

Thea Kozak is ...

“... a terrific, in-your-face, stand-up gal.... Stephanie Plum and Thea Kozak have a lot to say to each other.”

Janet Evanovich

“... a great character; she has a thoroughly real set of strengths and weaknesses; she is hell-bent on discovering the truth, even while she knows—just as well as the reader—that truth often comes at considerable personal cost.”

Mystery News

“... an unstoppable heroine who's refreshingly honest and genuine.”

Booklist

“... superbly witty and decidedly feisty.”

Amazon.com

Thea Kozak is back!

Stalking Death **by Kate Flora**

Coming September 2006 from
The Mystery Company
an imprint of Crum Creek Press!



Turn the page for a preview ...

Thea Kozak mysteries by Kate Flora:

Chosen for Death

Death in a Funhouse Mirror

Death at the Wheel

An Educated Death

Death in Paradise

Liberty or Death

Stalking Death

Also by Kate Flora, writing as Katharine Clark:

Steal Away

Stalking Death

Kate Flora

CRUM CREEK PRESS
The Mystery Company
Carmel, Indiana

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

STALKING DEATH

Copyright © 2006 by Kate Clark Flora

ISBN: 1-932325-06-9

First edition: September 2006

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form.

Crum Creek Press / The Mystery Company
484 East Carmel Drive #378
Carmel, IN 46032

www.crumcreekpress.com

Chapter One

I raised the heavy gun, trying not to flinch in anticipation of what was coming: the loud explosion and flash of fire, the ejected shell flying at me, the bone-jolting kick. I steadied it in two hands and tried to line up the site and the target. Andre had called it a bottle target. It didn't look like a bottle. It looked a bowling pin or one of Al Capp's shmoos.

Andre hovered behind me, a big, reassuring bulk. Not quite touching me, but close enough to keep me from running away. If he hadn't been there, I would have set the square, ugly weapon he'd loaded down on the counter, very carefully, and run like a gazelle out of this basement room, darkened with the lead and powder of thousands of explosions, out of the chilly air heavy with the brimstone scent of exploded gunpowder, and into the glorious brightness of a September day.

Andre was right. I had to push myself through this. This was part of my recovery. Last summer, I'd pointed a gun at a fellow human being and pulled the trigger. I hadn't touched a gun since.

He said it was like remounting after falling off a horse, but I'd fallen off horses before. Falling off a horse isn't premeditated. It happens so fast you're on the ground before you know what's hit you and you have to get right back on or you walk home. I've never heard of anyone with recurring nightmares from falling off a horse. Shooting someone, even when it's necessary, is different. You have to bring the gun. Load the gun. Release the safety. Point, aim, squeeze, and watch the other guy fall. When you put the gun down, you never want to see it again.

But I was Thea Kozak, recovering nice girl. Someone who genuinely believed that when the going got tough, the tough got going and that if I backed down, the girls and women coming behind me also lost ground.

Enough, Kozak. Time to get down to it.

I had ear protection. Safety glasses. I had Andre only inches away. His voice was soft. “Relax, Thea. Breathe in. Breathe out. And squeeze.” He straightened my body, turning me slightly. *Okay*, I thought. *I can do this. I have to do this.* Sensing my determination with that uncanny ability to read body language that some cops have, Andre stepped back.

I breathed in, breathed out, sighted down the barrel, and then I wasn’t looking at a shmoo. I was watching two men struggling to carry a third across a dark field while a fourth man they couldn’t see raised his gun and aimed at them.

“No way,” I muttered. “No way.”

I steadied my gun.

Always aim for center mass. I breathed in, breathed out, slowly increased the pressure on the trigger, and shot the shmoo, eight times, right in its generous little chest. Then I put the gun on the counter and walked out.

Driving home, Andre said, “I know that was hard for you. You were great.” He slid one hand off the wheel onto my thigh. “I was thinking of a cheeseburger, but how about a hat trick?”

A hat trick was one of those sports concepts I’d never grasped. All I knew was it was fun. Dash in the front door, shed our clothes, and make love on the soft living room rug. Move to the bedroom for round two. Then once more in the shower. This was my reward for being brave at the shooting range. We’d finished round two and were lying side-by-side, staring up at the patterns of light on the ceiling, his strong thigh against mine, when the phone rang.

“Don’t answer it,” Andre said. “You’re busy.”

But it was fall, the beginning of the most intense part of my working year. I’m a partner in an educational consulting firm,

EDGE Consulting, and when the independent schools which are our bread and butter geared up for the fall term, so did we. Weekends were a big time for problems, and problems were my specialty. I grabbed the receiver.

“Sorry. I was in the office when the phone rang. St. Matthews has a problem...” My partner, Suzanne. Her voice was light, but I read overtones of seriousness. Like me, and despite a husband and small child, Suzanne was a workaholic. “How’d it go today?” she asked. “Shoot off any toes?”

“Still got nine. That should be enough.”

“Seriously. You got through it okay?”

“Tough as a bowl of Jell-o.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. Sometimes that guy pushes you too hard.”

Andre pushed himself up on the pillows. “Suzanne?” I nodded. “Tell her you’re busy.”

“Andre says to tell you I’m busy.”

“Oh.” Her voice dropped a register. “Am I getting you at a bad time?”

She knew our penchant for midday quickies too well. “A good time, actually. We’re between rounds. What’s up?”

I couldn’t tell whether her sigh was prompted by St. Matthews or me. Lately, she’d been sighing a lot. “St. Matthews has a problem student. Or student problem, depending on how the facts turn out. The kind of thing that could blow up in their faces if it’s not handled right. What’s your Monday look like?”

It was the application season. No time for a headline-grabbing scandal if St. Matthews was to attract the applicants they wanted. “Hold on.” I crossed to my briefcase and fished out my PDA. PDAs and cell phones. Two disagreeable accessories that had become necessities. My latest “get rich quick” fantasy was a line of colorful cowgirl belts like little girls wore in the 50’s, with dual holsters for PDAs and cell phones. Instead of rows of little wooden bullets, the belts could have batteries. I’d make ‘em in purple leather and faux cowhide and glittering

plastic, become a hot product millionairess and retire.

I checked my schedule. "I'm chained to my desk, writing proposals."

"Not any more, you aren't." Her firm voice reminded me I was too busy for get rich quick. Still caught up in get rich slow. "You're going on a road trip..."

I looked over at Andre. I've always been a slave of duty and a glutton for work. Six months ago, if a school had called, I would have been out the door in a flash, pleased that I'd become well-enough established as a trouble shooter in the private school world to be the one they called. Now I hesitated. If St. Matthews' problem was big, it could mean an overnight. I hadn't spent a night away from Andre since the wedding. Having come so close to losing him, I didn't like Andre more than an arm's length away, and I hated being alone with my dreams.

"They give you a rundown?"

She made an affirmative noise. "It's bad, Thea. Classic case where they should have called us sooner. You know the headmaster, Todd Chambers. He's neither an incompetent nor a nincompoop. In this case, it sounds like he's being a bit of both. In danger of really putting his foot in it..."

Chambers was young for a headmaster, only early forties, but his preppie veneer and stuffy manner were from an earlier generation. He was so clearly born to the private school world I could picture him as an infant in diaper and tweed sports jacket, pacifier and horn-rimmed glasses, drooling onto his bow tie as he waved a Princeton pennant from his perambulator. In fact, he *was* born to the private school world. His father had been a legendary headmaster who, over a twenty-five year stewardship, had taken a second-rate school and made it one of the best in the country.

Chambers had been the trustees' pick to replace a headmaster who'd been way too liberal, his mission to put a very traditional New England boarding school that had been slip-

ping towards progressive back on a more conservative track. Reportedly he was doing a good job, but the student body, having grown accustomed to laxity about dress code and other regulations, was testy and resentful. Some of the younger faculty had also resisted returning to a more authoritarian regime. Jackets and ties and all they signified were harder to phase in than out.

