
Chapter 1

When she turned onto the street of the crime, Detective Teagan Smith took a long pull from her coffee and tried to steel herself before she reached the scene. Dispatch had said that the officers who arrived at the scene of the domestic disturbance found a barely conscious woman who had been attacked by her husband, with three small children in the house. The husband was still at the scene.

The sound of the helicopter overhead sped up the rate of Teagan's beating heart. "Don't let it be Pegasus; don't let it be Pegasus," she chanted over and over. Catching the dark blue of the helicopter as it landed on the street ahead of her, Teagan cursed. It was Pegasus. The life flight meant that the victim had taken a turn for the worse.

She arrived as a woman was being whisked by on a stretcher to the helicopter and scanned the scene. Her eyes were drawn to the little girl sitting in the corner of the porch, her knees drawn to her chest, trembling. Nodding to her partner, Detective Joey Covington, she headed toward the little victim.

Squatting next to the girl, she started talking. "Hey there, my

name is Teagan; what's your name?" she asked, placing her hand on the girl's back.

The child, who couldn't be more than eight, looked up at her, her eyes red and swollen from crying. "Elizabeth," she whispered.

"How old are you, Elizabeth?"

"Seven and a half," she answered.

Teagan nodded. As part of her training to become a Special Victims Detective, she had taken several classes on how to speak to children. Trauma informed care was extremely important, and looking around her at the scene, Teagan knew the girl was traumatized. She sat, silently, next to the girl, her arm draped around her shoulders for a few seconds, simply comforting her with her presence. Feeling the coolness of her skin, she studied her. Her hair had been braided in two very pretty French braids down each side of her head, and she was wearing clean red and black ladybug pajamas. She was clean and well fed, cared for.

"Are you cold?" Teagan removed her coat and draped it over her, the girl's lightweight pajamas no match for the bitter late November wind.

"Okay, Elizabeth, it's time to go," a woman said as she approached them on the porch. Teagan recognized Maria, one of her favorite state caseworkers.

"Maria."

"Teagan."

"Where are you headed?" There were a multitude of places Maria could be taking the girl.

"Hospital. Family local, trying to reach Grandma."

"Ah. Siblings?"

"Two, already in the car. Elizabeth is the oldest, aren't you, sweetheart?" Maria knelt next to them.

"Elizabeth, can you go with my friend now? She is going to

take you to be with your mom," Teagan said gently to the girl. Elizabeth nodded her head.

"I'm the oldest. Mom says it is my job to take care of them, keep them safe." Teagan saw the familiar glint of determination in the girl's eyes. She watched her rise, press her shoulders back and, taking Maria's hand, walked toward her car. She was much too young to be dealing with this amount of trauma.

Pushing herself to standing, Teagan looked around once more. Joey was talking to a woman with a small dog on a leash who must be a witness. Her sight fell on a concerning scene. Two young patrolmen had the perpetrator standing between them. They were talking to him as if they were old friends. What in the ever-living hell was going on? Why wasn't he in cuffs? Teagan stomped toward them, knowing her face would dress them down before she opened her mouth. It always did. Two steps away from reaching them, and the suspect took off.

"Where do you think you are going, asshole?" Teagan yelled at the six foot, two-hundred-pound man running down the sidewalk, before taking off after him.

"Fuck!" Joey yelled as he joined the chase.

Teagan got to him first, diving for his knees and taking him down with one textbook tackle. She struggled with him on the ground for a moment, dodging punches until his elbow hit her right in the eye. Adrenaline pulsing through her veins, Teagan let out a growl of frustration, twisted from underneath him, and pushing her knee into the small of his back, she pulled her Taser and pressed it between his shoulder blades.

"Resist, and I will shoot." She knew he wouldn't be able to differentiate between the Taser and her weapon.

"I didn't do anything," he said. Teagan laughed.

"Do you know how many times I've heard that?"

"Fuck you, bitch," the large man growled under her much smaller frame.

"I bet you are itching to hit me, like you did your wife, aren't you? You want to slam your fist right into my face and hear the bones crush under it, just like you did to her."

"Fuck right, I do!" His face turned red, a thick vein becoming visible across his forehead.

"You don't like being bested by a woman, do you? You can't stand it." He started to struggle under her. "Stop struggling, or I *will* shoot!"

