

Suspicious Coincidences

Chapter One

Julie Cantrell was happy! Happier than she'd been in a long time. As she entered the detective squad room, she looked around. All four of the detective desks were vacant. She smiled when she looked at the one in the corner by the door. That one was her old desk.

She'd had that desk for the last seven years, ever since she'd made detective. That thought brought a smile to her face. She knew she'd worked her butt off to get where she was now.

As of today, she was the detective sergeant. That made her in charge of the detective squad for Stillwater PD. Wow! She'd finally made it.

In a small department like this one, there was only the commander and the chief above her now. Well actually, the other five sergeants all had seniority on her. But they were all patrol sergeants.

Finally, she let her eyes swing over to the sergeant's office, her new office. When she opened the door, she only saw one thing. There was a piece of paper taped to the otherwise clear desktop.

The note was positioned so that she had to go around the desk, as if she were sitting in the desk chair, to read it.

Her smile faded, and she clenched her fists as she read it. Then she read it again. It was a computer printout that said,

**“YOU DON'T DESERVE THIS OFFICE!
YOU WILL BE SORRY!”**

Now Julie was mad! Madder than she'd been in a long time.

She looked around the rest of her new office. When she'd come in, she'd immediately focused on the piece of paper that had been on the desktop. Now, she saw that every file drawer and every desk drawer had been pulled all the way out. Even the doors on the credenza behind the desk was wide open.

Her first thought was that she was glad she hadn't had anything in any of those drawers or in the credenza. Otherwise, it would be all over the floor now.

She looked back out through the glass that made up the top half of the front wall of her office. There was still no one out there. But someone had been. In fact, that someone had been right where she was now standing. They had invaded her privacy ... to threaten her.

Yes! This note was definitely a threat.

Whoever had placed that note on her desk intended to try to make her fail as sergeant.

No way! That was not going to happen. Now, she was more determined than ever to succeed.

She looked down at the set of keys that she didn't realize she'd been clenching in her hand. Pain hit her then. She had been squeezing the keys so tightly that they were gouging her palm.

She had thought about not locking her office door when she wasn't in it as a show of trust and approachability. But not now. No, not anymore. That would only give them more ways to harass her, to get to her.

She placed the note in the middle desk drawer. After closing it, she began closing all the drawers and cabinets with an angry slam of each one.

Finally, she sat, almost fell, in her desk chair and stared out into the still empty squad room.

After a few minutes, she blew out a loud sigh. "Well, I've got a job to do, no matter who thinks I shouldn't have it, or that I can't do it. I'll show them, I'm going to do it better than it's ever been done before."

She jumped up, went out to her old desk, and started carrying her things from there back into her new office.

She hadn't had a chance to do this earlier since her promotion wasn't effective until today. It had to be May first, even though it fell on a Thursday. Well, it looked like that was the way they were going to be doing things from now on at Stillwater PD.

Their new chief, Casey Ryan kept saying that they would do nothing before it's time. She laughed softly to herself. She knew he'd borrowed that phrase from some commercial she'd heard years ago.

She had finally finished carrying all her things from her old desk into the office when her desk phone rang. It was the intercom.

When she answered it, Commander Dave Phillips said, "Hey Julie, somehow, I knew you'd be in early today."

She glanced up at the clock over her door and tried to control her breathing. It was still only six-thirty. What could he want this early?

She didn't need to be confronted with him right now. She needed to calm down first, before she faced anyone.

He continued, "Could you step over to my office for a minute? There are a few last-minute instructions that I'd like to give you."

She clenched her jaw tight as she hung up the phone and grabbed her satchel. From her new office to the commander's office in the opposite corner of the station was more than just a step.

On the way over there, Julie searched her mind for what the commander could possibly have to say to her. She had spent several hours

with him and the chief yesterday. Surely, they'd gone over everything she needed to know to start her new job as the detective sergeant.

That thought brought a smile to her face, finally. Now she was going to be able to do things the way she always thought they should be done. Great!