I pulled out a small reporter's notebook and a pen. Andre, giving up, folded his hands under his head and closed his eyes. He knew all about the call of duty. Just let the Maine State Police call for his services and he'd be gone before I could say SOP, his parting words some version of "Don't know when I'll be back. I'll call you." It might be one hour, or ten, or twenty-four, before I heard from him again. He wasn't plain old Andre Lemieux, the man of my dreams. He was Detective Andre Lemieux, a Maine State trooper, the man in the white hat. Although, of course, his hat wasn't white. Too good a target, white hats.

I shuddered and tried to concentrate on Suzanne. "You got his number?"

"I'm afraid so. Problem number 2002. Man about to have foot stuck in mouth."

"Could you be more specific?"

"It's all waiting on your desk, partner. My succinct notes on the nature of his problem. Minority scholarship student, athlete, loner, claims she's being stalked and has the whole community in a twitter. He says she's making it up. Doing it for attention. Or revenge."

She gave me a New Hampshire phone number. "He has a letter explaining the situation he wants to send to the parents. As a last minute thing, he wanted to run it by us. By me, actually, but I told him you were our crisis person. I didn't tell him I had to do a tea party."

She paused. "My psychic bones sense something fishy. Maybe a worried trustee in the background or more than he's

telling. He's waiting for your call."

I pictured Chambers, done up in tweed, sitting in a prim wing chair beside a shiny black phone, the dignity of his posture marred by the twisted leg, the toe of a polished brown wing-tip stuck between his lips. "If we've got the draft letter, then shouldn't a phone call should do it?" I was already pushing away thoughts of leaving.

"I think this needs the personal touch."

"You mean hand-holding? Is he nervous about this?"

"I was thinking more along of the lines of your having to sit on him," Suzanne said. "When you see the letter, you'll understand." There was a howl in the background, and a man's soothing voice. Her husband Paul comforting their son. "Call him, Thea. He's waiting...."

"It's Sunday. Doesn't he have a life?"

"You're a fine one to talk. You've worked plenty of weekends. This is boarding school, which is a seven-day-a-week operation, as you well know. Besides, he's young and ambitious, not like anyone we know, right? The school *is* his life...."

"Phooey," I muttered. "All right. I'll call him. But I hope he's not really sitting by the phone, 'cuz it's going to be a while." I looked at Andre and lowered one eye-lid in a lurid wink. "I've got some things I have to do first."

"Spare me the details," she said dryly, "I've got other things to do, too. Like mucking out the downstairs, removing one ton of baby detritus, and making things genteel and serene for an afternoon tea. New faculty today...."

"I may only have nine toes now, but I am not green with envy...."

"I didn't expect you would be."

She didn't sound mellow. Lately she rarely did. "This being a wife business is awfully demanding sometimes. You'll see."

Suzanne was very happily married but Paul's new job as headmaster had added the social obligations of being headmaster's wife to her already hectic life. We'd moved our

business to Maine to accommodate her, but she was finding there were a lot of other accommodations she had to make as well. Like fitting tea parties into her schedule. It was a good thing the female brain was adept at multi-tasking. A legacy of keeping the baby from falling in the fire while sweeping the cave while watching out for the saber-toothed tiger.

“Becoming Mrs. Detective Lemieux was the achievement of a lifelong dream,” I said. “Luckily, policemen don’t have tea parties. They have balls.” Suzanne made an exasperated sound. Andre grinned at me, tossed off the sheet, and headed for the bathroom. “I’ve gotta go. Mr. Detective is getting restless.”

“That’s what you get for choosing a man with appetites.”

“Is there another kind?” I spoke to an empty line. Suzanne had hung up and gone to police the parlor.

I pushed the buttons that would connect me with Todd Chambers. He answered so quickly it looked like he *had* been sitting by the phone. “Todd? It’s Thea Kozak, from EDGE. Suzanne Merritt says you have a problem?”

“Thanks for returning my call.” He expelled his breath with a sigh. “I’m afraid we do. I was hoping we could get together this evening. Don’t want to let any more time slip by on this one.”

There was a faint rustle as he raised a sleeve and checked his watch. I’m such a fine detective I can sort rustles into categories. Sniffs and snorts, too. “I figure what, two and a quarter, two and a half hours you could be here. Five-thirtyish?”

It was precisely that peremptory confidence which had made the trustees select him, but I didn’t have to jump when he said jump. I would jump when I was ready. “I could meet with you at 7:30.” He didn’t need to know what else was on my agenda. The fact that I wanted to get up close and personal with Andre and off-load some of the emotional baggage I’d acquired during my session at the range was my business.

“Seven-thirty?” His tone was on the cusp of protest, but he held back. “That would be fine. I’ve faxed some background

documents,” he said. “We’ve got a student who claims she’s been harassed. Stalked by someone leaving obscene pictures in her room. Our internal investigation says she’s doing it herself. Maybe for attention, maybe revenge. She hasn’t been happy here. Now she’s got other students stirred up, and that concern has spread to the parents. I need to put their minds at rest...I faxed a letter I want you to review.”

“Yes. Suzanne said it was at the office. I’ll go by and take a look at it. Maybe we can do this by phone.”

“I’d rather do this face-to-face, put you in the picture, maybe even have you speak with this girl... see if you can straighten her out...She needs to understand...” He stopped without finishing.

Straighten her out? I didn’t want to talk myself out of a job, but this wasn’t up my alley. The letter and related communication strategies, yes. Counseling a troubled student, no. “Isn’t that something one of your counselors should do? Or her advisor?”

“Well, you know adolescents. She’s blown this way out of proportion, says she doesn’t trust anyone here. I thought you might... that she might relate to you...I’m afraid we’ve... well, I’m afraid she feels alienated. We’re having trouble reaching her. We thought someone from the outside might help...”

As if my job were psychology and not PR. Troubleshooting. Admissions advice. Image counseling. I guess it all did involve psychology. Whatever the story was, it sounded like I could be walking into a nasty mess. A school community is like a small town. News travels fast and rumors get exploded like an enormous game of gossip. The parent community can be even deadlier. Once word of trouble gets out to them, it can spread coast-to-coast in a matter of hours. We live in an instant messaging world.

So probably he was right. I’d have to see the documents and get put in the picture. And we’d have to do this face-to-face. I

need to see his reactions to my suggestions, to get a read on him and the situation. When I got there, we could identify the best person to deal with an irate student. If she'd gotten to the point where she'd inflamed the campus, then they hadn't handled this girl well, nor, by extension, the rest of the students, especially the female half.

I was about to hang up when it occurred to me that a stalking complaint could have legal implications. "Have you run this by your lawyers?"

"Yes. They didn't see a problem."

That was good news. Many times, schools put their heads in the sand and refused to take the obvious steps. "Seven-thirty, then," I said, and wrote down his directions.

Andre was already in the shower, singing a ridiculous song to which he didn't know the words, bellowing snatches of song interspersed with bits of humming. I opened the door and stepped in. "I've got to go to New Hampshire tonight."

He twirled an imaginary mustache. "Not before I can work my way wiz you...."

I twirled my own mustache right back. "I thought I'd work my way with you...."

"Sounds like a plan." He dropped a hand on my thigh, worked its way up until it nestled against my body, and made a deep sound in his chest, somewhere between hunger and contentment.

Even as I savored the warmth, smiling with anticipation, another part of my mind was already racing ahead, working on the problem at St. Matthews.

Chapter Two

Andre lay on the bed like a male odalisque, artfully draped with a bit of sheet, watching me get ready to leave. He was reluctant to let me go. He didn't say anything, he wouldn't, it was just that by now we knew each other like the punchlines of old jokes. A word, a phrase, even a look could be shorthand for whole speeches. Sometimes, keying in to his moods was as simple as listening to him breathe.

"Don't try to drive back tonight if you're tired," he said. "Find a motel...." This from the man who would drive all night to be by my side if I needed him.

"I'll try to make it quick. You know I will."

"You're driving to New Hampshire to give this man a quickie?"

"Andre....."

"Yes, dear?" he said innocently.

I threw his clothes at him. "Get dressed, will you. I can't stand the temptation."

