

Chapter 1

The smell hit him first.

“Ugh, what the hell is that?” Nick Cappuano dropped his keys into his coat pocket and stepped into the spacious, well-appointed Watergate apartment that his boss, Senator John O’Connor, had inherited from his father.

“Senator!” Nick tried to identify the foul metallic odor.

Making his way through the living room, he noticed parts and pieces of the suit John wore yesterday strewn over sofas and chairs, laying a path to the bedroom. He had called the night before to check in with Nick after a dinner meeting with Virginia’s Democratic Party leadership, and said he was on his way home. Nick had reminded his thirty-six-year-old boss to set his alarm.

“Senator?” John hated when Nick called him that when they were alone, but Nick insisted the people in John’s life afford him the respect of his title.

The odd stench permeating the apartment caused a tingle of anxiety to register on the back of Nick’s neck. “John?”

He stepped into the bedroom and gasped. Drenched in blood, John sat up in bed, his eyes open but vacant. A knife spiked through his neck held him in place against the headboard. His hands rested in a pool of blood in his lap.

Gagging, the last thing Nick noticed before he bolted to the bathroom to vomit was that something was hanging out of John's mouth.

Once the violent retching finally stopped, Nick stood up on shaky legs, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and rested against the vanity, waiting to see if there would be more. His cell phone rang. When he didn't take the call, his pager vibrated. Nick couldn't find the wherewithal to answer, to say the words that would change everything. *The senator is dead. John's been murdered.* He wanted to go back to when he was still in his car, fuming and under the assumption that his biggest problem that day would be what to do about the man-child he worked for who had once again slept through his alarm.

Thoughts of John, dating back to their first meeting in a history class at Harvard freshman year, flashed through Nick's mind, hundreds of snippets spanning a nearly twenty-year friendship. As if to convince himself that his eyes had not deceived him, he leaned forward to glance into the bedroom, wincing at the sight of his best friend—the brother of his heart—stabbed through the neck and covered with blood.

Nick's eyes burned with tears, but he refused to give in to them. Not now. Later maybe, but not now. His phone rang again. This time he reached for it and saw it was Christina, his deputy chief of staff, but didn't take the call. Instead, he dialed 911.

Taking a deep breath to calm his racing heart and making a supreme effort to keep the hysteria out of his voice, he said, "I need to report a murder." He gave the address and stumbled into the living room to wait for the police, all the while trying to get his head around the

image of his dead friend, a visual he already knew would haunt him forever.

Twenty long minutes later, two officers arrived, took a quick look in the bedroom and radioed for backup. Nick was certain neither of them recognized the victim.

He felt as if he was being sucked into a rip tide, pulled further and further from the safety of shore, until drawing a breath became a laborious effort. He told the cops exactly what happened—his boss failed to show up for work, he came looking for him and found him dead.

“Your boss’s name?”

“United States Senator John O’Connor.” Nick watched the two young officers go pale in the instant before they made a second more urgent call for backup.

“Another scandal at the Watergate,” Nick heard one of them mutter.

His cell phone rang yet again. This time he reached for it.

“Yeah,” he said softly.

“*Nick!*” Christina cried. “Where the *hell* are you guys? Trevor’s having a heart attack!” She referred to their communications director who had back-to-back interviews scheduled for the senator that morning.

“He’s dead, Chris.”

“Who’s dead? What’re you talking about?”

“John.”

Her soft cry broke his heart. “*No.*” That she was desperately in love with John was no secret to Nick. That she was also a consummate professional who would never act on those feelings was one of the many reasons Nick respected her.

“I’m sorry to just blurt it out like that.”

“How?” she asked in a small voice.

“Stabbed in his bed.”

Her ravaged moan echoed through the phone. “But who... I mean, *why?*”

“The cops are here, but I don’t know anything yet. I need you to request a postponement on the vote.”

“I can’t,” she said, adding in a whisper, “I can’t think about that right now.”

“You have to, Chris. That bill is his legacy. We can’t let all his hard work be for nothing. Can you do it? For him?”

“Yes...okay.”

“You have to pull yourself together for the staff, but don’t tell them yet. Not until his parents are notified.”

