


CHESAPEAKE VALOR
— BOOK TWO —

STILL LIFE

DANI PETTREY



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Dani Pettrey, *Still Life*
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To Brenn Matthew:
Nannie loves you and can't wait for all
the adventures we'll have.
Just don't tell your momma. ;)



PROLOGUE

He glanced around what had become a dumping ground by the river's edge. Dark, silent . . . deserted. *Perfect.*

Popping the trunk of his car, he hefted the heavy garment bag out and trudged through the mud, the foul odor of rotting garbage and brackish water pungent on the wind lashing his face. A thunderstorm was brewing, churning the humid air. Lightning pierced the murky sky.

He found a fitting spot and tossed her away like the trash she was.

1

Inhaling a steady breath of the steamy August Baltimore air, Avery Tate paused a moment, clutching the metal door handle. This was it. Her first return to the Baltimore art scene since she'd been ostracized over a year ago.

Her grip tightened.

One more breath of the thick, sticky air and she yanked the cherrywood-and-beveled-glass door open. The cool of the gallery's AC rushed over her, rippling up her bare arms, her red satin dress thankfully not clinging to her after the muggy ten-minute walk from the parking spot she'd been lucky enough to find. An event like this made parking insane in Fell's Point.

The frenzy of conversation and lilting music buzzed as she stepped farther inside Christopher Fuller's gallery.

Her right heel wobbled, every nerve ending alive and dancing beneath her skin, whether from the cool of the building or from the circumstances she didn't know, but she fortified her gait and took another step forward.

She could fake walking in heels. How hard could it be?

One step at a time. You can do this. Hold your head high.

She'd overcome so much more than this petty group encircling her. The only reason the ostracism had hit so hard was because photography was where her heart lived . . . or had. Now it lived for Parker—a man of such depth, such sincerity albeit mixed with a playful spirit she adored and . . .

And why was she thinking about Parker Mitchell *again*? It'd been six months since they'd worked together as crime-scene investigator and crime-scene photographer. Nine months since she'd fully realized the depth of her feelings for him, but . . . She swallowed, the motion painful. Parker could never be hers, at least not fully.

Part of his heart, a huge part, would always belong to Jenna McCray. She understood. Jenna was Parker's first love, and her devastating murder seven years ago, when Jenna was just shy of her eighteenth birthday, had been horrific, but Avery couldn't spend the rest of her life with a man who loved someone else so deeply, a man who loved another woman more than her.

Forcing her attention back where it belonged, at least for tonight, she squared her shoulders and assessed her surroundings, as Parker had taught her to do.

Man, he lived in her head—her thoughts always drifting to him and their time together. Oh, she still saw him through mutual friends, but she could no longer handle working side by side. Unless she could permanently be at his side, she couldn't continue long hours, late nights, and close proximity in his lab. She missed him something terrible.

“Avery Tate, is that *you*?”

She needn't bother turning to find it was Marjorie Thrasher. Her effervescent voice—the unmistakable combo of shrill pitch and Yonkers accent—readily identified the elderly yet vivacious

woman. Of all the people to run into first, Marjorie was a great one.

Avery turned—well, *teetered*—around, praying her heels held firm on the recently buffed hardwood floor.

Marjorie's copper-painted lips puckered. "Oh, darling. I knew it was you. Whatever are *you* doing here?" Her faux lashes fluttered as she looked Avery up and down. "Don't tell me you're back in the crowd?"

"No." *Most definitely not.* "Just here to support a friend." Maybe if she kept reminding herself of that, along with the pivotal fact she was supporting Skylar *here* and not where they'd grown up . . . *Here* wasn't much more comfortable and, in all fairness, was probably just as toxic, but at least it wasn't *physically* hostile. Verbally hostile—absolutely—but fear of what others might say no longer paralyzed her. As her momma said, she had a fighter's heart.

The fact her mom had said those words the day she'd abandoned Avery imprinted the description on Avery's young mind, but it was true. She *was* a fighter and she loved that fact. Skylar Pierce was a fighter too, just on a very dangerous path, which Avery kept trying to yank her from.

Marjorie's thoroughly plucked brows, or rather what little remained of them, attempted to arch, but it was difficult when they were practically fastened in place due to Marjorie's addiction to Botox injections. Her smile, whether genuine or not, was permanent, her lips double the plump. "You aren't referring to Gerry, are you?"

Avery smothered her upchuck reflex. "No."

"I don't understand." Marjorie took a sip of her chocolate martini, the brown syrup swirling around the glass in fanciful patterns. Marjorie loved her martinis.

"A friend of mine modeled for him," she said. She and Skylar

had been friends since birth. Or at least their mothers had been. Both young, pregnant, and living in the same trailer park, they had naturally gravitated toward each other, and in turn Avery and Skylar had grown up together. That's what made their current relationship so difficult. She loved Sky like a sister but felt utterly helpless to do anything to prevent her self-inflicted destruction.

"Oooh. Which one?" Marjorie's bony fingers grasped Avery's arm, tugging her from her thoughts and through the milling crowd huddled at the center wall's morbid display.

Leave it to Gerard "Gerry" Vaughn to present a distasteful Black Dahlia-inspired showing.

Five portraits—each of a woman appearing to be captured post-mortem—hung perfectly aligned on the white surface, the lighting deftly illuminating each image. The women, dressed in fanciful gowns and striking makeup, appeared frozen in time—nearly lifeless. *Nearly*, except Skylar's. Something about hers stood out. Something was different. But what?

