

Thomas LaCosta

A Death At
**STONE
STEPS**



A Kelly Johnson Mystery

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By

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Chapter 1

Kelly Johnson felt the warm morning sunlight on his face. He cracked open his green eyes and saw the light filtering through the thin curtains covering the window in his bedroom.

The sun had been his alarm clock for the past two years. He had a job – his own business, actually – in the not so distant past. He had started a software company, Roundhouse Software, in his mid-twenties. The sale of Roundhouse had netted him enough money to buy his dream house, a semi-rundown beach bungalow, and to ensure that he would never have to work again unless, of course, he wanted to.

Kelly stretched a bit while he was still under the sheets, building up enough energy to make breakfast. His cat, Agatha, who was named after his great-grandmother, jumped up on the bed and nuzzled his hand. He had found

the small gray and white cat wandering the street a few months ago. He took her home and fed her, and she never left. “Don’t worry, Aggie,” he said, “I’ll get your breakfast in a minute.” Aggie purred and continued to rub against his hand.

When he finally got out of bed a few minutes later, he stretched before walking to his kitchen. The kitchen, like the rest of his house, was small. An old, two-burner gas range was crammed next to a small refrigerator and a tiny sink. The place had been built in the 1950s, back when few people lived in San Diego County and property near the beach was affordable.

As a result of the sale of his company, he had plenty of money to remodel his bungalow or even scrape it and build a modern house, but that was not the reason he bought his “rustic palace” as his mom liked to call it. Kelly grew up in the beach town of Encinitas and surfed from the time he was young. His dream was to own a place near the beach in his hometown and surf every day. When he sold his software company at age 29, there was no reason not to make that dream come true. To him, the house was a place to sleep

and relax in between trips to the beach, not a place to use for bragging rights.

The many years of his youth spent as a computer programmer had made him more comfortable with machines than people, so much so that he rarely had people over, other than some of his childhood friends who still lived in the area. They would spend the day surfing at Stone Steps beach – the beach stairs located just a few hundred feet from his front door – and then return to his house for BBQ and beer. If it was football season, they might watch the Chargers.

Kelly realized he had been staring in to space. “Sorry, Aggie, just amazed sometimes.” She was now aggressively rubbing his leg, obviously hungry. “Hold on.”

Kelly went to the pantry and pulled out a tin of sardines and opened it. The smell instantly permeated the air, sending the cat into a frenzy as she jumped up to her dish on the counter top and meowed repeatedly. Kelly scraped half of the fish into the cat’s bowl and started eating the other half himself. He was hooked on a low carb, “Paleo” diet, eating what most people would call dinner at every meal. He was amused that some of his friends thought his eating habits

were weird, or even disgusting. A few women he had tried to date over the past couple years seemed to have similar thoughts. He didn't mind. It worked for him. Ever since he starting eating this way, he lost the twenty pounds of flab he gained while sitting at a desk and long-forgotten muscles began to emerge from hibernation. The deep tan from hours surfing each week added to the definition of his muscles.

Half a can of sardines might have been enough for a cat, but it was not for Kelly, so he warmed up some sweet potatoes, fried himself an egg, and cut up an avocado. He gave up coffee after he sold Roundhouse, so steeped a cup of loose leaf green tea in its place.

After breakfast, he let the Aggie out the back door and checked his calendar. He was pretty sure it was Tuesday. He tended to lose track of the days unless he was doing some freelance computer work, which he picked up from time to time just to keep busy. He always donated his pay from these jobs to a charity.

It had been about a month since his last job. He helped the San Diego County Sheriff's Department break some

encryption on a computer. It turned out the computer was loaded with child pornography.

Kelly was a wizard with encryption and decryption. Before he sold it, Roundhouse had developed encryption algorithms used by major corporations and even the federal government to protect their secrets. His company had also been involved with highly-advanced quantum computers, used to break even the strongest encryption.

Eventually, a major Silicon Valley company became interested in acquiring Roundhouse and all its intellectual property. The buyer wanted Kelly to stay on as CEO, but he refused. The buyer even offered to pay him an extra \$10 million dollars to stay on for two years, but it was not worth it. The dream of becoming financially independent and surfing every day was in his grasp, and he was not going to put it off any longer.