“Oh, God, his poor parents. You should go, Nick. It’d be better coming from you than cops they don’t know.”

“I don’t know if I can. How do I tell people I love that their son’s been murdered?”

“He’d want it to come from you.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’ll see if the cops will let me.”

“What’re we going to do without him, Nick?” She posed a question he’d been grappling with himself. “I just can’t imagine this world, this *life*, without him.”

“I can’t either,” Nick said, knowing it would be a much different life without John O’Connor at the center of it.

“He’s really dead?” she asked as if to convince herself it wasn’t a cruel joke. “Someone killed him?”

“Yes.”

Outside the chief’s office suite, Detective Sergeant Sam Holland smoothed her hands over the toffee-colored hair

she corralled into a clip for work, pinched some color into cheeks that hadn't seen the light of day in weeks, and adjusted her gray suit jacket over a red scoop-neck top.

Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves and settle her chronically upset stomach, she pushed open the door and stepped inside. Chief Farnsworth's receptionist greeted her with a smile. "Go right in, Sergeant Holland. He's waiting for you."

Great, Sam thought as she left the receptionist with a weak smile. Before she could give into the urge to turn tail and run, she erased the grimace from her face and went in.

"Sergeant." The chief, a man she'd once called Uncle Joe, stood up and came around the big desk to greet her with a firm handshake. His gray eyes skirted over her with concern and sympathy, both of which were new since "the incident." She despised being the reason for either. "You look well."

"I feel well."

"Glad to hear it." He gestured for her to have a seat. "Coffee?"

"No, thanks."

Pouring himself a cup, he glanced over his shoulder. "I've been worried about you, Sam."

"I'm sorry for causing you worry and for disgracing the department." This was the first chance she'd had to speak directly to him since she returned from a month of administrative leave, during which she'd practiced the sentence over and over. She thought she'd delivered it with convincing sincerity.

"Sam," he sighed as he sat across from her, cradling his mug between big hands. "You've done nothing to

disgrace yourself or the department. Everyone makes mistakes.”

“Not everyone makes mistakes that result in a dead child, Chief.”

He studied her for a long, intense moment as if he was making some sort of decision. “Senator John O’Connor was found murdered in his apartment this morning.”

“*Jesus,*” she gasped. “How?”

“I don’t have all the details, but from what I’ve been told so far, it appears he was dismembered and stabbed through the neck. Apparently, his chief of staff found him.”

“Nick,” she said softly.

“Excuse me?”

“Nick Cappuano is O’Connor’s chief of staff.”

“You know him?”

“*Knew* him. Years ago,” she added, surprised and unsettled to discover the memory of him still had power over her, that just the sound of his name rolling off her lips could make her heart race.

“I’m assigning the case to you.”

Surprised at being thrust so forcefully back into the real work she had craved since her return to duty, she couldn’t help but ask, “Why me?”

“Because you need this, and so do I. We both need a win.”

The press had been relentless in its criticism of him, of her, of the department, but to hear him acknowledge it made her ache. Her father had come up through the ranks with Farnsworth, which was probably the number one reason why she still had a job. “Is this a test? Find out

who killed the senator and my previous sins are forgiven?”

He put down his coffee cup and leaned forward, elbows resting on knees. “The only person who needs to forgive you, Sam, is you.”

Infuriated by the surge of emotion brought on by his softly spoken words, Sam cleared her throat and stood up. “Where does O’Connor live?”

“The Watergate. Two uniforms are already there. Crime scene is on its way.” He handed her a slip of paper with the address. “I don’t have to tell you that this needs to be handled with the utmost discretion.”

He also didn’t have to tell her that this was the only chance she’d get at redemption.

“Won’t the Feds want in on this?”

“They might, but they don’t have jurisdiction, and they know it. They’ll be breathing down my neck, though, so report directly to me. I want to know everything ten minutes after you do. I’ll smooth it with Stahl,” he added, referring to the lieutenant she usually answered to.

Heading for the door, she said, “I won’t let you down.”

“You never have before.”

With her hand resting on the door handle, she turned back to him. “Are you saying that as the chief of police or as my Uncle Joe?”

His face lifted into a small but sincere smile. “Both.”