Skylar's pale skin, which must have been enhanced—no one's skin color was that even and flawless, even with makeup—formed a striking contrast to her red lipstick and the matching bloodred dahlia cradled in her open palm. Gerard had paid impressive attention to detail—the gleaming black nail polish, the silky texture of the scarf wrapped like a choker around her neck, and her dark hair pulled back, accentuating her dark eyes and pale face. Despite the grotesque subject matter, the portrait was artistically brilliant. But something was tugging at Avery. Something about Skylar's eyes. They were so dark, her pupils larger than usual, void of life—wells of emptiness.

The arresting image reminded Avery of the Brothers Grimm's description of Snow White—"Soon afterward she had a little daughter who was as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as ebony."

“Come, dear,” Marjorie said, pulling Avery to the next image before she was fully finished studying Skylar’s. “This one is to die for. Oops.” Marjorie giggled, tipping her martini glass and nearly spilling its swirly brown contents onto Avery’s favorite and only dressy dress.

“No pun intended.” Marjorie broke into another round of giggles as several lackeys in the surrounding crowd chuckled along with her, or more likely, at her. Marjorie was hardly a conformist, and most people weren’t sure how to take her. While Avery admired her individualism among a crowd of clones, there wasn’t a whole lot else to admire. She’d just ended marriage number three, and rumor was she’d already begun a dalliance with one of Gerry’s understudies.

“What do you think?” Marjorie poked her finger into Avery’s exposed right shoulder.

The image Marjorie gestured at was stunning compositionally, but again highly grotesque in content. The woman—dressed in a mustard-yellow satin ball gown and posed upon a fluffy white comforter covering a pitch-black four-poster bed—was bent backward, her torso hanging over the edge of the bed. Her blond hair, hanging long and free, flowed from her pale face. Her lips were a deep shade of burgundy, her eyes vivid blue with charcoal shadow. The entire image was a striking juxtaposition of colors: light and dark, life and apparent death. Even her expression was impressive—nearly devoid of life.

As Marjorie tugged her to the next piece in the showcase, Avery searched the crowd for Skylar. She wanted to congratulate her friend on landing the “gig of the century,” as Sky put it, and head out before Gerry appeared. He *adored* making a grand, fashionably late entrance, even if he was already in the building, just waiting somewhere in the shadows for his

moment. While she was thankful he hadn't appeared yet, she really wished Skylar would.

The portrait now before her was vastly different from the first two—a woman, dressed in a simple eyelet dress, falling into the depths of a body of water. Her arms and legs limp and lifeless, round rings circling up to the surface from whence she came. It looked eerily real. Though pompous and vapid, Gerry was extremely talented.

“Of course *you* show up. The wrong piece of trailer trash doesn't help me any,” Gerard said mere inches behind Avery, his breath hot on her neck and reeking of gin, as usual.

Balling her hands into fists, she turned to face him. Man, how she'd like to get him into the kickboxing ring just once. “Excuse me?”

“You're not interchangeable, you know,” he said.

“What are you talking about?”

“You show up for Skylar's showing, but she does not.”

“What?” Skylar was a flake when it came to timeliness, but she'd gone on and on about how important tonight was. Was she seriously late for her own showing?

“She's not here,” Gerard said, turning to face Skylar's portrait. And a string of expletive-laden sentiments followed. “What. Is. That?”

“Skylar's portrait,” Avery said. Exactly how inebriated was he?

“It's magnificent,” Marjorie gushed.

“It's trash. Just like the girl in it.” Gerard pushed past them, nearly knocking Avery over, and hollered, “*Who* did this? You think this is some kind of joke?”

A woman scurried over, moving as fast as her tight pencil skirt and three-inch heels would permit. “What's wrong?”

“Who. Did. This?” He shoved her toward the portrait, enunciating each word with disdain.

She took a brief moment to study it. “I don’t understand.”

“Well, that makes two of us, Nadine. Did you oversee the hanging of the showcase or did you not?”

“I . . . I did.”

“And?”

“Your original portrait of Skylar was hung.”

“Then how did *this* get in its place, and where is my masterpiece?”

Christopher Fuller, the gallery owner, rushed over, concern and a tad of horror mixed on his handsome face.

Patrons were staring, murmuring. This was not good for business. And with Gerard being one of the highest-paid photographers in the country, an egomaniac worth millions with zero tolerance for incompetence, if something had happened to Gerry’s photograph, Christopher was looking at serious financial damage.

“What happened?” Christopher asked, glancing at Avery with disdain, but rapidly shifting his focus to the distraught and fuming Gerard Vaughn instead.

“*This*,” Gerard said, “is an outrage.”

Christopher swallowed. “I don’t understand.” Even he was scared of the man. It was ridiculous. He loosened his collar, his gaze darting to the crowd. “Every piece was hung and lit to your exact specifications. Nadine oversaw the entire process.”

“That,” Gerard hissed, pointing at the portrait of Skylar that Nadine had lifted off the wall and now held in trembling hands, “is hardly my work.”

A mixture of confusion and concern danced through Avery’s gut. “If you didn’t take that photograph, then who did?”

“That is the pertinent question, is it not?” Gerard’s plump cheeks were nearly as red as his drinker’s nose. For an artist of his standing in the photography world, he certainly didn’t act like a professional.

“I checked everything fifteen minutes before the doors opened,” Nadine said in a flustered flurry. “Someone would have had to change it very quickly while we were all in Christopher’s office.”

So Christopher still held his preshow pep talk for the artists and staff before opening the gallery doors.

“Did they think I wouldn’t notice? They stole my masterpiece and replaced it with *this* . . . ?” Gerard gestured to the portrait. “Outrage, I tell you. Outrage!” he roared at Christopher. “I’m calling the authorities.”

“FBI handles art theft,” Avery said. “You’ll want to contact them.”

Gerald let out a burst of air. “At least you’re good for something.”

Avery forced herself to remain silent as Gerard stomped off. He wasn’t worth it. Instead she retrieved her phone and dialed Skylar. What had she done?