He still had lots of offers to work on contract jobs for law enforcement agencies and some private corporations all over the country. Usually, one or two offers would pass through his email each week. He only took the ones that interested him, even if they didn't pay well.

Kelly checked his email. Nothing.

“Well,” he said aloud, “time to go check the surf.”

Chapter 2

Kelly opened his door and selected a pair of flip-flops from one of several choices of varying age and quality strewn about the old, rough concrete porch. After slipping them on, he strolled along the narrow gravel path in his front yard that was filled with lush, mature plants. When he reached the edge of his yard, he opened a low gate in the picket fence. He stepped onto the sidewalk and turned left.

The narrow cement street was normally calm. But today, he saw two Sheriff's patrol cars and about twenty people gathered near the top of the stairs leading down the cliff to Stone Steps beach. He raised an eyebrow and quickened his pace.

Arriving at the rear of the crowd, he saw that the Sheriffs were keeping the crowd about twenty feet back from the top of the beach stairs. Turning to a tall, thin woman named

Jane who lived a few doors down from him, he asked, “Do you know what is going on?”

“Oh my god, Kelly, someone was hurt on the stairs!” she replied with a slight stutter. “It must be bad.”

Kelly knew a lot of people in the neighborhood and hoped it wasn't one of them. It did not take him long to realize there were no ambulances present. With a pit forming in his stomach, he asked, “Do they know who it is?”

“I think I heard the cops saying it was a woman, but that's all I heard.”

“Oh,” he replied quietly. “Okay, thank you.” He smiled nervously at the woman. She nodded and returned to craning her neck to try and see something.

Kelly realized that he was not going to be getting to the stairs anytime soon. He wondered if he should wait around to find out who it was, but this made him feel like a vulture. He assumed whoever was on the stairs was dead. Word as to her identity would get out soon enough. He did not need to be part of the spectacle. As he turned to walk the few blocks south to the next overlook to check the surf, his eye caught sight of someone he recognized behind the police

tape. Walking to the edge of the crowd, he leaned a few feet over the tape.

“Detective Peterson. Hey, detective, it’s me, Kelly.” A tall woman about Kelly’s age with shoulder-length raven hair turned in his direction. She nodded, raising a hand with her index finger extended to let him know it would be just a moment. After what seemed like ages, but was really about two minutes, she made her way over to where he was standing. “Hi, Kelly, been a few weeks, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah, Padma, it has.”

To Kelly, Padma Peterson was striking. She was about 5’ 9” with the sharp, Nordic features of her father’s family and the beautiful olive skin and raven hair of her mother’s. She seemed to carry herself with an air of authority and confidence. Some might think her haughty or arrogant, but Kelly knew her as a smart, tenacious cop. She was a woman who could have done or been anything. Kelly sometimes wondered why she had chosen to become a police officer. Some day, he would have to ask her.

Kelly had met Padma about a year ago, when he started working for the local Sheriff’s Department following a year of

decompression and travel after selling Roundhouse. His most recent job for the Sheriff had been helping Padma and another detective.

“Thanks for helping us with that awful child porn case. We could not have made that case without you.”

“Sure.” Kelly looked down at his feet for a moment before asking, “So, what’s going on here?”

Padma shook her head sadly. “Looks like some sort of accident. DOA woman, twenty-two, just beneath the mural. Looks like she probably was out late, maybe drunk, and tripped and hit her head.” Padma paused and sighed before continuing, “But, the circumstances put it in the category of a suspicious death. The coroner will have to do an autopsy to make sure there is nothing out of place.”

“Oh, man.... Do you have a name yet?”

Padma pursed her lips and pushed them to one side and looked at Kelly with feigned displeasure. “You know I can’t release that information until we contact her next of kin.”

“Oh, yeah, well, of course,” said Kelly, soberly. “It’s just that I know a lot of people around here and was wondering if I knew her. That’s all.”

Padma smiled. “I knew you would understand.” Padma looked behind Kelly and saw a television news van arriving. She nodded her head towards the van, “Oh, boy, the vultures have arrived.”

Padma reached out and gave Kelly’s shoulder a quick pat. “I need to get back to work,” she said, tilting her head forward slightly and looking at him over the upper rim of her sunglasses.