"I've married a woman who can't handle temptation?"

"Where you're concerned, you're damned right you are. It would be easier if you were fat or ugly. Or dressed." I grabbed a fistful of underwear and shoved it in the suitcase. My hands hurt. I wondered if there was a job-related injury called trigger-blister, if you could get carpal tunnel from steadying a firearm. I'm a big, strong woman but Macho Man had chosen a cannon for today's exercise instead of some sweet, ladylike Barbie-pink Smith & Wesson.

"Black lace underwear to sort out a confused headmaster?"

he said.

“Honey, darling, sweetie-pie,” I said, sticking out my chest, “a bra this big in hot pink looks like a pair of beach umbrellas. And I don’t much like white....”

He leaned back against the pillow, his hands behind his head, showing off his arm muscles, his chest muscles, his rock-hard abs. “I like big girls out of their underwear....”

“Not out on the public street you don’t. Not behind the wheel....”

“Good point,” he agreed, reaching for his tee-shirt. “At least, not when they’re you. Other girls....” He shrugged. “When I was a highway trooper, you wouldn’t believe the things I’d see. Walk up to a car to check some girl’s license and registration and she’d have her skirt up to here and her blouse unbuttoned down to there....” He demonstrated with suggestive motions of the sheet. “I’d just lower my eyes and look at away....”

“Oh, right....”

The phone rang. “It’s your mother,” he said, checking his watch.

She was calling to complain that we still hadn’t sent her wedding pictures, and I wasn’t in the mood for it. I had to get on the road. “Tell her I’m not here.”

He picked up the phone. “Hi, mom....”

I could tell he was getting an earful. Didn’t I understand that decent people didn’t work on Sunday. They played golf or visited their mothers. Dusted the dracena or taught manners to their almost perfect children. But I was not letting her upset me.

Andre murmured some soothing sounds and put down the phone. “Brace yourself,” he said. “She wants to know if we have any good news for her.”

She, with her own history of miscarriages, shouldn’t be hinting about pregnancy. I was getting a headache. She sends them, telepathically, to punish me for being such a rotten daughter. Even now, she was marching into my father’s office in high dudgeon to tell my father, for the zillionth time, what an

impossible girl I was. At thirty-one, I'm old enough to stop letting her give me headaches. Some of us are slow learners.

I grabbed my toiletries bag, shoved it in and started zipping up my suitcase. "Don't forget to pack a sweater," Andre said. "Warm socks. And your umbrella....."

I made my hand into a gun, and pointed it at his heart. "Don't start."

"Can't help myself," he said. "You're too much fun to tease. And admit it. You do sometimes need looking after....."

"And you're just the man to do it."

"You bet your ass." He stood there, grinning, letting his eyes travel over me in an imitation of rude cop attitude. When other cops do it, it makes my blood boil.

"I'm late." I jerked the suitcase off the bed.

"Aren't you going to wear a suit?"

"Why? It's just a meeting."

"For when you meet the press."

"Not meeting the press, honey."

"Better take a suit. With your track record, you'll get there and all hell will break loose....."

"That's reassuring. If my clients thought like you, I'd never get any business." I narrowed my eyes. "What's this stuff about a suit, anyway? You don't like me in suits."

"Exactly," he said. "Suits make you look grown-up and dumpy." He was grinning again. Bastard. He had the most backhanded way of giving compliments.

"So no one will notice me, right?"

"Right," he agreed. "It's so easy to miss a beautiful woman when she's 5' 11" and stacked."

"Stacked?" I crossed my arms defensively over my chest and glared at him. "What has gotten into you today?"

He turned toward the window. "Guess I'm having trouble letting you go....."

Our history read more like an adventure novel than a romance. We had good reason to fear separation. Still, duty

called and I had answered.

I was wearing black pants and a green sweater. I walked to the closet, got my black jacket, and put it on. “You see,” I said, pirouetting slowly. “Suit.”

“Damn,” he said. “Hot damn. You don’t look the least bit dumpy.” I could have dragged him to bed once more, but we were out of time. And, like Scarlett O’Hara’s mammy, my mother had tried to teach me to exhibit ladylike appetites.

I stopped by the office and picked up the papers Todd Chambers had faxed, reading through them on my way to the car. Someday I’m going to fall and break my neck trying to do two things at once, one of which involves forward momentum.

Even a cursory reading told me I had to stop him from sending the letter. While it might be useful in calming upset parents, if he already had an upset student on his hands, sending a letter suggesting she’d made it all up would be like throwing gasoline on a fire. It stopped just short of calling her a crazy liar. There had to be a better way. My job was to figure that out between here and his office, then present it to him diplomatically.

The roadsides were banked with a thick tangle of flowers—goldenrod, chicory, Queen Anne’s lace, and masses of pink and purple asters. In the fields, the drying cornstalks were turning gold and pumpkins growing orange. The mountains of Western Maine were a mixture of late summer’s fading greens sprinkled with bits of yellow-green and deeper gold and the occasional early maple in brilliant reds and oranges. The wide lakes reflected the blue of the sky, quiet after a summer being churned by propellers. Wedges of birds were gathering for the journey south.

I wanted to savor this before October’s chill and November’s bleakness. But the day was already softening into darkness, the shadows deepening and lengthening as I pressed westward. Todd Chambers’ problem had begun to permeate my mind. I felt uneasy about what was waiting for me.

I switched on the radio to distract me, but the word “news” is just shorthand for “bad news.” After a domestic murder, a 12-year-old girl who’d been snatched off the street and assaulted, and two fiery crashes on New Hampshire highways, I turned it off, but I couldn’t quite forget that girl. After years working on girl’s education issues, I’m proud of young women’s growing independence, but the danger also seems to be growing. Too often, when I pass a barely dressed female jogger, my admiration for her athleticism wars with my desire to ask if she’s lost her mind.

I went back to the beauty outside my car and the job inside my head. Schools hired me because I was the competent outsider who could come in and help them handle thorny problems. I didn’t doubt my ability to do that. When I got to Chambers’ office, I’d help him figure out what tell his parents. We’d craft language reassuring them that their children weren’t living in a place where students were stalked and terrorized. Tell them that a careful investigation had found no evidence that anything scary had taken place except in the overwrought imagination of a student. Our challenge was to make the school look good without making the student look bad.

I hoped he had conducted the investigation in a careful and sensible manner and been sensitive and kind in handling his troubled student. I didn’t want to get into this too deeply or have to spend a lot of time on campus establishing the facts. We were already too busy. Sometimes it happened. I’d arrive thinking there was one thing to be done and find myself up to my ears in something else.

I left the winding Maine roads and set off across New Hampshire. St. Matthews was located in the heart of the state, in one of those picture-perfect New England towns with a green sporting the requisite Civil War memorial and a pristine white bandstand, surrounded, at this season, with vibrant orange mums. Facing the green were a few blocks of big white houses with rolling lawns and wide porches with wicker furniture and

porch swings, punctuated by the rare and even more imposing brick house.

I never entered such a town without a brief longing to live there. Small towns had a down side, though. Unless you worked like the dickens to keep your secrets, everyone knew your business. Private schools were like that, too, little inbred communities where people lived in each other's pockets and secrets were hoarded like gold, their keeping traded like favors.

I flipped on my blinker and steered down something called Academy Lane, which, according to my directions, would bring me to Bishop Hall and the headmaster's office. Bishop Hall was one of those imposing white houses I'd been admiring. A discreet black and white sign identified the visitor parking, empty now in the darkness of a Sunday evening. I pulled into the space closest to the door and shut off the engine. Closest to the door out of habit. Despite the eye-glazing sound of it—consultant to independent schools—my work life has been anything but uneventful.

But the night was pleasant and benign, the area well-lit, and I'd only come to talk about a letter. The only danger I could foresee was that Todd Chambers wouldn't like what I was about to tell him and that despite his good breeding, he might express that displeasure in a loud voice. Guys who like to yell are tiresome, but that's all.

I got out and walked briskly to the door, looking neither left nor right to see if there were bad guys in the bushes, firmly repressing the skin-prickling sensation that someone was watching.

