Turning to Eddie and Samoa, Hall said, “Okay, you guys can really leave now. Christine’s frightening me and it’s all your fault.”

Hall rose from the floor, collected the slumbering Goldie from Eddie’s lap, allowed both guests to give her a tiny peck on the cheek and left the room. Christine looked at Samoa and Eddie and pouted. She so seldom entertained at home since the baby was born that she hated to see the evening end and her friends leave.

Eddie rose from the floor and extended his hand to help Samoa to her feet. Looking up at the exquisite masculine body clad in crisp black dress pants and an olive knit shirt that was neatly tucked into his belted pants, Samoa blushed and searched the floor for a second for some unknown object before taking his hand. On her feet, Samoa whispered, “Thank you.”

Giving her a half smile, Eddie said, “You’re welcome.”

At the door, Christine handed Eddie his coat and Samoa hers. Eddie immediately took Samoa’s coat from her and held it open for her to slide her arms into the sleeves. Smoothing the front of her coat, Samoa whispered, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Christine hugged Samoa and Eddie just as Hall joined the group in the foyer. He kissed Samoa’s cheek, shook Eddie’s hand, and said, “Thanks for hanging out with us old married folks. It’s refreshing to know that single people are still suffering in the world.”

In unison, Eddie and Samoa asked, “Who’s suffering, Hall?” They looked at each other and turned away quickly. Eddie and Samoa left the apartment and walked side by side down the long corridor to the elevator in silence. They both put out a finger to press the down button and Samoa’s finger landed first. Eddie’s finger touched hers and he snatched it back. They gave each other a nervous smile and he looked left while she looked right.

When the elevator arrived, Eddie allowed Samoa to enter first, and she said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

When the elevator reached the lobby, Eddie allowed Samoa to exit first, and she said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Eddie walked beside Samoa until she reached her black Mitsubishi Galant. She smiled at him and nodded before using her keypad to open the lock. The moment he heard the click, Eddie reached down and opened the door. Samoa stood there frozen. Eddie smiled and waved toward the car. She climbed in and put the key in the ignition.

Eddie smiled down at her and said, "Okay, Samoa. Have a safe ride home. It was nice meeting you."

"Yeah. Right. You too. Thank you."

Eddie's shoulders slumped, when he said, "You're welcome."

He closed the car door, waited to hear Samoa's engine turn over and walked back up the street to his gray Volkswagon. She blew her horn as she passed his car and he blew his horn in acknowledgment.

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In the apartment, Hall looked down at his diminutive wife and said, "I've got twenty that says they'll be dating no later than Wednesday."

"Make it fifty. I saw a pair of shoes I liked the other day. Sam's attracted to Eddie and she'll avoid him like he's a leper."

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On the lower east side, twenty-year old, Nathaniel Dawes comes in from his job at Kentucky Fried Chicken at midnight. He sees that there is a package addressed to him in the closet. Looking at the sender's address, Nathaniel frowns because he doesn't recognize it. His court appointed attorney's name was Beaumont, not Samuel Stiles.

In his room, Nathaniel tosses his shoes and flops down on the unmade bed. He sighs and unwraps the package. Nathaniel is astonished when he sees what's in the package. He jumps up from the bed, closes his bedroom door and returns to look down into the box again. Nathaniel cannot believe his eyes. Samuel Stiles has sent him a brand spanking new 45.