“Sure,” said Kelly.

As Padma walked away, she turned and said, “Didn’t you say you were a surfer?”

Kelly was a bit surprised by the question. “Uh, yeah, since I was a little kid.”

“Being by the beach has got me thinking I’d like to learn how to surf. Maybe you could give me a lesson sometime.”

“Uh, yeah, sure, that would be great.”

Padma smiled. “Great. See you later.”

Kelly watched her walk away. Ever since he had started working with Padma, he had a crush on her. He had wanted to ask her to dinner several times, but he did not want to jeopardize their working relationship. He realized a surf lesson was not exactly a “date,” but it certainly wasn’t work-related either. Although he felt a bit weird feeling happy at this moment knowing there was a dead body so close by, he could not help himself. After a short moment, he shook his head to bring himself back to reality.

Kelly decided to stick around for a little while longer, maybe he would get a chance to speak to Padma again. He sat on the curb watching the television news team set up for a live shot. The reporter, a blonde woman in a bright blue skirt-suit wearing stilettos, was touching up her makeup and pointing here and there, deciding where to stand to have the best background for her live report. In the end, she decided to stand just behind the crowd, but on an angle so that the viewers would be able to see the throng of people gawking as well as the multi-million dollar house perched on the cliff above the ocean. Then, the live feed started:

“This is Barbara Jenkins reporting live from Encinitas, where, last night, among multi-million dollar beachfront homes, tragedy struck. A young woman was found dead on the stairs at Stone Steps beach, a popular playground for surfers and local families. Details are sketchy at this point. We know that she was in her early twenties and died sometime before dawn. We’ll stay on the scene and get you details as they develop. Reporting live from Stone Steps in Encinitas, this is Barbara Jenkins. Back to you, Kurt.”

Kelly shook his head as he was listening to the news report. He decided to leave. This is a circus, he thought to himself. As he got up from the curb, he saw something that made his heart sink. Jim Dortmund, a childhood friend who still lived in the area, came around the corner. They had grown up surfing together and even went to UCSD together. Jim looked frantic as he ran toward the crowd.

“Where is she?” he yelled. “Where’s Chrissy?”

Oh, god, no, thought Kelly.

Chrissy Dortmund was Jim’s little sister. Kelly had known her most of his life. She was probably four or five years old when he and Jim became friends during seventh grade.

Kelly had watched her grow from a chubby little girl into a beautiful young woman.

“Jim!” shouted Kelly.

Jim was startled. He looked around for the voice. Finally, his eyes fixed on Kelly. “Kelly! Oh my God, I got a call! They say Chrissy . . . that she” He couldn’t say any more and let out a whimper.

Jim practically ran to where Kelly was standing. Kelly reached out and grabbed Jim’s shoulders. “I . . . I . . . didn’t know who it was . . . ,” he mumbled as tears started to come to his eyes. Jim’s body felt limp. Just then, Padma came over.

“Mr. Dortmund?” she asked. “Jim Dortmund?”

Jim pulled away from Kelly and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “Yes?”

“Please come with me.”

Jim looked at Kelly through teary eyes and said, “I can’t do this alone.”

Kelly looked at Padma, silently asking. She nodded. Jim and Kelly slipped under the police tape and followed Padma as she led them to the top of the stairs.

Chapter 3

The Stone Steps stairs began with a wide flat landing. From there, one could go right or left, walk down a gradual flight of about a dozen gray concrete steps, then hit another wide landing. After that, another identical flight steps led to a second landing, behind which was the locally-famous Stone Steps mural. The tile mural depicted a mermaid gazing at a breaking wave and the sunset. In the center of the picture was a large scalloped clam shell, at the base of which was written: Stone Steps. From the landing in front of the mural, you could descend a very steep flight of stairs down the sheer cliff to the beach below.

The outline of a human form covered with a yellow, plastic sheet lay in front of the mural. As the sheet lightly flickered with the ocean breeze, the edge of a pool of red liquid could be seen on the ground near the head. Two deputies stood

near the body. One was taking measurements while the other snapped pictures. When they saw Padma and Jim arrive, they stopped their work and stood respectfully to the side.

