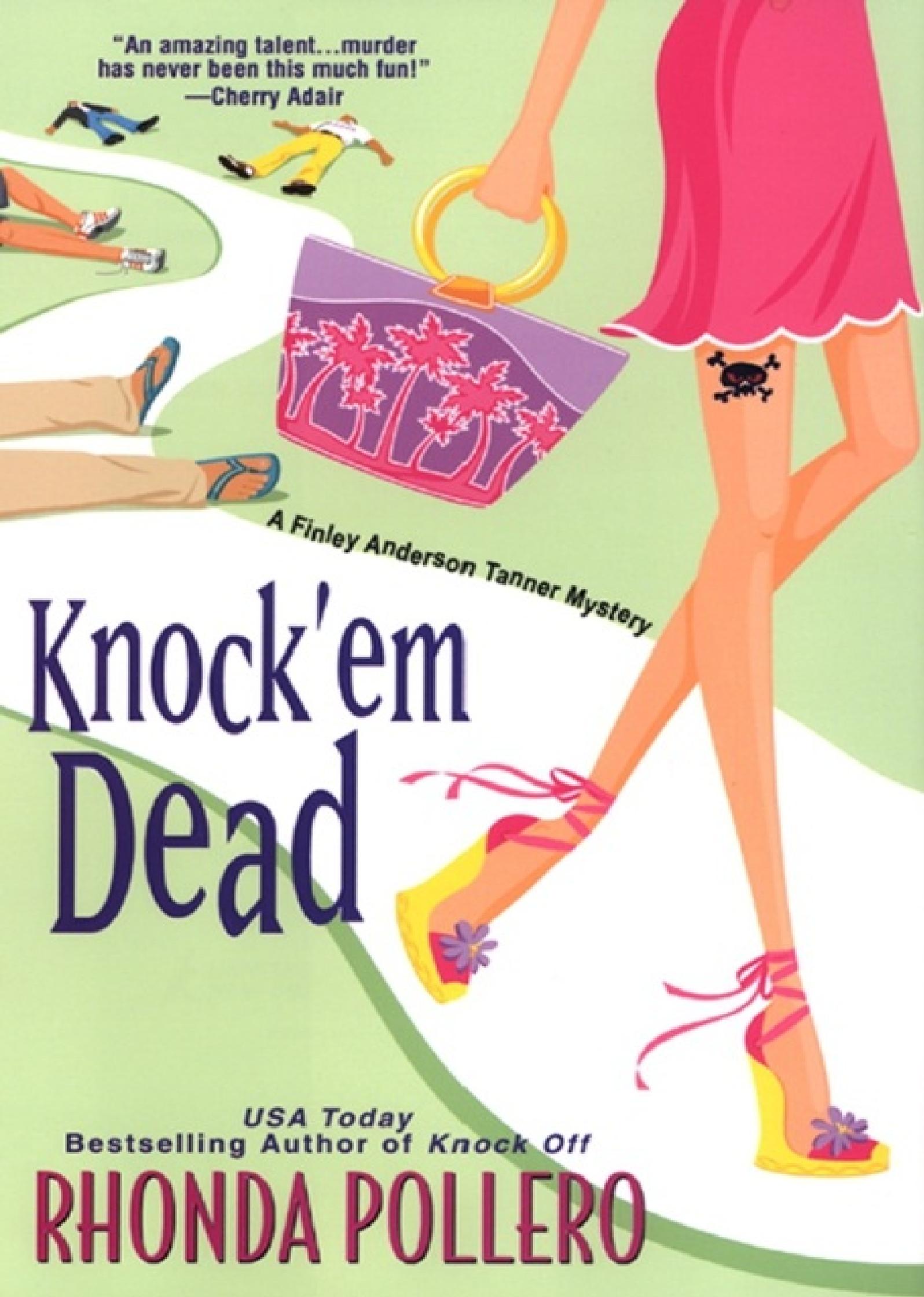


"An amazing talent...murder  
has never been this much fun!"