A woman waiting just inside the door popped out of her chair when I came in. "Ms. Kozak?" Her voice was throaty and slightly accented. I nodded. "If you would follow me?" She turned and moved away down the dimly lit hall, assuming I would follow.

She wore a flowing dress in a deep shade of purple, and was draped in a vast scarf in intricate swirls of purple, lilac and

turquoise blue, caught at the shoulder with a rhinestone brooch. Her black hair was confined in an impeccable chignon. She was slight, no more than five feet tall, and elegant in the striking, bony way of some Frenchwomen. Next to her, I felt like a giant. She didn't look much like a secretary, even if Chambers had a secretary who would work on Sundays. She didn't introduce herself and I wondered who she was.

She led me to an imposing door, nearly 8 feet high and painted a dramatic, shining black, stenciled, in gold letters, Headmaster's Office. She knocked and opened the door to a lovely room, long, high-ceilinged and well proportioned. The books on the shelves were old, with gold-embossed leather bindings. The four fine paintings had elaborate gold frames and small signs identifying the painters, like old paintings in museums. A dark cabinet held a magnificent set of Cantonware. It conveyed St. Matthew's tradition of austere Yankee gentility perfectly.

Todd Chambers, blond, trim and slightly supercilious, was behind his desk, playing with a letter opener. When we entered, he stood but didn't come forward to greet me. His failure to come out from behind the desk told me that he expected me to work for him, not with him. Also, that the trustees might have hired him for his manner, but not for his manners. It didn't bode well for the discussion we were about to have.

Seeing him, I remembered that the other time I'd met Todd Chambers, he'd reminded me of those arrogant and unlikable fraternity boys in Animal House who'd made me root for the losers.

Normally, when I met with a school on a sensitive matter like this, the headmaster would have his deans with him, and often one or more trustees. Except for the silent woman, Todd Chambers was alone. I sat in one of the chairs facing his desk—chairs comfortable enough to be welcoming to visitors, yet sufficiently formal to convey the dignity of the office to students who were being “called on the carpet,” and waited.

He didn't waste time on polite preliminaries, but dropped into a big leather chair that gasped slightly at the impact of his body. He scooped up some papers from his desk. "You've read my letter?" I nodded. "What did you think?"

The woman in purple had taken a chair to the side and slightly behind me, the indoor equivalent of being in my blind spot. Her silent presence spooked me. There's something eerie about a person deliberately sitting where you can't see them. Like the cop in the back taking notes during an interrogation, except the cop has an identified function.

"I think it's a good start," I said. "You've got an extremely sensitive situation here. It calls for some rather delicate drafting."

"You didn't like it?" he interrupted. "We thought it was pretty good. You have no idea what things have been like around here since that girl started stirring things up. No idea. My phone's been ringing off the hook...."

"I have a pretty good idea, Todd. That's why you called me."

He waved the papers back and forth, like someone fanning a fire. "Of course. Of course. Just a figure of speech. Naturally. So, with your experience, knowing how fast rumor travels, you can certainly understand why I'm... why we're all... so anxious to get this letter out as quickly as possible. Did you want to suggest some changes?"

He paused, his eyes flitting briefly to the woman behind me. He seemed to have been expecting I'd smile and rubber-stamp the awful thing. But Suzanne could have done that over the phone. He'd wanted one of us here. Of course he was eager to get the letter out, if he was being deluged with calls from parents, but that made the content more important, not less.

"Before we start working on the letter, you need to put me in the picture more fully. You didn't go into much detail about what's been happening."

There was a rustle behind me, but when I looked, the woman

was silent as a stone. Chambers shook his head dismissively, then quickly scanned the papers. “I had hoped, with all your expertise, that reviewing the letter would be sufficient. That’s our real focus here, after all....”

“I thought your real focus was managing a tense situation on your campus involving a student who claims she’s been...” I raised my eyebrows quizzically, “...is being stalked, and the resulting rumors and concerns among the rest of the student body, which have gotten back to the parents.”

He looked past me at the silent woman. “Is that really necessary?” There was another rustle.

“Todd, you know I can’t help you draft a tactful and reassuring letter to parents about events I don’t understand myself. In such a volatile situation, it’s essential to ensure that what goes into your letter is accurate. If this girl is bent on causing trouble, you don’t want to make statements or take positions you can’t defend and you want to be sure you’ve done everything possible to look out for her well-being. You don’t want to do something which will blow up in your face.”

“Blow up? How?”

“She could go to the press with her story. It’s the sort of thing newspapers love. To the police, since stalking is a crime. Or hire a lawyer...sue the school or her alleged stalker.”

He blinked in surprise, as though his only concern was discharging his responsibility to the bill paying segment of his community by sending out an appropriate letter, not the state of things on his campus. Shockingly unconcerned with the delicate matter of managing the student whose claims to being a stalking victim he wanted to label lies and paranoia. Indifferent to the potential effect that declaration could have on the rest of his female students, or on his applicant pool, 50% of whom were presumably female, and most of whom had mothers. Parents take safety seriously and stalking sounds threatening and unsafe.

Maybe he hadn’t listened to the news, but it seemed likely to

me if the abduction of a young girl in this part of New Hampshire made the national news, it would add new dimensions to parents' reactions to a potential stalker.

"I'd like to deal with this letter first," he said, snapping the paper loudly. "Then if you have other questions, we can discuss them. It's all here anyway. We conducted an investigation and determined she was making it up. There is no stalking problem on this campus."

This wasn't a chicken and egg problem. I couldn't evaluate the letter without knowing who the girl was, what she'd claimed, how they'd handled their investigation, and why, if there was no evidence of stalking, the students were upset and talking about it to their parents. Nor could I predict the risks of any steps, such as this letter, St. Matthews might choose to take.

I looked at his stubborn face, tinged pink with frustration, and somewhere above my slow but still competent head, a lightbulb began to glow. Chambers didn't want to discuss this because he didn't care. He didn't want advice about a letter or his campus crisis. He only wanted the imprimatur of EDGE Consulting on this mess so he could show his trustees and the independent school world he'd done his best. He'd wanted one of us physically here so he could say he'd brought in the experts to be sure he was doing it right. Was the silent woman sitting behind me there as a witness?

Keep the incredulity off your face, Kozak, I told myself sternly. This isn't the first time you've been used. You ain't no babe in the woods. Well, this babe wasn't leaving without making a sincere effort to get the facts and give my reluctant client the services he needed, even if they weren't the services he wanted.

Calmly, I pulled paper and a pen out of my briefcase and gave him my best professional smile. Once you've been executed by the right wing militia, an evasive, slightly truculent headmaster isn't so daunting.

"I can't help with the letter until I have all the facts. Let's

start at the beginning, shall we?"

"The facts are that the girl is crazy," he said, giving his papers a frustrated shake. "Dangerous and crazy."

I waited.

"She's impossible."

I still didn't say anything.

"Don't you understand," he said, exasperated. "I have to stop this right now. Discredit her and reassure my parents. I can't let her go on. She's trying to destroy everything I've planned for this school."

Chapter Three

For a full five minutes after he'd declared his student crazy, he sat silently, looking anywhere but at me, twiddling his pencil, shuffling his papers and occasionally tugging on his ear. I'd never seen a grown-up professional man tug on his ear before. It fascinated me. I'd seen little kids do it. I'd seen women touch their earlobes quickly, checking for earrings, but this was serious tugging, as vigorous as pulls on those old-fashion bell ropes the rich used to have in their drawing rooms.

What was he summoning. Ideas? A coherent version of the story? Another way to con me into approving his letter? It was possible he didn't understand the seriousness of the situation. I'd seen it before. Sometimes headmasters got so caught up in the day-to-day running of their schools that they lost sight of the context, of the position of the school in the wider world of parents, alumni, and potential applicants. That was where trustees, with their broader vision, were useful — someone to remind Chambers that the economic security and prestige of his school depended on its reputation — and a Dean of Students to be mindful of the *in loco parentis* role.