As she walked, she thought about the fact that there were only four detectives and a sergeant in the whole squad. That reminded her that no one had told her yet who the new detective to replace her would be. Well, now Phillips might finally get around to telling her.

She didn't look forward to commanding four men. Worse yet. She knew that at least one of them didn't want her to be commanding him.

The front office was empty as she passed through. There were a few officers in the patrol squad room but they all ignored her. That was good since she didn't know if any of them approved of her being the new detective sergeant. She didn't think many of them did either.

When she reached the commander's open door, she knocked on the facing. He called out for her to come in, so she stepped into the office.

"Good morning Julie. Have a seat."

He gestured at the guest chairs in front of his large desk which was twice as big as her new one. But she almost smiled when she thought that her new desk was much larger than her old one.

She chased those foolish thoughts out of her mind and tried to ready herself for whatever the commander wanted to tell her. She had to think positive.

* * *

Julie sat and looked up at the tall man with a shaved head. She'd known Dave Phillips ever since she joined the force twelve years before. He'd been a training officer back then and had been one of her trainers. He'd recently been promoted from Detective Sergeant to Commander. When the old chief retired, the old commander did too when he didn't make chief.

The city council had gone outside the department to hire Casey Ryan as the new chief. There were quite a few who had been surprised or even upset. She sure hoped things would start to settle down now.

Julie wasn't sure what kind of a chief Ryan was going to be. He'd only been there since the first of April and she'd had very little to do with him until she had to go through a series of interviews by him, Commander

Phillips, and several city council members as well as the mayor, to get the detective sergeant position.

“Well, Julie. Are you ready?”

She tried to smile but still wasn’t sure where he was going to go with this meeting. She had a strong feeling that he had wanted Lamar Freeman to replace him as detective sergeant. She also had a feeling that the only reason she’d gotten the promotion was because she was female. All five of the other sergeants were men. That didn’t sit very well with her ... never had.

She was not one of those women who wanted any position just because she was a woman. She wanted to feel as if she’d earned everything she ever got.

She turned her attention back to Phillips when he spoke again.

“The main reason I wanted to see you this morning is to introduce you to your new detective.”

Gee! He sure was dragging this out. She knew that there had been quite a few applicants for the position but no one except the chief and the commander knew who they had chosen ... yet.

Phillips squirmed a little in his chair. She knew he had to be having trouble sitting still behind his desk. He was one of those people who liked to be up and moving all the time. She should know him quite well. After all, he’d been her detective sergeant for the last seven years.

He didn’t speak again for a long moment, but his eyes were on the open doorway behind her. Finally, when he stood, Julie turned to see Helen Wright standing there. Helen had been one of the officers that Julie knew had applied for the detective position.

She was surprised to see Helen. Could she be the new detective?

No! They wouldn’t have two women in a detective squad with only five slots. Would they? But Helen was dressed in black slacks and a white shirt, just like Julie was. Her badge and gun were on her belt, just like Julie’s. Her eyes went straight to the badge. It was still silver.

When Julie finally turned back to Phillips, he announced, “Detective Sergeant Julie Cantrell, I’m sure you know Officer Helen Wright.”

He smiled before saying, “But now it’s Detective Helen Wright.”

Julie stood quickly and stuck out her hand, which Helen grabbed with a tentative smile.

“Welcome to the detective squad, Helen.”

Helen gave her a big smile. “I’ve been looking forward to this for a long time Sergeant Cantrell.”

Julie could tell from that smile and Helen’s words that the two of them were going to get along fine. She’d worked with Helen when Helen

had spent three months in the detective squad several years ago. She'd thought then that Helen would make a good detective.

They were all still standing, and Phillips cleared his throat. "If the two of you will have a seat, there are a few things I'd like to go over with you before you get started on your new jobs."

Once they were seated, Phillips blew out a noisy sigh. "I don't think that I need to tell either one of you that you're going to have a tough time of it from now on."