—Cherry Adair



*A Finley Anderson Tanner Mystery*

# Knock'em Dead

*USA Today*  
Bestselling Author of *Knock Off*

**RHONDA POLLERO**

**Books by**

KNOCK OFF

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KNOCK 'EM DEAD

Rhonda Pollero

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*To affirming friends . . . Karen Harrison, Cherry Adair, Traci Hall, Patricia Gagne,  
Dani Sinclair, Renae Dryer, Leanne Banks, Twist Phalen, and Cindy Gerard.*

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*As it turns out, there is something a guy can't live without.*

One

I was having an erotic dream about a seriously hot guy with blue eyes, and black hair — *not* Liam McGarrity, a sowrongforme man who can turn me into a quivering pile of hormones with a single glance—and definitely not my perfectineveryway boyfriend, Patrick, when the knocking started. It was loud and insistent. Some impatient someone wanted my attention at this ungodly hour of—I slitted bleary eyes at the bedside clock—fivetwenty A freaking M. On a Sunday, no less. This better be good. I groaned heavily, missing my thousandthreadcountsheets even before I'd tossed them aside. Patrick was justback in town, so I was dressed in a cotton tee and matching boxers. No sense wasting the good stuff when I'd spentthe previous evening watching the *What Not to Wear* marathon I'd been storing up on my new DVR. A gadget I'd only been able to afford after Visa upped my credit limit. *Bam. Bam. Bam.* "I'm coming, damn it!" Threequarters asleep, I pulled on my robe and started out of the bedroom, stubbing my

toe against the bed frame in the process while whoever the idiot was at my door kept right on knocking. Like I hadn't heard the first ninety-nine knocks. Me and all my neighbors. I winced, hopped, and cursed, not necessarily in that order. The banging on my front door became more urgent. In the few seconds it took me to hobble through my darkened apartment, flipping light switches along the way, I mentally ran through some possibilities. Could be Sam, my upstairs neighbor and friend. Soon to be former friend if he was the one on the other side of the door. Patrick was a more remote possibility. He flew cargo for FedEx and often arrived and/or departed at off hours. But we were two years into our relationship and he knew me well enough to know I wouldn't appreciate an early morning drop-in. Not when I'm at my most visually vulnerable, pre-shower, hair, and makeup. Definitely not my mother. Even if she needed me urgently, she'd send a messenger before she'd break protocol. She doesn't even use the telephone other than during the socially acceptable hours of 10:00 AM to 10:00 PM. I got up on tiptoes to peer through the peephole. Though the figure was silhouetted by backlighting from the parking area, I recognized my friend Jane Spencer instantly. Fumbling with the safety chain and flipping the deadbolt's lever, I yanked open the door so fast that Jane's balled fist caught me square in the center of the forehead. I stumbled backward, my head now throbbing along with my toe. "Jesus, Jane! What the f—!" " *Oh god oh god oh god* ," she babbled, closing the door and gripping me by the shoulders as I teetered. I'd met Jane at the gym almost six years ago. Though we were total strangers, we'd agreed to pretend to be

friends in order to take advantage of the gym's two-for-one special. I don't like to think of it as a scam so much as the broadest interpretation of the term *friend*. My friendship with Jane quickly became a reality and we get together whenever possible. My attendance at the gym is spotty at best. Jane, on the other hand, works out religiously, hence the reason her accidental blow had me seeing stars. "I'm okay," I lied, shrugging off her hold. Moderately pissed, but okay. Then my vision cleared and I looked at her. Really looked at her. Her dark brown eyes were red, puffy, and filled with a kind of abject terror I'd never seen in my calm, reasonable, rational friend. Though she looked a lot like one of the Pussycat Dolls, Jane was an accountant and investment broker. A geek in sex kitten clothing. She was covered in deep crimson blood. *Wet* deep crimson blood. It was matted in her hair and soaked through the right side of her thigh-skimming, aqua La Perla negligee. The streaks of partially dried blood continued down the side of one leg to her bare foot. My brain dealt with the blood first. Why she was outside, in the middle of the night, in her nightie, could wait for later. "What happened? Did you have an accident?" Jane's fingers trembled as they snagged in the crusting blood in her hair. I followed her as she walked stiffly into my living room, leaving single-footed, reddish brown marks on my tile and carpet as she moved, her hands hugging her bare, bloodstreaked arms. "He's dead. There was so much blood . . ." My initial hope that maybe she'd picked up some runover animal or something evaporated. "He who?" "Paolo. He's dead. Oh God, worse than dead."