"You're next, bitch. My lawyers will have me out by lunch, and then I'm coming for you."

"You can sure try. Unlike your wife, I am always armed, and I fight back. You wouldn't know what to do with a woman who fought back, would you? You only prey on defenseless women because you are a coward, little boy."

"Little boy? Who are you calling a little boy? I'll show you how much of a man I am when I am riding you like the whore you are."

"Shut your mouth," Joey said, catching up and hearing the last few words. Pulling out his gun, he pointed it at the man on the ground. Teagan holstered her Taser and pulled the cuffs out, making quick work of securing his hands. Rising from her position, she glared at the man on the ground. There was a bit of satisfaction in seeing the blood coming from his nose and chin from where he had hit the concrete when she tackled him.

"Or what? You going to shoot me? I'm an unarmed man. Come on, big boy. Shoot me. I dare you."

"What? No threats for me? You can't handle going toe to toe with a real man," Joey replied.

"I'll tell you what I will do," the man sneered. "I'll let you watch me rape your bitch partner, here."

"Get this asshole out of my sight!" Teagan yelled to the approaching uniform police officers. Once they had him in a squad car, she turned to walk back to the crime scene. Walking past the uniformed officer, she reentered the modest, sunshine yellow rancher. The victim had been life-flighted to a level one trauma center, and her young children were transported to the hospital by another member of the team. Sighing deeply, trying to regain her courage, Teagan readied herself to go into the house.

"It looks like a war scene in here," Joey said, coming up behind her. Teagan pulled on a pair of gloves.

"He wasn't our normal, middle-class domestic violence perp," Teagan said. "He was out of control. He wasn't trying to hit her in a place that wouldn't show. He went out of his way to cause the most amount of injury."

"I hope she lives. Those babies need her," Joey said, and Teagan nodded her agreement. She peered at the picture of a happy family on the walls, father, mother, two children. Mom's hand was resting on her swollen stomach. Although she had a smile plastered on her face, her eyes told another story. Teagan wondered how long the father had been beating her.

"Detective, the victim's mother is here." The officer stuck his head in the front door.

"Don't let her in here," Teagan said. She had to protect the integrity of the crime scene, especially if, God forbid, the woman died. More so, Teagan didn't want the victim's mother to see the blood. There was so much blood.

"You've got this?" Joey was bent over, snapping photos with

his cell phone. CSI would eventually be on scene, but they would take their own notes and photos for their report.

"Yeah," Teagan agreed. She had the gentler bedside manner when dealing with victims. Joey, while a top-notch detective, was abrupt and could lack empathy with his straight forward, hold no punches, personality.

As she removed the gloves she had just put on, Teagan took a deep breath. This was one of her least favorite parts of her job. *At least, I don't have to give a death notification,* she thought. *Not yet, anyway.*

"What is her name?" she asked the officer who had told her of the woman's arrival.

"Um, shit."

"You didn't ask her name?" The look on his young face answered her. "Next time, ask for a name."

"I'm sorry," he started, but Teagan held her hand up.

"It's fine." Scanning the crowd of people that had gathered behind the yellow crime scene tape, Teagan's eyes rested on the older woman wringing her hands.

"Ma'am?" Teagan approached her. "Do you know the family?"

"I'm Janet's mother," the woman answered.

"Please, come with me." Teagan carefully guided her around the tape to a spot under a large tree.

"Please, what is going on?"

"First, can I get your name?"

"Oh. Margaret. My name's Margaret."

"My name is Teagan. I am a detective with the Special Victims Unit. Have you spoken to Janet today?"

"An hour or so ago. She called me in a state of panic. Craig was laid off from his job at the plant and was coming home. She

said he sounded upset and asked if I could come get the children. I rushed right over. I left the house so quickly that I forgot my phone there." That explained why Maria hadn't been able to reach her.

"Please," the distraught woman begged, "my daughter? My grandchildren?"

"Your grandchildren are okay; they are waiting for you at Legacy Hospital. I'm afraid Janet was life-flighted there about twenty minutes ago." Watching the woman carefully, Teagan was there to catch her when her knees buckled underneath her.

"Life-flighted?"

"I'll let the doctors give you a report on her condition as I am unaware of the injuries she sustained."

"That bastard," Margaret said. "Where is he?"