All the while, the woman behind me stayed so silent I finally looked around to see if she was alive. My CPR was rusty — I'd only used it once in fifteen years — but I would have given it my best shot if she was lying there unconscious. She wasn't. She was sitting, still as a statue, watching him and waiting. If I lived a thousand years, I'd never develop that kind of patience.

“It started the first week of school,” he said finally.

“So, about a month ago?”

“Yes.”

“The student who says she’s being stalked, who is she? Tell me about her.” What he chose to tell would reveal as much about him and his reading of the situation as it would about the girl.

“She’s African-American,” he said. “An athlete. Here on a full scholarship. Decent student. Not stellar, she came to us with a lot of educational deficits, but adequate...something of a gift for poetry, I believe.”

I waited for the details that would explain her more fully. What her personality was like, whether she played well with others, got along with her roommate, was quiet or loud, introverted or extroverted. Whether she observed curfews and followed the rules or was rebellious, a risk-taker or a discipline problem. If she’d come with a history of mental or emotional instability. And what her sport was.

“Actually, she’s only half black. But she’s got a lot of attitude.....she can be....” He searched for the right word, settled on, “prickly. She followed her older brother, Jamison. He’s a brilliant athlete. A campus leader. Charming. Personable....He’s a senior this year. We’ll be sorry to lose him.....”

But not his sister. His sister who, thus far, remained unnamed. “And her name is.....”

“Shondra.” At this rate we’d be lucky to get through this by midnight. Since it was clear I wasn’t going to be through this anytime soon, I needed to think about a place to stay tonight. But first, the girl’s whole name.

“Shondra what?”

He looked puzzled, as if, she being in the wrong and all, her name didn’t matter. “Jones.”

I was willing to bet, just from the little he’d said, that her name mattered very much to her. I looked pointedly at my watch. “It doesn’t look like I’m going to be driving back

tonight, especially if you want me to meet this girl. Is there a motel or a bed and breakfast you'd recommend?"

My query was about as welcome as a skunk at a wedding. It even stirred the silent woman behind me. Now that I was asking questions instead of following his script, he wanted me gone. But it was he who'd insisted we meet face-to-face, he who wanted me to talk to this girl. Maybe that had been part of the rubber stamp—first approve the letter, then get the dirty job of explaining it to her. Had he seriously expected either thing to happen? I reminded myself that however dense or difficult he was being, he was my client, even if he was playing hard to help.

Despite the way I was foiling his plans right and left, he eased the sulky expression off his face and found some manners. "Many of our parents like The Swan. It's our local B&B. It's very nice. Our parents can be particular...." He paused. "But of course you know that. You're very familiar with our little world...."

He reached for the phone, and made me a reservation. Of course, keeping his parents happy was a big part of his job. I didn't mind if he momentarily confused me with them. I didn't even wrinkle my nose at his use of the phrase "our little world." Practically speaking, he was right, the private school word did serve a small population.

But "our little world" was an interesting and challenging one. He and the other administrators on the front lines, and Suzanne and I and the rest of the EDGE staff backing and assisting them, were in both the education business and the service business. Boarding schools not only provide the classes that are their primary purpose, they provide housing and food service, sports training and culture and recreation, medical services and guidance and structure, as well as caring adults and a safe environment to the students entrusted to their care.

How campus crises or potential crises, large and small, were handled could have a major impact on a school's ability to attract and hold the type of student it wanted. Increasingly, in

a world that scrutinized and rated schools, information about the quality of the student body and their success in getting into “good colleges” was what parents considered. That and the physical plant. Parents considering letting their children live away from home were also concerned about safety.

While he proposed to slap a Band-Aid on the situation in the form of his awful letter to parents, Todd Chambers, like it or not, had a lot more to deal with than nervous parents. He had a potentially explosive situation on his hands. It didn’t take a Pollyanna to recognize that a crisis was also an opportunity. Handled well, his response would reflect positively on the ability of the school to provide a safe and caring environment to all the resident students. Handled negatively, it would outrage at least one member of the student body—one with the ability to have a significant PR impact—and not necessarily reassure the rest of the female students that they were respected, supported and safe.

I was surprised he hadn’t thought this through more carefully. Maybe he had and just wasn’t sharing those thoughts with me. He’d have to be more forthcoming if we were going to work together.

“Thanks for taking care of that,” I said. “Now, tell me a little more about Shondra. What sport or sports does she play?”

“Basketball.” As though tall, athletic young black women didn’t engage in other sports. He seemed so surprised I hadn’t grasped that on my own that I didn’t remind him black women were winning at Wimbledon, that Jackie Joyner Kersee and FloJo hadn’t been basketball players, or that China had a wonderful women’s basketball team. We’re supposed to be learning not to make assumptions about people based on sex and race and national origin. His mandate might have been to tread on the conservative side, but I doubted that he’d been hired to take St. Matthews back to the dark ages.

“She’s 6’ 3,” he said, as though that explained everything, and another bulb lit up. Since I was another tall woman, he’d

assumed I'd have special insights and an instant connection with his problem student. As though being tall made me a mind-reader.

"Tell me about this stalking complaint. What does she say happened?" This time, the rustle behind me was more pronounced. When I turned, she was shaking her head.

"Mostly phone calls. Phone calls of a sexual nature. Recurrent phone calls, frequent enough to disrupt her studies and interfere with her sleep....."

"Weekly? Daily? Hourly?" He shook his head. "Does she have a roommate?"

"Not this year."

"So there's no one to corroborate her story." I felt a flash of sympathy for this unknown girl. Whatever was driving her behavior, she was all alone with it.

"That's right."

"Anything else, other than calls?"

He looked back at the woman behind me and I could sense her nodding, giving him permission to answer. Surely, if she were a Trustee, he would have introduced her. So who the hell was she and why was he looking to her for authorization?

"Twice since the fall term started she has come to us with rather... uh....pornographic...uh...pictures she claims to have found in her room. She says there was another one, back in the spring, that she threw away. She says her things have been rearranged. Disturbed. That messages and bits of paper have been placed in her pockets and in her... uh... undergarments."

Bizarre. Why would someone make up such a story, what did she stand to gain? "To whom did she go with these items?"

"In one instance, to the head resident in her dorm. The second time, to the resident on duty. Both times, we conducted a careful investigation and concluded that there was no way anyone other than the student herself could have placed the items there....."

I needed to know the details of his investigation. "You told

her this?"

"Yes. And she went crazy on us. Hysterical. Furious that we didn't believe her. That's when she started spreading all over campus that she was being stalked and harassed, that a male student had invaded her room, and we wouldn't help her. Naturally that got a lot of the other girls upset. They called their parents....and...you can imagine the rest..."

"You didn't involve the police?"

The "of course not" from behind me almost drowned out his reply.

"We preferred to handle the matter in house, as I'm sure you can understand. And we have a most adequate security force...."

Maybe they were. Some campus security forces were superb, others little better than glorified groundskeepers. "Did your security force conduct the investigation?"

"No, we did."

"You, personally?"

"Of course not. The Dean of Students and the Head of Residential Life."

"And their names are?"

For a second, I thought he wasn't going to answer. Headmasters are frequently defensive when they have to call in outsiders, but usually it doesn't take long for them to realize we're all on the same side. Sometimes lower level administrators are more difficult. They often feel their jobs are threatened. But Chambers ought to be able to see that his job was more threatened by not handling things well than by doing the right thing. I was only asking the same questions he could expect parents or reporters to ask.

"Craig Dunham is Dean of Students. Cullin Margolin is Head of Residential Life."

"Do you still have the items she claims were placed in her room?"

He looked past me at the woman. "Miriam? Could you... I think they're still in Wendy's desk...."

“It doesn’t matter, Todd. They’re irrelevant,” the woman said.

“Well, she’s asked. And I suppose it makes sense for her to see them....”

“It’s just a waste of time,” she said, but she rose from her chair and glided out the door, the only sound the subtle susurrations of her dress.

“Your secretary?” I asked.

“My wife.” Again that slight surprise, as though I should have known.