*Paolo?* The name didn't register. Nor did the concept of worse than dead. It's one of those absolutes, like being pregnant. You definitively are or you aren't. "Back up," I insisted, gently lowering her to the sofa. I grabbed the pashmina throw draped over the back of the couch and wrapped it around her shoulders. Taking her hands in mine, I knelt in front of her. "Take a deep breath and start from the beginning." She swallowed audibly and nodded. "Paolo was my date. You know, from that meet a rich guy introductionservice Liv represents?" Sure I remembered it. Olivia Garrett, one of our mutual friends who owns an event planning company, had been hired by a very exclusive, very expensive dating service to create "fairytale fantasy dates" for available men and women of means. Liv had persuaded the owners to waive the whopping five grand membership fee for Becky and Jane. Becky Jameson and I work together at a law firm in West Palm Beach. She's an attorney in the contracts department, while I'm a few rungs down on the professional ladder. I'm an estates and trusts paralegal. Because of Patrick, I was blissfully exempt from the freebie. Jane was willing to give it a try. Becky was not. If I remember correctly, her exact words were, "I'd become a celibate lesbian before I'd go out on a buy-a-guy date." Back to dead Paolo. "So he was your date and . . . ?" "Heart Association Fund Raiser at the Breakers. Cocktails after. Then he drove me home. He had chilled champagne waiting in the limo and by the time we got to my place I was feeling pretty good. So I invited him up for some coffee and we, um, you know. At least I think we *you knowed* ." "You don't remember?" God, sex with Patrick was methodical, but at least it was memorable.

“We must have,” Jane decided with a small shake of her head. “Why else would I be wearing my get lucky lingerie?” *Good point.* “And then?” “I woke up and there was bloo—” “You fell asleep?” “Apparently,” Jane snapped. “I know, total breach of first sex etiquette, but I must have had more to drink than I realized and the guy was gorgeous. Anyway, he was on one side with his back to me. I thought he’d breached too, and was fast asleep, so I shook his shoulder.” I felt her shiver before she yanked her hands free of mine. “He was ice cold, and then I went to move closer to him when I felt the wet sheets.” “Gorgeous and incontinent. Interesting combination.” Jane glared at me. “I tossed back the covers and there was blood everywhere. It was exactly like that producer guy in *The Godfather* who wakes up with the horse head in his bed. “I think I crawled over him or maybe it was around him and I see this big knife in his chest. I pulled it out, rolled him over, and was about to feel for a pulse when I just happened to glance down and see . . .” Jane looked like she wanted to vomit. Her skin bleached white and her eyes squeezed shut for a second. “And saw what?” “It was gone.” “What was gone?” “*It*,” Jane repeated succinctly. “*It* it?” I felt disgust churn in my stomach along with serious confusion. “So what? The police showed up, took your statement, and then just let you leave? Dressed like that?” “I didn’t call them.”

I practically leapt to my feet. “*What?*” “Everything was so bloody and I’d just touched a deadguy. I was terrified and not exactly thinking straight. It isn’t like I’ve ever awakened and found a man with his privates cut off in my bed before. Plus, I didn’t know if the killer was still in my apartment so I just grabbed my keys and jumped out the window.” I blinked. “You live on the second floor.” “The jump wasn’t bad. The landing was a bit of a bitch. So what do I do?” “We call the police and then we call Becky.” I reached for the phone, changing the order of the calls in my mind. Becky answered in a groggy, guttural voice. “Hello.” I don’t think I stopped to breathe as I quickly told her the tale of Jane’s date culminating in the discovery of Dickless Paolo. She mumbled a few curses, then said, “Call the police and stay put. I’ll be there in thirty minutes.” “Okay.” “Finley?” “Yeah?” “I don’t want either one of you to say a word to the cops until I get there. Understand?” “Not a word.” I glanced over at Jane, who was now curled into the fetal position at one end of my sofa. I had a feeling the cops would expect more than a “no comment” when they got their first glimpse at Jane. “Do we tell them our names?” “Name, address, age, occupations, all fine.” “Jane is covered in blood. I’ll get her cleaned up and she can—” “No. No shower, no change of clothes. Nothing to compromise the forensics any more than they’ve already been compromised. Why didn’t she call the police?” “She wanted out of her apartment.”

