

Twenty-Five Years Ago Today

By Stacy Juba

www.stacyjuba.com

Chapter 1

Kris Langley stared at the bright newsprint lit up on the microfilm reader. The top headline leaped off page one. “Missing Barmaid Murdered.” She squinted over the story of Diana Ferguson, a young woman found bludgeoned to death in the woods. In little over a week, it would be the twenty-fifth anniversary. A quarter of a century ago, Diana must've dressed and driven out as always. An evening like any other. By the end of the night, she was dead, her life extinguished like the other victims on fate's hit list.

Most people had forgotten Diana by now. In the black and white yearbook photograph, she didn't smile. Straight dark hair curtained her serious oval face. Diana had her arms crossed on a table, slender fingers too delicate to protect her from a killer.

Kris flipped to a blank page in her notebook, scribbled “Diana Ferguson” and stopped writing. Resurrecting the tragedy in her “25 and 50 Years Ago Today” column would catch readers’ attention, but it seemed inappropriate.

She jumped as Dex Wagner, the seventy-year-old editor-in-chief of the *Fremont Daily News*, slapped a rolled-up newspaper against someone’s desk. “Jacqueline, why the hell didn’t we have this theater group feature? The Fremont Community Players are in our own backyard.”

Suppressing a grin, Kris swung around in her seat. She could use a distraction right about now. Dex waved the competition paper in the air, red circles and slashes marking half the page. In her three weeks as editorial assistant, Kris had enjoyed Dex’s tantrums. So far, none had been directed at her.

Managing Editor Jacqueline McCormack tossed back her blonde ponytail, gathered in a tan fabric scrunchie. She owned a world class selection of ponytail holders that complemented her designer wardrobe. Kris couldn't help thinking of her as a thirty-five-year-old cheerleader. Corporate Barbie.

“We ran a story last week in our entertainment section,” Jacqueline said. “They got the idea from us. Gosh, Dex, are you trying to blind me with that underlining?”

Dex paced to the oak bookshelves and back to Jacqueline's neat desk. His stomach bulged under a rumpled gray suit and his wrists hung out of jacket sleeves a couple inches too short. “I think we missed it.”

“Trust me,” Jacqueline said. “I put a headline on it myself. You *do* read beyond the front, don’t you, Dex?”

Grumbling under his breath, Dex opened *The Greater Remington Mirror*, a large daily that covered the ten towns in their readership area and more. Kris saw another column ballooned in red marker.

He pressed his index finger against the lead paragraph, his penguin-patterned tie flapping as he stooped forward. “What about the stabbing of that Miles kid? We should be talking to his family and we haven't even contacted them. For Christ's sake, do I have to keep track of everything?”

"Relax, I'm working on that," Bruce Patrick, the police and court reporter, said from the doorway. He swaggered over and hopped onto the edge of Jacqueline's desk.

"I just got off the phone," he said. "The parents are basket cases, but the siblings said I could come by tonight. And it's an exclusive."

A 19-year-old college student had murdered his classmate, Scott Miles, in a fight that went too far. Kris had edited the obit, stomach queasy as she cut "beloved son and brother" out of the text. Dex insisted such phrases only belonged in paid death notices.

Unlike the Diana Ferguson case, there was no mystery to this homicide. Many young people had witnessed the brawl, which started over a girl. It had lingered in her memory, though, a teenage boy who went to a party and left dead in an ambulance. Another individual singled out by fate, never suspecting he had no future. He picked the wrong girl. For that, he died.

Kris shuddered despite the heat in the newsroom. The family members must feel like their world had spun out of control. She remembered the grieving process well: walking around as if in warm Jell-O, arms and legs heavy, head difficult to hold up, and crying until numbness froze the tears. Forgetting had disturbed her the most, slipping away into the calm relief of sleep, then jolting awake in cold horror.

Jacqueline's ponytail bounced in glee. "They'll talk?" She turned to Bruce. "Terrific. Have you assigned a photographer?"

Bruce rested his notebook on his thigh. "You bet. I didn't mention the photos, but once we're there, I'm sure they'll go along with it."

"Get two or three color shots for the front," Jacqueline said, a lilt in her voice.

Kris abandoned her quiet corner of the newsroom and strode over to the group. Bruce and Jacqueline had never suffered tragedy in their lives, or they wouldn't act so blasé.

No one noticed Kris's presence. She spoke quickly, before she lost her nerve. "I know you want a good story, but have a little sympathy. Sending a photographer unannounced would be taking advantage of these poor people."

Her co-workers regarded her with blank expressions.

"Why?" Bruce asked. "The kids are of age. It's not like we're exploiting pre-schoolers."

"If they're inviting a reporter into their home, they should realize we intend to play up the story," Jacqueline said.

"They'll be emotional," Kris said. "A photographer will make them feel worse. The least you could do is prepare them."

Jacqueline folded her arms, covering a horizontal row of gold buttons on her biscuit-colored blazer. "I'm sure they expect it, but Bruce was smart in setting it up this way. If they have doubts, they'll be more likely to say yes once our staff has had a chance to develop a rapport. If the pictures bother them, the family can always decline."

"They'll feel pressured," Kris said. "They have enough to deal with right now. You've got your exclusive. Why can't you just run photos of the boy who died?"

"Kris, this is our job, not yours." Coldness had replaced Jacqueline's lilt. "This paper tells it like it is. If you can't accept that, then maybe you shouldn't work in a newsroom."

"Maybe you should treat your sources like human beings."

"Why don't you stay out of things that don't concern you? As I recall, you have

no news experience. I'm not even sure why you were hired in the first place.” Jacqueline glared at Dex.

They all knew the answer to that. The previous editorial assistant had quit on Jacqueline's vacation. Dex grew impatient and placed a classified ad. Kris admitted she preferred the dreaded four-to-midnight shift, and he hired her on the spot. His judgment wasn't good enough for Jacqueline, who had reminded him of the three-month probation for all employees.

Dex's shaggy salt and pepper eyebrows curled downward. “Kris does fine. She's bright and talented. Give her a chance to learn.” He glowered at Bruce. “Next time you're working on a hot story, check with me.”

He stalked to his desk, leaving the others gaping after him. Her neck and shoulder muscles tense, Kris released a deep breath. She needed this job. Like it or not, she was stuck working with Barbie. “Sorry if I offended you, Jacqueline. I just wanted to give you another perspective.”

Jacqueline ignored her and gestured to Bruce. “Come on, let's discuss tomorrow's budget.”

He snapped to attention and followed her into the conference room. Jacqueline carried herself with the posture of a model, her back straight and an upward tilt to her chin. Jacqueline and her budget. Kris had once asked Dex if the paper was in okay shape, money-wise. She'd assumed Jacqueline was obsessed with the editorial department's finances. Dex just laughed and said, “That's news lingo for story line-up.”

As others in the newsroom headed out, Kris drifted back to the microfilm machine and her research. Her editors demanded eight historical facts per issue. Dex told her to play up light local fluff as people liked seeing their names in print, while Jacqueline said to emphasize hard news. Kris found herself trying to please them both.

At first, she had enjoyed exploring the older editions. Fifty years ago, chunky blocks of type took up the front page. Most articles came over the wire and staff-written pieces had no bylines. Dex had explained how reporters worked for “the paper” in those days, not for the recognition. But now if Kris spent too much time on the machine, the scrolling of the film gave her motion sickness. The focus lever didn't work right, so she'd press her finger over the tape, holding it in place.

Frowning, Kris stared at the bold black headline splashed above the subhead “Body Found In Fremont State Woods.” For the second time, she skimmed the article about Diana Ferguson.