Padma led a shaking Jim over to the sheet. He let out a wail as they got close to the yellow mound. “No!” And then, in a quieter voice broken by sobs, “Chrissy, little kid, oh, no.” Jim started to bend down to lift the sheet and see her body.

The deputy standing nearest the body reached over, roughly grabbed Jim’s arm and said, “I’m sorry, sir, this is an active investigation, we can’t have you touching anything.”

Jim’s head shot up and he looked at the deputy with hatred in his eyes, hatred he could see reflecting back at him in the deputy’s mirrored sunglasses. “I’ll do what I want, goddammit!” He lunged forward to lift the sheet, but the deputy was quicker and restrained him.

Padma put a hand on Jim’s arm. “Mr. Dortmund, look, I apologize for my overzealous deputy,” she said as she shot the deputy a look, “but he is right. This is an active investigation. Just let us move the sheet. You can see her, but please do not touch anything.”

Jim nodded mutely. Padma reached down and raised the portion of the sheet that was covering Chrissy's head.

When he saw her face, Kelly felt as though all the breath had left his body and he was not sure when it would come back. He put his hand to his mouth and sighed, tears filling his eyes. It was unmistakably Chrissy. Her blue eyes were vacantly staring ahead, and her long sandy blonde hair was caked with dried blood. The blood had come from her left temple, which appeared to be where she had struck her head on the concrete.

Jim slowly crumpled to the ground, softly and repeatedly hitting the concrete landing with his clenched fist. Padma quickly lowered the sheet. Jim looked up at Padma and, shaking his head, staggered over to the nearest stair, sat down and put his head in his hands. Kelly sat next to him for a while as the deputies continued their work of documenting the scene.

After a few minutes, Jim looked at Padma through tear-stained eyes. "Did she trip?"

"That's what it looks like, but we are still investigating to make sure." Padma paused for a moment, looking at Jim,

who was resting his chin in his hands like a sad, sulking child. “We . . . well, we plan to do an autopsy to confirm the cause of death.”

Jim immediately dropped his hands to his sides and stood up. “What?” he asked incredulously. “She hit her head. Why do you need to cut into her?”

“Jim, it’s okay. They are just doing their job,” said Kelly.

“She’s not your sister!” Jim yelled. The anger in his voice stung Kelly.

“Mr. Dortmund,” Padma said softly, “sometimes a death that looks accidental isn’t.”

“Are you saying someone killed her?” asked Jim with a clear note of hysteria now present in his voice.

“No, I am not saying that at all. We just need to explore all the options when a healthy young woman dies.”

Jim was nodding. “I’m sorry. I just” Jim shook his head like he was clearing the cobwebs from it. “What do you know so far?”

“Well, a man out for an early morning run found her about 5:45 this morning. We got here about fifteen minutes later. This is a busy set of stairs, so based on that and her body temperature at six o’clock, we believe it’s likely that she died sometime between midnight and 3:00 a.m.”

Jim looked confused. “What was she doing here so late at night?”

“That’s why we need to investigate.” Padma replied. “We will need to speak with her friends and roommates. We will check her phone records to see if there is any evidence there.”

Jim nodded slowly, processing the information.

“She did live nearby,” Kelly added, trying to distract Jim and himself from the thought that she might have been killed. “Maybe she was just out for a walk and had an accident.”

Jim shook his head anxiously. He could hear the skepticism in Kelly’s voice. “I wouldn’t call it close. Her place is down by Moonlight Beach. That’s like a fifteen minute walk from here.” He sat silently for a few seconds, pondering. Then he said, “Make sure you speak to her boyfriend.”

“Oh?” said Padma with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, she was dating some married guy. Eric Riggs is his name. He was twice her age. I guess his wife found out about it a couple weeks ago and made him break it off. Chrissy was pretty upset about it. She told me she loved him.”

“I will definitely check that out,” said Padma, writing a few notes. “Now, Mr. Dortmund, we need to take some more photographs of the scene and do some further investigation. It will probably take another hour or two. I’m sorry, but I’ll have to ask you to leave until we are done.”

Jim stood up, looked at her as if he were going to say something, then resigned himself and nodded. “Call me when you are done. I want to ride with her to . . . well, to wherever you take her.”

“Yes, of course,” said Padma. “What is your phone number?”