“Then she should have driven to the sheriff’s office.” I heard Becky’s frustrated sigh. “Why didn’t she think?” “How am I supposed to know?” Cupping my hand over the mouthpiece, I whispered, “She’s totally freaked out. Stop lecturing me and get over here.” I’m not sure if I said goodbye to Becky or not before calling the cops. Only that a few seconds later a calm, monotone voice came on the line. “Nine-one-nine. What is your emergency?” I shot a quick glance over at Jane’s huddled form on my sofa. “I, um, well . . . I need to report a . . . a, um, bloody friend.” “Do you need an ambulance, Ms. Tanner?” “How’d you know my name?” I pushed a strand of my disheveled hair off my forehead. “Forget that. What I mean is, my friend was in some sort of . . . See, she had this date and it didn’t go well.” “Ma’am, what *specifically* is your emergency?” “Specifically? I think I need to report a murder.” “Who has been murdered, ma’am?” “Paolo.” “Is that a first or last name?” I rolled my eyes. What difference did it make? Was she going to send help or carve the freaking headstone? Jane was pretty useless, so I gave what limited information I had, including Jane’s address so someone could check on Paolo. “I’ve alerted the sheriff’s office. Please stay on the line with me until help arrives.” I did as she asked, though it felt weird holding the receiver to my ear when we weren’t talking to each other. Maybe 9-1-1 should invest in Muzak or something. Anyway, it seemed like days passed before I heard sirens and then the screech of tires. I hung up, opened my door, and counted no fewer than a dozen sheriff’s cars careening into

the parking lot in front of my apartment. In a matter of seconds, several of the officers leapt from their cruisers and crouched behind their squad cars, guns trained in my direction. Then I was blinded when they turned their mounted spotlights on me. Through a megaphone or radio or whatever, a disembodied male voice boomed through the predawn quiet. "Lace your fingers and place your hands behind your head. Get on your knees. Slowly." "But I'm—" "Now!" Squinting against the harsh light, I dutifully followed instructions. My pissed-off meter went into the red zone. The cement was rough, painfully digging into my bare knees. As if it wasn't humiliating enough to be assuming a position I'd only seen on episodes of *Cops*, I heard my neighbors whispering as they began stepping out of their apartments to investigate. Jane came up behind me. "Hold your position, Ms. Tanner," the male voice instructed. This time his tone was compassionate as he spoke to Jane. "Let us subdue the suspect before—" I rolled my sightless eyes. "I'm not the suspect and she's not Finley Tanner. I am. I'm the one that called you." *Morons*. Oh, and like I wasn't already mired in Suckville, a photographer's camera flash strobed where the cops had busily setup neon yellow crime scene tape to cordon off my parking lot. Getting the police to understand that I wasn't an imminent threat to society was a lot like trying to bathe a cat. But eventually, I was allowed to put my arms down and get to my feet. Much to the disappointment of my neighbors. My complex is a pretty laid-back place, so the commotion was a really big, if personally mortifying, thing.

Finally, two plainclothes detectives stepped forward, escorting Jane and me, with two uniformed officers trailing us inside my apartment. The female detective directed a motion with her head to the deputies. Leaving me helpless and annoyed as the officers dispersed, one went into my kitchen, while another strode toward my bedroom. “Where are they going?” I asked. Ignoring my question, the female detective instructed Jane and me to sit on the sofa. She was African-American, with skin the color of a caramel latte. She wore utilitarian navy blue slacks and a plain white cotton blouse. No jewelry, unless you counted the silver-toned grommets on her sensible shoes. Or the gold badge clipped at her waist. I didn’t. The male detective came over to me and caught me by the elbow. There wasn’t anything the least bit chivalrous about the gesture. Using my right arm like a rudder, he quickly got me to my feet and escorted me into the bedroom, pushing the door just shy of completely closed. The detective stood next to my dresser, stiff and devoid of expression. He reminded me of the guards outside Buckingham Palace. Not that I’ve ever been to see the queen, but it is on my list of things to do and places to go. Reading the gold nameplate above the badge dangling out of his right shirt pocket, I locked eyes with the detective. I didn’t even attempt to soften the contempt in my tone. “Detective Graves, Jane’s in shock or something. Maybe you should—” “EMS will check her out,” he said. He asked me for identification, then reached into his back pocket. He pulled out a small memo pad and took a nub of a pencil from inside the spiral binding. I grabbed my purse off the nightstand and pulled my license from my wallet. My thoughts were fractured, racing in every direction. Jane, Paolo, blood, and the inappropriate memory of finding