They both remained silent, staring back at him. He looked directly at Helen. "There were five other officers who applied for this detective slot."

His expression softened. "I don't think any of them are going to be all that pleased that you got it. They all feel that they deserve it more than you do."

The commander stared at Helen as if he expected her to make some sort of comment.

Julie felt sorry for Helen. She sure didn't know what she would have said in the same situation.

Helen took a breath and Julie was proud of her when she looked him in the eye. "I appreciate it that you and the chief felt that I deserve this promotion, Sir. I will do my very best to make sure that you never regret that decision."

Phillips nodded as if in approval.

After a long pause, he turned his gaze on Julie. "Sergeant. There was only one other qualified candidate here at SPD that applied for your new position."

She knew he wasn't ready for her to comment yet, so she remained silent and waited.

"I'm sure you know who that person was and I'm also sure that you know he is not going to be happy that he didn't get it."

Julie still didn't think she was expected to speak yet.

"I have to admit that on paper, he was more qualified than you for the sergeant slot."

Julie's stomach fell as he let that statement hang for a long moment. "But ... the chief and I both feel that you are better suited for leadership and that's why you got the promotion and he didn't. Don't let anyone say that you got it because we needed a female sergeant."

He was looking at her expectantly and she knew he expected a comment now.

"Thank you, Sir. And as Detective Wright just said, I will do my best to see that neither you nor the chief will ever regret that decision."

“Good. That’s good sergeant. But.” He held up a hand. “I think you also know that he will probably do everything he can do to make you look bad.”

She didn’t know what to say, so she didn’t say anything.

“I will say this to both of you right now. You will both have a rough go of it, not only from that certain detective but from a lot more of the people around here too.”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Regretfully, there is nothing I will be able to do to help either one of you. That is, unless someone actually does something that is clearly against department regulations.”

He stood then so Julie and Helen both did too.

“So. To put it bluntly, you’re on your own, both of you.”

When neither one spoke, he leaned against his desk. “Okay. Now, I’ll let you two go on over to the detective squad room and get started on your new jobs.”

He grinned down at them and stuck out his hand. “Good luck detectives.”

* * *

As soon as Julie and Helen made their way out of the commander’s office, Helen started to speak but Julie held up a hand to stop her and gestured around the patrol squad room they were passing through. The desks were all full and every eye was on them. She spoke softly, “Let’s wait ‘til we get to my office before we talk.”

With that, they continued on through the patrol squad room. Next, they went through the front office. The receptionist, clerks, and the chief’s admin all smiled at them as they walked past.

Finally, they were inside the detective squad room. It was now after seven and the other three detectives were at their desks but none of the men looked up when the women came in.

Julie motioned to her old desk with a smile on her face. “That will be your desk. Why don’t you put your things over there for now and come into the office, so we can get started?”

Helen took the box she’d been carrying over to the desk while Julie went into her office and sat behind her desk.

As Helen came in, Julie motioned for her to close the door. Helen then took a seat in front of the desk with a smile and an expectant look on her expressive face.

Once Helen was situated, Julie looked out into the open squad room. The other three detectives were all leaning over their desks, as if they were hard at work.

But Julie knew better. One of them had put that note on her desk and she was sure that the other two saw him do it or at least knew that he did it. They were all trying to look a little too innocent.

Well, she knew for sure that one of them wasn't and she was sure she knew which one it was. Lamar Freeman! That's who! He'd wanted the promotion to detective sergeant and had made it very clear that he felt that he deserved it. But, Julie knew that she deserved it more. No matter what the note had said.

What the commander had said about her leadership ability made her feel good. She was going to prove that, not only to the chief and commander, but to the whole department in the process.

She had a job to do whether anyone around here thought she deserved it or not.

She took a good look at Helen and realized that the other woman was giving her the same kind of once-over look.

Finally, Helen made a sound somewhat like a snort. "I've heard a lot of talk around the station, ever since they announced that you'd made detective sergeant."

