

CASEY

There's blood on the bottom of my shoes. I rinse the soles, knowing the police will trace the impression of the rubber pattern and determine that they're Skechers. They'll find the charge for the shoe store on my credit card, proving they're mine.

Blood runs down the drain. My heart races as though it's my own draining away, but it's not mine. My throat constricts as tears fill my eyes, but I push them away. There's no time to feel.

When the shoes seem clean enough, I blot them on a towel and slip them into my bag.

They'll see the traces of blood on the sink, in the footsteps at the door where I took the shoes off, on the towel. They'll shine that luminol stuff all through my apartment and add it to the evidence list against me. There's no point in wasting time cleaning it up. I just have to get out of here.

It's not easy to pack your life into a duffel bag, but I have no other options. I pack what I think I'll need—a skirt, two pairs of jeans, some shirts, a pair of scissors for cutting my hair as soon as I'm in a safe place, underwear, mascara, toothpaste and toothbrush, contacts case and glasses. I go to my dresser and slide out the drawer, dig past my socks to the cigar box at the back. I open it. The stacks of hundred-dollar bills are still there. This is my rainy day, the emergency I need the cash for. I stuff the stacks into my bag's pockets, then hurry into my tiny living room/kitchen combo and grab the framed pictures of my family from a shelf. I stuff them into the bag too.

Quickly, I write a check for my rent, tear it out, and leave it on the counter with a note to the landlord that he can rent my apartment and donate what I've left to Goodwill. I don't want him left holding the bag. I think of calling work and telling them I won't be back in, but it's better if I don't.

I slip my purse strap over my shoulder and carry the duffel out, then lock my apartment behind me, though I don't know why.

I see the blood on my car door handle as I get in. Ignoring it, I drive to a parking garage at a hotel downtown, leave it without looking back, and ride the elevator down to the hotel's

first floor. I slip into the ladies' room and pull my hair up in a ponytail, then tie a bandana around my head. I take out my contacts, wash off my eye makeup, and shove on my glasses. Then I carry my purse and duffel bag through the hotel's glass doors to the driveway, where cabs are waiting. I tip the bellman as he signals to one for me.

I get in and tell the driver to take me to the bus station.

They're probably not looking for me yet. It will be a while before they discover Brent's body. I give in to the temptation to pray, though I don't know if anyone will hear. I have trouble believing in God, but when I'm in a mess, my mind often formulates quiet pleas. I don't know what to ask for. Time? Distance? An escape path?

Justice?

Yeah, right.

I ask for help in general, trusting that if there's someone on the other end of those prayers, he'll know what I need. Loneliness falls over me like a fog as we drive through my town, and I wonder what I'll do without my friends. I love people. Always have. I don't like being alone.

And my family. My six-month-old niece who adds a new trick to her baby repertoire every week . . . will I ever see her again? The thought of never rocking her to sleep again is almost as brutal as the image of my best friend lying dead on the floor.

I let my eyes linger on the town I've grown to love. Funny, I didn't know I loved it until now.

TERRI BLACKSTOCK

I struggle to keep my mind from going back to what happened earlier. An hour ago? Two hours? I force my thoughts from the terror of it.

One step at a time. Get to the bus station. Then I can cry.