Before Jim could start talking, Kelly said, “You know what, I’ll take Jim to my house. It’s just a few houses north of here on the right side of the road. Look for the gate with the big copper sun in the front. Stop by and get Jim when you are done.”

Padma looked at Jim. “Is that okay with you, Mr. Dortmund?” Jim nodded silently.

A few moments later, Jim and Kelly were walking under the police tape. The blonde reporter he had watched earlier rushed up to them and asked, “Did you know the victim? What did you see down there?”

Jim, his dark eyes flashing, was about to speak, and say something he surely would have regretted, when Kelly put his hand on his shoulder and said, “Let me handle this.” He turned to the reporter. “I think you had better wait to speak with one of the Sheriffs.”

The reporter insisted. “This is an important story. I need to get information out to my viewers so that they—”

“No,” interrupted Kelly, “you cannot justify your own voyeurism by hiding behind your viewers. They have no right to know about this. This is not politics or government. This is someone’s life. So, shut up and leave us alone.”

Kelly put his arm around Jim’s shoulder and pulled him down the street to his house.

Chapter 4

Kelly opened the front door to his house. Jim walked in and sat down on the recliner, where he always sat when he came over. But, instead of the usual banter, Jim sat in a stunned silence, staring at the wall.

Kelly sat down on the couch on the opposite side of the room. He put his hands to his temples and rubbed them for a moment. Then, he put his hands down and looked at Jim. “Can I get you something to eat or drink?”

“How about a fifth of whiskey and a couple buckets of hot wings,” Jim said with only a hint of humor. Kelly smiled. He and Jim had gotten drunk on cheap whiskey while eating buffalo wings one night during college. Neither one of them could touch the stuff since.

“How about some tea and nuts? Fruit?”

Jim grimaced. “Tea and nuts? Your whole nutrition kick kinda sucks. I’ll just take a glass of water.” Kelly brought the water and sat down on the couch again. Jim was staring out the back window as he took shallow sips from the glass.

After a few minutes, Kelly broke the silence. “I don’t know what to say man. I’m really sorry.” Jim nodded silently in response and continued to stare out the window.

Kelly could tell Jim was not in the mood to talk. “I’m going out back to pull some weeds and maybe work on the surfboard I’m shaping. Come out if you want.”

Jim nodded. “Hey, do you mind if I call my parents? I forgot my cell phone at home.”

“Of course not.”

Jim stood and walked over to the rotary phone, shaking his head as he picked up the receiver. “Still have this dinosaur?”

Kelly smiled. Jim was always giving him a hard time about having hundred-year-old technology in his house, especially since he had made millions working on the cutting edge of the digital revolution. He stood up and patted Jim on the

shoulder. “I’ll give you some privacy.” Then, he walked out to the backyard.

Kelly liked to work with his hands whenever he was in a low mood. He spent so much of his life sitting at a desk thinking about abstractions that working with his hands – even something as simple as pulling weeds – helped him get out of his head and relax. He always had some sort of craft or construction project on going. He began doing this shortly after he started his software company. He needed something completely unrelated to work that would allow his mind to take a rest from the constant stress of building and running Roundhouse.

In the corner of his backyard was a small shed where he made most of his projects. He had built several pieces of furniture (some sturdy, some not) and had shaped at least twenty surfboards. He rode about half of the boards, and gave away or sold the others.

But his pride and joy was his vegetable garden. It was early July. The summer vegetable plants were finally getting big, and many of the vegetables were starting to ripen. He had several varieties of tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, peppers,

eggplant, kohlrabi, and even some chard and lettuce in a shady corner. In a way that he found difficult to explain, it gave Kelly just as much satisfaction growing vegetables as it had when he was building his business.

He was checking to see if any cucumbers were big enough to pick when Jim said, "Garden looks good."

Kelly turned around and smiled. Jim was standing on the grass. "Thanks," replied Kelly, "you should put one in at your place."

"I'd like to, but no time to work on it. The wife and I both are too tired when we get home from work. We just want to relax." Jim's final words trailed off into silence as he stared at something invisible to Kelly.

"Are you okay, man? I mean, the phone call to your folks."

Jim nodded. It took him a moment before he was able to speak. "They'll catch the next flight out. Probably be here tonight." But that was all he could say before he broke down sobbing.