Todd Chambers was reasonably polite, had a reputation for competence, and had had the good sense to call us when he had a campus problem. So why did I find him so irritating? Because he expected to have his mind read, and I’m no mind reader. Because he was being ridiculously stubborn about providing essential information. I couldn’t tell whether he was being deliberately disingenuous, whether Miriam was here because she was the brains in this outfit, or whether they had a plan to get our approval without actually dealing with their problem.

I was also irritated because of what was coming—the moment when he’d drop all pretense of cooperation, try to force me to approve his letter, and I’d say no. Then, either I’d have to persuade him to let me help or I’d have to leave. If it was leave, it would be only with the clear understanding he couldn’t represent that I, or our company, had had any part in his decision to send the letter or anything else he chose to disseminate. That would be unpleasant.

Chambers’s wife returned holding an envelope gingerly between two fingertips. She placed it on the desk in front of him with a husky, “Darling, it’s getting late,” and began her flowing retreat.

I held out my hand, stopping her. “Mrs. Chambers?”

Her expressionless eyes met mine as she gave my hand a cursory squeeze. It was like being handed a bag of bones that had been in the refrigerator. She dropped my hand without a

word and glided back to her chair.

I watched him shake the contents of the envelope onto his desk. Two pieces of paper in protective plastic sleeves. I've spent too much time around cops, I guess. They reminded me of evidence envelopes. I reached toward the top one. "May I?"

"Of course," he said. "You asked to see them, didn't you?"

I picked it up and moved it into the light. A strong-looking naked black woman bound to two posts, a leather hood over her head, being approached by a masked white man wearing an enormous dildo. Scrawled between her legs were the words, "You know you want it, baby." The message was pornographic and stomach-turning.

Hastily, I set it down and picked up the other. Different woman, different position, different message, but equally ugly and disturbing. I tried to imagine myself at sixteen, finding such a thing in my bed, and my stomach knotted. No young woman, unless she was deeply disturbed, would associate herself with something like this. Most would have no idea where to find such pictures. The new freedom and ease about their sexuality which many young women espoused was about exactly that—freedom. Freedom was not what these pictures were about.

Seeing the pictures enforced my growing sense that I needed to meet Shondra Jones. If she was crazy enough to do this herself, handling her would be well beyond my abilities, probably beyond the abilities of the St. Matthews counseling staff. Whatever I learned from a meeting with Shondra Jones, now that I'd seen these pictures, I knew this situation would not be put to rest by any letter.

"These are very disturbing," I said, putting them back in the envelope. "Have other girls seen them?"

"A few," he said, "before we took them and locked them up." His head bobbed. "The pictures, I mean, not the students."

"So it's understandable why they're upset." He nodded. "But no other students have gotten them?"

"No."

“Getting back to the phone calls. How many? With what frequency? Duration?”

This time he answered. “She says all the time. Often enough so she can’t study or sleep.”

I made a note. “That also began this fall?”

“Not exactly.” I waited. “She claims they began last spring and continued all summer to her home. She says she reported it to her housemother. The woman she reported it to... claims she reported it to... is no longer on our staff. And there is no record of the complaint.....”

“There would normally be such a record?”

“Of course.”

“Did you contact this woman?” He didn’t answer. “What about her last year’s roommate? She doesn’t corroborate Shondra’s story?”

“She didn’t return this year. She really wasn’t St. Matthews material.”

Meaning no one had tracked her down as part of their thorough investigation or she’d refused to talk to them after being tossed out on her ear. “What about friends who might have been in her room when the phone calls occurred?”

“She’s pretty much a loner.”

He seemed almost pleased that no one could corroborate the story, while I imagined a troubled girl increasingly isolated by the departure of anyone she was close to. Either isolated and crazy enough to crave attention, even negative attention, or scared to death with no one to share it. “Are the dorm residents also the student’s advisors?” He nodded. “What is her relationship with her current house mother?”

Behind me, Miriam Chambers sniffed. His eyes shot to her, then back to me. “I told you. She’s difficult.”

“Has Shondra accused anyone of being her stalker? Identified anyone?”

Chambers stared steadily past me at his wife. “How could she? There is no stalker.”

It wasn't an answer to my question. "Is this her third year here?"

"Second."

"So she's a sophomore?"

"Junior."

"Does she get along all right with her dorm mates?"

Chambers shrugged. "Like I said, she's kind of a loner."

"What about with her teammates?"

"I've heard no complaints. She's a hell of an athlete." He sounded annoyed.

Did that mean he hadn't bothered to find out during his thorough investigation? Anyone trying to get a handle on the matter would need information about the student, her personality, her social and academic situation both to investigate the complaint and decide what steps to take to help her. Even if he planned to con me, at some point someone, a trustee, a reporter, or even Shondra's lawyer, would be bound to ask these questions.

"What about her brother? Is he a four-year senior?"

Chambers nodded. "Getting Shondra here was his idea. He was worried about what might happen to her back home. They're being raised by a grandmother and I guess that Shondra was quite a handful.....so Jamison just kept at us until we agreed to take her." He smiled. "He's quite a diplomat, but he never gives up. He's very protective of his little sister, very much the responsible older brother, even though they're not much more than a year apart."

"You sound fond of him."

"I am."

"But not so fond of his sister. Why is that? Has she given you trouble before?"

He shrugged, sighed, and looked at his wife. "We might as well tell her, I suppose."

"I thought....." Her voice was steady and cold, a hard knot of sound in the dim, quiet room. "She was only brought here to

advise us about the letter. So people would see we'd done everything we could....."

"But Miriam... you've been listening. She'll understand when she knows what this is really about."

"It was just the wording, Todd. That's all we were concerned about. That's all *she* should be concerned about. The wording and the fact that we did the proper thing. Sent the letter so our parents would be reassured. That's all we hired her for. Shondra doesn't matter. We can't allow a trouble-making thief to spoil what you've worked so hard for."

She confirmed my suspicion that EDGE had been called in as window dressing, not to give real advice. I hate it when people discuss me like I'm not in the room. It's rude and demeans both me and them. I turned to her. "You must realize that the proposed letter is neither produced nor sent in a void, Mrs. Chambers. Neither the content nor the impact can be adequately assessed without the facts."

"The facts are that the girl's crazy. She's out to get us. She'll make trouble no matter what we do."

"Shondra has a history of mental illness?"

"Not that I know of....." She shook her head impatiently. "I told Todd to just expel her. That would have been the simplest thing. He said we had to go through some steps. We need to discredit her and calm everyone down, then get that girl out of here before she destroys everything."

"What is she trying to destroy?"

I was watching her face, not really expecting an answer, but though she uttered no words, her eyes moved to a picture on an easel in the corner—a large colored architect's rendering of an impressive brick building.

I got up to examine it. In the lower right corner, in that incredibly neat square printing architects have, it said: MacGregor Center for Music and the Arts. I hadn't seen the rest of the St. Matthew's campus, so I didn't know how this fit in, but it had a bigness and impressive centerpiece quality which

suggested it was a major project for the school.

“It’s lovely,” I said.

“Thank you,” Chambers said. “We’ve got donor commitments for over nine million and we’re about to begin the public phase of the campaign. The largest ever for St. Matthews. This is a particularly sensitive time, which is why we’re so concerned about Shondra coming forward with her accusations now.....”

His wife’s sudden sharp gasp stopped him before he finished the sentence. But though people, sometimes including my own clients, have occasionally wished I were deaf, dumb and blind, I am none of those things. “What is it that you and your wife are trying so hard not to tell me?” I asked.

Todd Chambers had an ability to delay without embarrassment that bordered on the extraordinary. He’d done it to me before and now he did it again. He simply sat behind his desk in the pool of yellow light while his wife and I waited, watching in different kinds of breathless anticipation as he carefully straightened and aligned three piles of papers. Finally, when he’d gotten the arrangement just the way he wanted it, he raised his head and cleared his throat.

“Actually, I misspoke earlier. Shondra did accuse someone of being her stalker. Her accusation is, of course, completely ridiculous. His name is Alasdair MacGregor and he’s the grandson of the major donor of our arts center.”