Julie tried to laugh but wasn't very successful. "Let me guess. They're all saying that the only reason I made it was because they needed a female sergeant."

Helen nodded her head. "Yep. Just you wait 'til they hear that I made detective." She did snort that time. "And from the looks we were getting over in patrol, I'd say that they all just figured it out."

When Julie didn't respond to that, Helen raised her chin almost defiantly. "Well, all I gotta say is welcome to my world. You're a token now too."

When Julie gave her a strange look, Helen shrugged her shoulders. "I'm the department's token black person. I know the only reason I got hired originally was, so they could fill two slots at the same time, a woman and a black person."

She grinned at Julie. "Now, you're their token female sergeant."

Julie didn't know what to say. She was a little surprised at how direct Helen was being. She'd been around the other woman some over the years but had never really gotten to know her all that well. Helen had joined the force about the time that Julie made detective, so they hadn't worked together much.

She gave Helen a tentative smile. She had a feeling a lot more things were about to change.

Helen spoke up then as if she'd read Julie's mind. "Don't you think the two of us ought to band together to keep those guys from getting the best of us?"

Julie smiled for the first time. As she thought about it, she'd always wondered if Helen might be a fun person to get to know. Now, she looked into those dark eyes. "Yes, I think that would be a good idea ... under the circumstances of course."

When Helen only grinned back at her, Julie decided to get down to business.

"Okay, Helen. I remember a few years ago when you did your three-month stint in this squad. What did you think about things here then?"

Helen gave her a toothy smile. "I liked it so much that I just couldn't wait until I had my five years in and could apply for a vacancy here."

"But you've been with the department longer than that haven't you?"

"Yep. It'll be eight years next month. It just took a little longer than I'd hoped to finally make detective."

Julie knew she'd put off having her first squad meeting for as long as she dared. She was sure that at least Lamar Freeman would give her a hard time. She also figured that his buddy, Tom Evans would too, if nothing else but to support Freeman.

She wasn't too sure about the third detective, Alonso Morales. He usually spent most of his time with the Hispanic people in the area. He never said much and basically just went about his job rather methodically. That could be good and ... maybe not so good.

Well, she couldn't put it off any longer. She gave Helen a determined look. "Are you ready to face those guys out there? We need to start off with a squad meeting. They need to know how I plan for things to go from now on."

Helen giggled and stood. "I'd like to know that too."

Julie laughed with her but grew serious quickly. "I have a feeling that you already have a pretty good idea."

"I think you're right about that."

Then Julie remembered the note that was now in her middle desk drawer. She made a quick decision as she pulled the drawer open a little and pulled out the note.

When she slid it across the desktop, she gave Helen a warning look. "Don't pick this up or even let them see you reading it."

Helen read it and uttered a mild curse word. "Oops. Sorry."

Julie had to laugh at that. "That's okay. I had very much the same reaction when I saw it taped to my desktop this morning."

As Julie placed the note back in the drawer and closed it, Helen looked her in the eye. "I'm not going to let them do this to you."

"Thank you."

They stared into each other's eyes for a moment longer then Julie broke the silence. "I thought you needed to know what we're up against here."

Helen nodded and firmed her jaw. "Thank you."

Julie walked around her desk. "Let's go get this over with."

* * *

They stepped out of Julie's office and went over to the round table in the center of the room. Julie looked over to the other side of the room where Freeman and Evans had their desks.

"Okay, let's get things started this morning with a short squad meeting."

She then turned toward Alonso's desk on her left. He was already up and starting to move toward the table. When she looked back at Freeman and Evans, she knew she was going to have trouble. Neither one had moved or even acknowledged her in any way.

Helen and Alonso were already sitting at the table. Rather than say anything else, Julie stepped over there and pulled out a chair between them.

Once seated, Julie laid a folder on the table that held her notes. She waited a full minute before speaking again.

"Either you two join us or go out that door right now."

Freeman stood then, and Evans quickly followed suit.