"He's in custody," Teagan reassured her. A shrill scream came from Margaret's mouth. Teagan turned, following her gaze to see the bagged, bloodied baseball bat being put into the back of the crime scene van. The color had drained from Margaret's face.

"What did he do? What did he do?"

"Margaret, look at me." Teagan turned her. "I know this is hard, but your daughter and your grandbabies need you. They need you to be strong and love on them. They just witnessed an extreme trauma and are alone at the hospital with strangers. Can you do that? Can you be strong for them?"

Margaret nodded.

"Is there someone we can call? Your husband? To come get your car and meet you there?"

"My husband is at my oldest son's house working on building a deck. Can you call him?" Teagan quickly got the information from her before turning and waving another officer over to them. "Officer Jones will transport you to the hospital."

Waiting until the woman was in the cruiser, Teagan pulled out her phone. "Mr. White? Hello, my name is Detective Teagan Smith, and I am calling about your daughter." She hated these conversations. The father was calmer than the mother had been, resolved almost. Teagan couldn't help but feel that he had been waiting for a phone call like this for a long time. Hanging up the phone, Teagan returned to the scene of the crime. An hour later, after running through the event several times, speaking with the crime scene investigators and the neighborhood witnesses, Joey and Teagan were finally getting ready to leave the scene, when their boss showed up.

"Smith, Covington." Lieutenant Downy nodded in their direction.

"Boss," Covington greeted while Teagan raised her hand in a small wave.

"Terrible situation this morning," Downy said.

"Truly," Covington agreed.

"You okay over there, Smith?" Downy asked.

"Yes, I'm fine." Teagan bent down, noticing a blood splatter in the grass. "Fuck."

"What?" Both men quickly walked toward her. She was putting a fresh pair of gloves on and picking up the pacifier from the grass. The blood-soaked pacifier. "She was holding the baby when he attacked her."

"Was the baby injured?" Downy asked.

"No, when patrol got here, the baby was in his crib. Everyone assumed the fight started inside once he got home." Following the tiny droplets of blood into the house, Teagan closed her eyes, imagining what had happened based on the evidence. "She came inside, put the baby down, called the children into the nursery and shut the door." She paused, catching her breath.

"All the while being beaten. Then she walked into the den, here." Teagan pointed to the bloodied handprint on the wall. "This is where he grabbed the bat." She nodded to the empty space next to the ball and glove. "He beat their mother in front of them and then used the son's baseball bat as a weapon." The three of them looked at each other in silence. The silence was broken by Downy's cell phone ringing. He stepped to the side to answer it. Joey scrubbed his hand over his face, looking at Teagan.

"Days like today, I hate our job, Teagan," he said.

"I do so much to try to prevent this from happening," Teagan said. "I volunteer at least twenty hours a month in education and prevention. Why? I don't think I am making a bit of difference."

"Don't say that. Between sitting on domestic violence court, mentoring, teaching, and everything else you do, you're making a difference. Imagine how many women have left their abusers because of you and how many perpetrators have gotten help." Joey said.

"I have some bad news," Downy said, rejoining them. "This case is no longer ours. Homicide is taking over."

"When?" Joey asked.

"Five minutes ago. She died on the table," Downy said quietly.

"Dammit!" Teagan's frustrated, strangled cry filled the room. She bit her inner lip to keep from crying. It wasn't professional. She didn't know why she cared so much, why she always cared. The victim was a stranger, and yet it was as if Teagan had lost a friend.

"What is wrong with your eye?" Downy's random question had Teagan's hand going to her face.

"There was a struggle with the perpetrator," Joey supplied.

"Why wasn't he in cuffs when you got here?" Downy asked.

"That is a good question, boss." Joey replied, his frustration evident in his tone. It wasn't the first time in recent months when patrol had done a crap job securing a scene or a suspect. "They were questioning him next to the house, and he ran." The look on Downy's face was of pure disgust. Teagan knew someone would be getting an earful.

"Why don't you go home and take a shower?" Downy asked Teagan. "Grab some lunch, and then come back to the office. You can type your notes and meet with the homicide detectives."

"I'm okay." Teagan shook off the feeling of dread in her gut and put on her tough face.

"It wasn't a suggestion," Downy said, "and put some ice on that eye."

"Sure thing."