Chapter Four

I did not yell out, “Aha! The plot thickens.” But I wasn’t as surprised as I would have been if he hadn’t spent so long playing silly games with this information. Way in the back of my mind, I wondered if I was performing some strange form of marriage counseling alongside my consulting. One thing was certain. Mrs. Chambers was pissed as hell at her husband for telling me this. She’d abandoned her stillness in favor of an angry rustling. I knew if I looked back at her, I’d see those cold, dark eyes beaming icy rays in his direction. Chambers had gone back to playing with his papers.

Pissed as hell was not a nice expression. I’d been trying for months to excise it from my speech. But it was surprisingly easy to fall into bad habits, and hard to fall out of them. Even in the middle of this professional consultation, my mother’s voice was in my head, chiding me about my language. Lately her voice has been there way too much. Mostly asking about pregnancy, or my lack of it. My loss. Something my mother should understand. Suddenly I was very tired.

I wondered if they had children. She didn’t act like a nurturing person, but there are all kinds of parents in the world. There were no children’s pictures anywhere in the room, which was the usual practice in the business. But then, most of what I’d experienced at this school didn’t follow the usual practice. For everything about this matter, I had to maintain that difficult pairing—an open mind and a watchful eye.

Meanwhile, it was getting late and the only other people in

the room were silently at war. It was time for me to take charge. I flipped to a fresh sheet of paper. "Okay, here's your situation. You have a minority student who claims to be the victim of a stalker. The stalker's behavior has involved, according to her, phone calls to her at all hours of the day and night, and, most recently, pornographic pictures and messages which have been left in her room. Right so far?"

I put on my best "we are going to get along and get to work" expression. Chambers grunted. Mrs. Chambers sniffed loudly and, when I turned, she looked pointedly out the window. It was dark and there was nothing to see. I was losing patience. It was inconsiderate to the point of being antisocial to sit behind someone in a meeting involving only three parties. Good thing I wasn't here to teach manners.

"To complicate matters, the student has identified her stalker as the grandson of a prominent alumnus and important donor, correct?" He nodded. "And your internal investigation has indicated that what she says is untrue?" Another nod.

"Dean Dunham conducted the investigation and you didn't involve the local police department? Dean Dunham didn't consult them or ask for advice?"

"He already told you," Mrs. Chambers snapped. "We wanted to handle the matter quietly. Todd, she's supposed to be working for us, isn't she? So why is this girl being so uncooperative?"

Ignoring her, I asked, "So no one ever checked the documents or her room for fingerprints or anything like that?"

"We don't have that capacity," Chambers said. "I doubt that any school's security services do."

"What about phone records? Is there anyway verify her claims about harassing phone calls, at least as to frequency or source?"

"If they had come from him, they would have been part of the internal system. There wouldn't be any records. But the calls were never made, so it's a moot point," Chambers said.

“Your investigation consisted of?”

I waited while he played with paperclips. Finally, he said, “Interviewing her and interviewing people in her dorm.”

“And there’s a written report?”

“Craig just reported his findings to me.”

“Surely you anticipated...” I stifled the words, anxious, given what I hearing, to try and save this man from himself. “Did she tell you how she identified her stalker?”

“She said she recognized his voice.”

“What about the boy? Her alleged stalker. Did you interview him?”

Miriam Chambers’ voice was an icy blast from behind me. “Aren’t you listening? You think we gave any credence to her crazy claims?”

“I would have assumed,” I said quietly, “that you would have listened to both sides before dismissing such a serious claim. Doesn’t the school have a harassment policy? A written procedure for handling such matters?”

“Of course we do,” Chambers said, “all schools do. But in this case we felt....”

“That she wasn’t entitled to be accorded the same procedural safeguards as any other student? That he shouldn’t be subjected to a hearing on the matter?”

“I think we were entitled,” he began, “when the accusations were so outlandish...to deal with it before it got to the formal accusation stage....”

His wife cut him off. “We’re trying to keep this quiet, Ms. Kozak. Whose side are you on here, anyway?”

“Well, it hasn’t been kept quiet, has it?” I countered. “You have one very unhappy student who is determined to make it as public and noisy as possible and your failure to follow your own procedures hasn’t helped. You’ve said she was already difficult, perhaps known to be a trouble-maker. Didn’t you anticipate that she might react this way?”

“We expected her to cooperate. That she’d be grateful,” Mrs.

Chambers said. “Frankly, I don’t see why all these questions are necessary, why any of this is. We only asked you here because we wanted your advice about the letter. Because we wanted things done right.”

I’d already explained why I was asking questions. If she didn’t want to hear it, fine, but the words had been spoken. Something I’ve learned from my years in headmaster’s offices and trustee’s boardrooms—you can talk until you’re blue in the face but you can’t make people listen.

“Are your trustees informed about the situation?”

Chambers opened his desk drawer, selected a large paperclip, and carefully fastened some papers together. “Our chairman, Charles Argenti, has been kept abreast of the developments. The rest of the board...” He shrugged. “Charles and I had hoped it wouldn’t be necessary.”

“And you consulted your legal counsel?”

“They sent one of their associates out last week. Nice girl. She seemed to think there wasn’t any problem.”

His statement ruffled my feminist feathers. All the people in positions of authority he’d mentioned were men, and he’d referred to them by name. Come to the one woman involved, he called her a girl and omitted her name. He’d done the same thing to Shondra Jones. Maybe I was being too sensitive. I’m a hell of a sexism barometer.

“You told her about Shondra Jones’ accusation, whom Shondra had named, and why that was significant? Did you share your concerns that Shondra might have a strong reaction to your dismissal of her complaint? Did you show her the pictures? Brief her on your written procedures for handling sexual harassment complaints?”

My father’s a lawyer, and lawyers always say you shouldn’t ask a question if you don’t already know the answer. So far, I hadn’t asked anything I didn’t believe I knew the answer to. Todd Chambers wasn’t the first naïve headmaster I’d ever met, and he certainly wasn’t the first person to make a situation

worse by trying to sweep it under the rug. I just needed to know how bad things had gotten.

I also needed a softer tone. This guy was my client, not Shondra Jones. However irritating his naiveté might be, however badly he'd bungled, I had to take these situations as I found them.

"We gave her the facts."

He was getting sullen as I dismantled the house of cards he'd constructed, spoiling his fantasy that things were under control, his problem solved, and that all he had to do to tidy up was send that letter. How he avoided thinking about strategies for dealing with a 6' 3" minority woman who claimed she was being stalked and was mad as hell escaped me. But whatever he was trying to do in his own head, that didn't absolve his lawyer of her responsibility to ask the important questions.

"I'm surprised she let you off so easily," I said. "It's hard to believe any lawyer, having learned that a female student who claims to have been the victim of a terrifying stalker has had those claims dismissed and essentially been called a liar and a fraud, would tell you that you didn't have anything to worry about. Especially when it all took place without the benefit of the school's written procedures."

I hesitated, but there were things I had to tell him. He was being frighteningly complacent in the face of a potential disaster. "Todd, I'm sorry to be saying this, but I think you have a lot to worry about. You have a ton of negative publicity to worry about. You have a frightened female student population to worry about. You have a potential lawsuit for slander to worry about. Stalking is a crime in most states, so you have a failure to report an alleged crime to worry about. Just for starters...."

I forced myself to stop. I was dumping it all on him too fast. Better take it slowly, give him a head's up about potential issues I saw, and lay out a strategy after I'd gathered the facts.

Miriam Chambers rose to her feet with an angry rustle. "How many times do we have to tell you." Her voice was

unsteady. “There was no stalking. There is no stalker. The girl is a mental case. She needs help. That’s our only problem.”

I hadn’t yet asked what kind of support and services they’d offered Shondra. Somehow, I didn’t think they’d be responsive to that question right now.