Kelly rushed over to his friend and embraced him, saying quietly, "I'm so sorry."

Jim cried for a minute or so before regaining his composure. He pulled away from Kelly and wiped his eyes and nose. He took a few deep breaths. He changed the subject. “So how do you know that detective?”

“Uh, well, I met her about a year ago, but only really got to know her when I was working on decrypting the communications of a cross-border child pornography ring.”

Jim couldn't help but laugh a little.

“What?”

Jim shook his head. “You sound like James Bond or Sherlock Holmes or something.” Then, he paused for a moment and his face became very serious. “Is she good? I mean, if it turns out that Chrissy was Well, will she be able to find whoever did it?”

Kelly nodded. “I've worked with Padma on a few cases and have heard about her from others. She's good. Relentless.”

“I guess that makes me feel better,” he said, wiping his nose again.

“And,” Kelly added, “I will keep in contact with her and make sure she gets any help she needs.” Jim nodded his silent thanks.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Kelly continued, “who is this Eric Riggs character Chrissy was involved with?”

Jim sighed. “I met him about two months ago. She had been acting weird for a while, like she had a secret. Turns out, they had been dating for a few months by then. She really liked him, but I thought he was a creep. I mean, he *was* a nice guy, and had that older guy, suave thing going on, but early forties dating a twenty-two year old? Creep.”

“Did she know he was married?”

“She must have. But, even if she didn’t, she certainly found out.” Jim paused and sighed as he felt a wave of emotion rising. Because he was eight years older than Chrissy, Jim was always trying to protect her, but she wasn’t a little kid anymore. “She . . . she called me a couple weeks ago crying. Said that Mrs. Riggs stopped by her house, called her a slut, and then told her to stay away from her husband.”

Kelly considered this for a moment. He was not exactly sure how to ask what he wanted to, so he decided to be direct.

“Do you think . . . I mean, that one of them might have wanted to hurt Chrissy? The wife?”

“God, who knows? Other than the phone call about the wife, Chrissy didn’t say anything to me about the Riggs. The incident was probably just a pissed off wife venting.”

The two were quiet for a moment, contemplating. Then, Jim pointed to one of the vegetables and said, “What’s the hell is that? A beet?”

“No, it’s called kohlrabi. Tastes like jicama.”

Jim opened his mouth a bit and nodded. “You learn something new every day.” He turned around and walked over to a chair on the small concrete patio and sat down. He was done talking for a while. He sat there, staring into the distance. Kelly looked down at the dirt in his garden and saw an ant carrying a leaf about thirty times its size, oblivious to what was happening above it.

Chapter 5

Another hour passed before Padma knocked on the door. Jim was sitting in the recliner, while Kelly sat on the couch reading a book about the history of American beer brewing. Kelly got up and let her in.

“Hello, Mr. Dortmund,” she said. “We finished at the scene. We have your sister in the van.”

Jim nodded and started to stand up.

Padma put up her hand. “But, before we go, I was hoping I could speak with you a moment, if you feel up to it.”

“Sure,” he said as he sat back down.

Kelly looked around sheepishly. “Uh, should I step outside?”

“That’s up to Mr. Dortmund,” Padma responded in an official sounding voice.

“No, it’s cool. Stay here. You knew Chrissy a bit. Maybe you can help.”

Padma sat down on the couch and Kelly sat next to her. “We found your sister’s cell phone in her pocket. We checked it and found that she did not make or receive any phone calls after eight o’clock last night. But, she did engage in an interesting texting conversation around midnight.”

Padma pulled out her notebook. “The phone number from which they came was not in her contacts. I was wondering if maybe you recognize it?” She showed Jim a piece of paper on which the number was written. He studied it and then shook his head. “It was worth a shot. It looks like we’ll have to do a little digging to find out who owned the phone. But, the messages went like this.”

Incoming: Chrissy, are you still mad at me?

Outgoing: Who is this? I don’t recognize the number.

Incoming: It’s me, Eric.

Outgoing: Yeah, I am.

Incoming: Let me make it up to you.

Outgoing: Ping me when you are divorced.

Incoming: Please, just give me a chance. Let's meet and talk.