the pink Chanel wallet at the outlet mall. So what if the clasp was broken? It wasn't like I passed my wallet around, so my secret was safe. No one, not even my closest friends, knew that I'd been reduced to buying factory seconds. But I couldn't think about that now. Jane's predicament was far more pressing than my tenuous financial situation. He dispensed with the standard questions—name, age, etc.—all while comparing the answers to my driver's license. "Please tell me your version of tonight's events." "Version?" "Yes, ma'am," he answered, pencil poised. "Approximately what time did Miss Spencer arrive?" "Before I had a chance to make coffee," I said. I wasn't trying to be snotty, I just couldn't help myself. The detective had coffee breath and it didn't seem fair that he'd gotten his while I was expected to provide lucid answers without an ounce of caffeine in my system. His single, bushy unibrow pinched between his chocolate-colored eyes. He was also African American, but unlike his partner's, his complexion was very dark. He either worked out religiously or had a serious steroid problem. His neck wasn't a neck so much as a thick stump. His biceps and oversized chest strained against the fabric of his blue oxford shirt. And his tie was at least five seasons out of date and knotted wrong. The thinner black and gray striped strip hung pathetically about two inches below the front flap. In fact, now that I had an opportunity to look at him, I realized he'd worked out so much that his body no longer fit conventional clothing. The waistband on his slacks bunched beneath his cinched belt. Because of the bulk of his thighs and calves, the seams on his khaki slacks were stressed almost to their breaking point. While some women find musclebound men attractive, my brain goes in only one direction. If a guy's lats make it

impossible to lower his arms completely to his sides like a normal person, how does said guy aim to pee? “The time?” he prompted. “Five twenty.” “You noted the *exact* time?” “Cursed it, actually.” I glanced through the slit in the door, trying to catch a glimpse of Jane. I couldn’t hear her conversation with Detective Sensible Shoes, but every so often the muffled sound of Jane hiccupping wafted into my room. “She’s really distraught, Detective. I know she needs medical attention.” “She’ll get it,” he said. “Now, if we could get back to your statement?” Raking my fingers through my hair, I was about to give him the abbreviated version. Screw Becky’s advice. In fact, screw Becky, she should have been here by now. The radio clipped to his belt crackled, and then an almost unintelligible voice said, “One eight seven confirmed at 636 Heritage Way South.” Graves grabbed the radio, depressed a button, and asked for more details. “Hispanic, approximately five ten. According to his wallet, the vic is Paolo Martinez. Palm Beach address. The ME hasn’t gotten here yet, but COD is definitely multiple stab wounds and . . . uh . . . mutilation.” “Mutilation?” Graves asked. For the first time real interest seemed to kick in. “Yeah,” the voice on the radio answered. Like Jane, he seemed to have a difficult time describing the injury. “There’s been an, well, um, a —” “For Chrissake,” I cut in, my hands slapping against my sides. “The killer cut Paolo’s penis off.” “Yeah,” Radio Voice agreed. “What she said.” “Signs of a struggle?”

“Negative. We’ve been unable to locate the missing, uh,er—”I glared at Graves. Why was it so hard for men to say the word yet so easy for them to adjust it in public whenever the mood struck? Amazing. “Penis.” “Yeah. We haven’t found it.” “Keep looking,” Graves said. I thought about that assignment, repulsed as I imagined how it must feel to be the one assigned to find the penis. Graves asked me all sorts of pointless questions. Did I know Paolo? No. Was the deceased Jane’s boyfriend? Heck no. Would I characterize Jane as a violent person? Hell no. Graves seemed frustrated by me, my answers, or both. He left me under the watchful eyes of the uniformed officer as he slipped into the living room. Balancing on the edge of the bed, I leaned to the right, hoping I might be able to catch bits and pieces of the huddled conversation between the detectives. Silently, I tried to send Becky an urgent telepathic message to move her ass. Especially when I saw the vacant look in Jane’s eyes. Hearing a knock at my front door, relief washed over me, but it was shortlived. Instead of Becky, two paramedics lumbered in, carrying what looked like large red tackle boxes. I stood, only to have my progress blocked by Officer Useless. “Keep your seat, ma’am.” *Kiss my seat, and don’t call me ma’am.* “I don’t understand your problem,” I muttered. “Standard procedure,” he said, as if that explained the whole divide and conquer thing they had going on.