I looked down at my notes. “Tomorrow, I hope I’ll be able to talk with the people involved. And we needed to begin devising a management strategy. Your biggest challenge will be communication—reassuring your student body and their parents that there is no stalking problem on your campus and that the students are perfectly safe, without doing so in a way that will embarrass or enrage Shondra Jones.”

“That’s impossible,” Miriam Chambers said flatly. “She’s already enraged.”

My neck was getting sore from swiveling around. “It’s unfortunate that it’s gone that far. We’ll have to find a way to calm her down. Show her that St. Matthews cares about her and wants only the best. Do you disagree, Mrs. Chambers?”

She glided down the room to join her husband, setting a possessive hand on his shoulder. Her previously expressionless face had congealed into an icy, dismissive glare. It was a practiced look, and probably normally quite effective. But if looks could kill, I’d have been dead a thousand times. So far, knock on wood, not even the real killers had succeeded. If she meant to intimidate me, she’d have to work pretty damned hard.

“I think you should get the school’s attorneys back here,” I said. “Get their feedback on the details of your investigation. On the failure to follow your own procedures. Get them to clarify the issue of slander. Get their sign off on not involving the local police.”

Todd Chambers put a cautionary hand over his wife’s and manufactured a yawn. “Excuse me,” he said. “Long day. I’m afraid I’m losing my concentration. What if we get together again in the morning?”

He was the client. “What time?”

“Eight-thirty?” he suggested. “Come to the house. We’ll give you breakfast.”

Miriam Chambers looked like that was the last thing on earth she wanted to do, but she nodded.

“Fine,” I agreed. “Could you arrange for me to meet with Dean Dunham afterward? And the faculty residents from her dorm? And, of course, Shondra herself?”

He nodded.

A thought struck me. “What about her brother? You said he was very protective toward his sister. How is he reacting to all this?”

“Oh, Jamison is a very sensible boy. I think he’ll stay out of this.”

“Well, you might check in with his advisor, or his coach, see what’s going on.” This was so basic. Chambers was supposed to have his fingers on the pulse of his school, and he hadn’t considered this? Maybe there hadn’t been time, if they’d just delivered the bad news to Shondra. But he’d said she had inflamed the whole community, and that took time. “When did you tell Shondra that you’d been unable to substantiate her claims?”

“Tuesday evening.”

And it was Sunday. She’d had plenty of time to get steamed up. “And what form did that communication take?”

“You know,” Chambers said, “you make me feel like I’m on the hot seat here. You sound more like a cop than a consultant.”

“Todd, my specialty is damage control. I can’t help if I don’t know the situation.”

But his remark had gotten me thinking. Not long ago, someone had mistaken me for a cop. At the time, I’d thought it was ridiculous. But hanging around with them so much, was some of it was rubbing off? A natural curiosity. A deep skepticism about everyone’s story. A sensible instinct to test the offered version of the facts. I’d have to watch myself. The last thing I needed was to start scaring away clients.

Suzanne was the charmer and the diplomat, I was the heavy, brought in for the hard cases to help clients in PR trouble. It was part of my job to make people face the facts. It was also my job to handle the process with sensitivity and to make it as easy for them as possible. It didn't sound like my client was experiencing that just now.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to sound like the Grand Inquisitor. I'm used to getting called in on emergencies where I'm coming in from outside, having to quickly gather the facts and work out strategies for handling things. I guess sometimes I do tend to sound like a drill sergeant." I waved an apologetic hand. "It's your show. If my approach is not what you want...."

Just as suddenly as he had flared up, he was effusively apologetic, as though he feared I was about to flee. "No, no. I didn't mean it like that. We do need your help. I was just thinking we might all function better in the morning...."

"Morning is fine," I agreed, shoving my notes into my briefcase. "If you could just tell me how to find The Swan?"

For a second, he looked puzzled, as though he didn't understand where swans came into this. Then he smiled. "It's very easy. You go back down the drive the way you came, turn right onto the main road, and it's half a mile down on the right."

"And your house?" He looked blank. "For breakfast tomorrow?"

He pulled a campus map out of his desk, circled the building we were in, then followed a curving drive with his pen and circled another building. "We're right here."

"Eight-thirty," I said. Then remembered something. "The boy she's accusing. Has there ever been a relationship between them?"

Their "no" was quick and unanimous.

"What's he like?"

"Resolute and determined," he said. "Clever."

"Handsome and inventive."

"Popular?" I asked.

He let it go a beat too long. “Alasdair’s kind of particular about his friends.”

“He ever been in trouble?”

Their eyes met, and like two computers networked, information flowed quickly back and forth, encrypted so I couldn’t read it. “No,” he said. “Nothing significant.”

I wondered how the school, or Chambers, differentiated between significant and insignificant. “Your student handbook sets out the rules for conduct, academic and social?” He nodded. “So by not significant you mean he’s never broken a major rule?”

I watched the exchange of data again. His face was bland but there were tell-tale signs. He was deciding to lie. “No. Nothing major,” he agreed.

I lifted my bag to my shoulder and checked my pocket for keys. “I’d like a copy of the handbook....” I waited while he reluctantly went to the shelf and found a copy.

“Thanks.” I gave him a smile I hoped was reassuring. “See you in the morning.”

He said a polite goodnight. She stared through me like I wasn’t there. I thought of Suzanne, my partner, now a headmaster’s wife herself. She would never intrude into Paul’s business like this, however much they might have discussed it in private. Nor, should she ever be drawn in, would she forget her manners because her nose was out of joint. Fierce, formidable and icy though she was, Miriam Chambers had many of the qualities of an ill-mannered child. And both of them, polite and impolite, were showing the strain of holding things back.

I stood in the dark parking lot, watching them through the window, huddling together at his desk, wishing I *could* read minds. Unconsciously, I formed my hand into a gun, aimed, and fired. She staggered backward, her hand at her chest. But it was something he’d said, not what I’d done. I turned away and clicked the unlock button.

My instinct for impending disaster told me to get in and drive

straight home. Back to security and normalcy and Andre. Especially back to Andre. It warred with the businesswoman in me, which told me to stay and soldier through or people would stop calling me for cases like this. It also warred with the part that, like a bloodhound, was on the scent of something and wanted to follow it. The self that relished the challenge of a difficult case.

Overarching it all was an ironic detachment, born of having lived too long on the cusp of danger, which saw the whole thing cinematically. Like in one of those volcano movies, on the surface, everything was placid and normal, with an everyday set of problems to be dealt with. I walked on grass and asphalt on a peaceful New England boarding school campus, breathing air scented with wood smoke. Underneath, masked by this benign surface, violence and danger roiled like molten lava, waiting to explode.

“Oh, get over yourself, Kozak,” I mumbled as I started the engine. “It’s just a job.”

The rest of the story is coming

September 2006 from

The Mystery Company

an imprint of The Crum Creek Press



Crum Creek Press titles are available to stores and libraries through Baker & Taylor, Ingram, Brodart, and other wholesalers, and directly from the publisher. *Stalking Death* can be pre-ordered now from all of these sources. For more information, contact us at 800-643-6737 or by email at staff@crumcreekpress.com

Kate Flora

Kate Flora was raised on a chicken farm in Maine. She left the rural life behind for college and law school, returned to Maine to practice law, and eventually ended up a lawyer in Concord, Massachusetts. She has since abandoned the law to write full-time but has never given up her curiosity about what motivates bad behavior. When she isn't writing, she's teaching writing or trying to coax reluctant perennials to behave. She recently served as the international president of Sisters in Crime. She and her husband, Ken Cohen, have two sons. They now divide their time between Concord and Bailey Island, Maine.

EXCERPT FROM THE
UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT

Stalking Death

A Thea Kozak Mystery

by **Kate Flora**



Title: STALKING DEATH
Author: Kate Flora
Date: September 2006
Price: \$25.00
Binding: Hardcover
Trim Size: 5 x 7-1/2
ISBN: 1-932325-06-9
Edition: First edition

Crum Creek Press
484 E. Carmel Dr #378
Carmel, IN 46032

Phone: 800-643-6737
Fax: 317-705-1402
Email: staff@crumcreekpress.com

www.crumcreekpress.com