Julie fought a smile. "But if you go out that door now you won't be coming back anytime soon. I will immediately file insubordination charges against both of you."

She watched them carefully. Evans seemed nervous and kept giving Freeman a look that seemed to be pleading with him to do what she said.

Freeman ignored both Julie and Evans for a long moment. Finally, he made his way slowly over to the table and sat across from Julie. Evans quickly did the same.

As far as meetings go, it didn't turn out exactly the way Julie had planned it. She did all the talking and no one else, including Helen, said more than a word or two. Even then, they only answered questions that Julie directed at them.

As soon as the meeting was over, the other three detectives left the room. She could only hope that they were leaving to work on cases. Alonso probably was, but she had her doubts about Freeman and Evans.

Oh well. She couldn't do anything about it yet. Not until, as Commander Phillips had said, they go against a department regulation. She knew they'd push her as far as they could, just short of that. That was exactly what they had done before the meeting.

She went into her office and wasn't surprised to see Helen following her.

"Why don't you close the door? They might come back."

Julie wasn't sure what else they needed to discuss and was about to tell Helen that when there was a knock on her door. She looked up to see one of the patrol sergeants, Don Tipton.

He opened the door and gave Julie an apologetic look. "Got a new burglary for you."

He stepped into the room and placed a complaint form on her desk.

She glanced at the report and was somewhat surprised that he was giving it to them so quickly. Usually, on a new case like this, patrol would keep the routine ones. There must be something about this one to make it stand out.

Then she saw the address and sighed loudly. "Okay, Don. I can see why you're giving it to us so quick."

He laughed as he was going back out the door. "Yeah, plenty of bigwigs live in that neighborhood. But the real clincher is that the woman is Mary Franklin's sister and she made sure we knew that little fact too. Good luck with her."

With that, he was gone.

Well, that was all she needed. A high-profile case right off the bat and the sister of a councilwoman at that. Great!

Helen spoke up then. "Who's Mary Franklin?"

Julie laughed. "I take it you don't follow local politics very closely."

"No Ma'am. I stay as far away from that stuff as I can get."

"She's a city councilwoman, technically one of our bosses."

"Oh-kay. Say no more."

Julie stood and smoothed her slacks. "I guess we'd better get up there and see what we can find out. I sure don't like the feel of this one. We had a rash of burglaries in that area a few years ago. It was really hard to crack even though most of those houses have alarm systems."

As they were going past dispatch, Julie turned to Helen. "Why don't you step in there and tell them where we're going. I'll be right back. I need to talk to Charlotte for a minute."

While Helen went inside the dispatch room, Julie went up to the front office. The chief's administrative assistant, Charlotte was a nice middle-aged woman whom Julie liked.

She was watching Julie as she approached. "Oh Julie. I'm glad you stopped by. I'm so excited to see you get this promotion. Congratulations again."

"Thank you, Charlotte. Do you have the new badges and IDs yet for Helen and me?"

Charlotte, frowned and looked toward the front door. "No, the badges haven't come in and the chief doesn't want me to give out the IDs without the badges. But our UPS delivery hasn't come yet, and they're supposed to be on it."

Just as Charlotte spoke, the receptionist buzzed the front door open and called out, "UPS coming in."

Charlotte laughed. "There they are now."

Julie stood by while one of the clerks signed for four packages and then handed one of them to Charlotte.

By then, Helen had joined them, and Charlotte gave each of them their new badges and IDs. She took their old ones and placed them in a desk drawer.

"Well, now you're official. Congratulations to both of you. I know you deserve it."

They thanked Charlotte and headed for the back door, clipping their new badges on their belts. Helen's new badge was gold and had Detective on it instead of Officer. Julie's new badge, while still gold, had Detective Sergeant on it instead of Detective.

Helen giggled making Julie smile. "She got that right for sure. Now we're official and nobody can stop us."

Julie kept smiling but didn't say anything. She sure hoped Helen was right. They left the building and stepped into the compound at the rear.