“She’s a dear friend who’s suffered a terrible trauma. I’d simply like to offer some moral support.” “I can’t let you do that, ma’am.” I swear, if he “ma’amed” me one more time Paolo wouldn’t be the only one in Palm Beach County missing a body part. The EMS guys checked Jane for injuries, flashed penlights in her eyes, and then declared her injury-free. “Like hell,” I yelled loud enough so the group in the other room could hear me. “Look at her, she’s obviously in shock.” “This will be a lot easier on everyone if you calm down, Ms. Tanner,” the officer insisted. “Why the hell should I?” I asked emphatically, standing up and tugging at the edges of my robe. The officer opened his mouth to say something just as Detectives Steadman and Graves slapped handcuffs on Jane. “Have you all lost your minds?” I demanded as I pushed past my official babysitter. “Why are you handcuffing her? At best she’s a witness and at worst, an almost victim.” “Stand back,” Graves warned in a very official tone. “But!” I started to argue, then realized I had nothing convincing to say beyond “Vacant expression Jane is my friend and I know for a fact she would never depend on a guy.” My phone rang then and I was torn between answering it and a strong urge to muscle my way through the throng of cops to save my glassy-eyed friend as she was being led toward the door. Counting paramedics, there were six of them and only one of me, so I went for the phone. “Yes?” I snapped into the receiver. “The whole parking lot is cordoned off. They won’t let me past the police line.” I added this bit of information to my growing list of

irritations. “Hey, Kojak,” I called to Graves, who had one hand on Jane’s bound wrists and a brown paper sack in the other. He glanced in my direction as his latex-gloved minion was depositing my pashmina into an evidence bag. “We’re being denied our right to counsel.” “You and Ms. Spencer will be afforded an opportunity to make a call from the station,” he replied blandly. *Me?* What had I done? What had Jane done? *Shit.* “Our attorney is right outside. Her name is Rebecca Jameson and I happen to know she has every right to be present during arrest and questioning.” Both he and his partner gave me that “you’re a real pain in the ass” look. Not that I cared. I just wanted Becky here to put an end to the idiotic notion that Jane was in anyway responsible for Paolo’s death. Graves made a call on his radio and within a matter of seconds, Becky was rushing through the door. In the forty-seven minutes since I’d made the frantic call to her, Becky had obviously been busy. I was a scrunchie and a bad shoulder tattoo away from looking like a skanky warehouse shopper. Jane was a zombie, a barely conscious, bloody, La Perla-clad mess. Becky, however, looked polished and professional. Her red hair was twirled into a loose knot, secured by a couple of lacquered chopsticks in the same shade of coral as her blouse and wedge sandals. With her cream jersey skirt, she had the perfect casual business look of a nonsense attorney. I’d berate her later for taking the time to accessorize and applying a full complement of makeup, but for right now, I was just glad she was here. I’d known Becky since our freshman year of college, so I recognized the look of horror that flashed briefly across her face when she saw bloody Jane cuffed and surrounded by sheriff’s deputies. She introduced herself, conveniently leaving out the part

about being a contracts attorney who hadn't seen the inside of a courtroom since her moot court assignment when she was a third-year law student. "Who is in charge here?" "That would be me," Detective Steadman said, stepping out of the small group. She didn't offer Becky her hand. "I'm the lead on the case and this is my partner, Detective Graves." Graves nodded, then walked out on my patio when his cell phone rang. His part of the conversation consisted of a series of grunts—lots of "umms" and "uhhuhs" and "reallys?" "Do something," I mouthed to Becky. "Unless you have cause to hold Miss Spencer, I want the handcuffs removed now." "That isn't an option," Steadman said without inflection. "Why not?" "Miss Spencer is under arrest on suspicion of murder." Suddenly my babysitter twisted my hands behind my back and slapped handcuffs tightly around my wrists. "Ow!" Steadman's expression didn't so much as flicker. "And I'm taking Miss Tanner in as well." "For what?" I practically screamed. "Accomplice, material witness, assaulting a witness after she was told to stay in the bedroom. Take your pick," Graves said, his dark eyes flashing something that looked annoyingly like pleasure. Steadman turned to Becky and added, "You have thirty seconds to vacate these premises. Based on evidence found at Miss Spencer's home and the blood trail here, I'm designating this apartment a secondary crime scene."