Outgoing: Won't your wife see these messages?

Incoming: I'm using a pre-paid phone. I just bought it. She doesn't know about it.

Here, Padma paused for a moment and gave Kelly a knowing glance, which he returned. Pre-paid phones were also known as "burners," meaning you used it once or twice and then threw it away. Criminals loved these sorts of phones because they were difficult to trace. If Riggs had purchased the burner with cash, it might be impossible to link him with the phone. Padma looked back down at her notebook and continued.

Outgoing: I don't know. It's crazy for us to be together.

Incoming: I won't lie any more. I promise.

Incoming: Please meet me.

Incoming: Please.

Outgoing: Okay.

Incoming: Great!!!! :) Can you meet tonight?

Outgoing: I guess.

Incoming: Meet me at the Stone Steps stairs at 1:00 am.

Outgoing: So late?

Incoming: Please?

Outgoing: Ok.

Jim looked up in shock. "I'll kill him," he said, standing up and starting toward the front door. Kelly and Padma jumped up and grabbed him.

"Come on, Jim. Wait, you can't do this," said Kelly.

"He killed my sister!"

"Mr. Dortmund," said Padma, "I know how it sounds, but believe me, sometimes things are not what they seem. We have to connect all the dots to be able to bring this guy to justice. Right now, we can't let Mr. Riggs know that we suspect him. If I knew for sure that he was involved in your sister's death, I would pick him up immediately. But right now, we don't have any evidence that this was anything

other than an accident. If Riggs did something wrong, he'll make a mistake, killers always do, and then we can use it to put him in jail for the rest of his life."

Kelly could feel the tension starting to leave Jim's body as Padma spoke. "Okay," said Jim, "I get it."

"Promise me you won't try to speak with Riggs? We need you to stay away in order to do our jobs. Please, let me help you," Padma emphasized the last sentence by squeezing Jim's shoulder as she said it.

"Yeah, sure," he said with a sad sigh.

Padma looked in Jim's eyes, wordlessly reassuring him that she would do all she could to find out what really happened to Chrissy. "Why don't you go out to the coroner's van? You'll have to sit up front, there is not enough room in the back. I'll meet you at the morgue in a while; I need to have a word with Kelly."

Jim nodded. He gave Kelly a look, opened the door, and left.

Padma had a concerned look on her face. "You think he will be alright? He won't confront Riggs, will he?"

"He'll be okay. He'll do what you asked," replied Kelly.

“Good.”

“You think Riggs killed her?”

“At this point, the death looks like an accident, but those text messages are concerning.”

“Jim told me that Mrs. Riggs confronted Chrissy about two weeks ago at her place. Maybe the wife has more motive than the husband?” suggested Kelly.

“Could be. I’ll be sure to explore that possibility,” promised Padma.

“Any chance you can keep me in the loop? I want to help. We’ve worked together before. You know I can be discreet.”

“I don’t know, Kelly,” Padma said, “you are too close to this.”

“I am close, but I know I can help.”

“How?”

“Well, using a pre-paid phone suggests someone planned ahead and wanted to communicate with Chrissy without being tracked. If Chrissy was murdered, it was premeditated.”

“Definitely,” agreed Padma. “And, it is someone who knew her number and knew the details of her recent break up. That should be a fairly limited number of people.” Padma paused and thought for a moment. “Look, if it turns out we are dealing with a homicide, we may need your help with the cell phone metadata. There must be something in there that could help determine who was using it.”

Kelly tilted his head and sighed. “Well, maybe we can figure out the cell tower used to send the text messages, but we can’t do that unless we can actually find the phone itself. I might be able to get some additional information too.”

Padma nodded knowingly. “I need to get going. I’ll keep you in the loop to the extent that I can without compromising the investigation.”

“I appreciate that. Jim is one of my best friends, and I knew Chrissy since she was a girl.”

Padma opened the door and stepped outside. As she walked down the short path to the gated fence, she turned and said, “After all this blows over, let’s do that surf lesson.”

Kelly felt his skin flush a bit. Fortunately, his tan kept it hidden from view. “For sure.”

I hope you liked reading the first five chapters of *A Death at Stone Steps*. If you would like to read the rest of the book, just head over to <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00ELX96PW> to get your copy.
