



[Deadly Intent](#)

by

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The Grant family's exclusive Sonoma spa is a place for rest and relaxation—not murder! When Naomi Grant finds her client Jessica Ortiz bleeding to death in her massage room, everything falls apart. The salon's reputation is at stake...and so is Naomi's freedom when she discovers that she is one of the main suspects! Her only solace is found with the other suspect—Dr. Devon Knightley, the victim's ex-husband. But Devon is hiding secrets of his own. When they come to light, where can Naomi turn...and whom can she trust?

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Excerpt of chapter one:

Chapter One

The man who walked into Naomi's father's day spa was striking enough to start a female riot.

Dark eyes swept the room, which happened to be filled with the Sonoma spa's staff at that moment. She felt his gaze glance over her like a tingling breeze. Naomi recognized him instantly. Dr. Devon Knightley.

For a wild moment, she thought, *He's come to see me.* And her heart twirled in a riotous dance.

But only for a moment. Sure, they'd talked amiably— actually, more than amiably—at the last Zoe International fund-raising dinner, but after an entire evening sitting next to her, he hadn't asked for her phone number, hadn't asked for any contact information at all. Wasn't that a clear sign he wasn't interested?

She quashed the memory and stepped forward in her official capacity as the spa owner's daughter and acting manager. "Dr. Knightley. Welcome."

He clasped her hand with one tanned so brown that it seemed to bring the heat of the July sun into the airy, air-conditioned entranceway. "Miss Naomi Grant." His voice had more than a shot of surprise, as did his looks as he took in her pale blue linen top and capris, the same uniform as the gaggle of spa staff members gathered behind her. "It's been a few months since I've seen you."

He still held her hand. She loved the feel of his palm— cool and warm at the same time, strong the way a surgeon's should be.

No, she had to stop this. Devon and his family were hard-core atheists, and nothing good would come out of giving in to her attraction. "What brings you here?"

"I need to speak to Jessica Ortiz."

An involuntary spasm seized her throat. Of course. Glamorous client Jessica Ortiz or plain massage therapist Naomi Grant—no comparison, really.

But something in his tone didn't quite have the velvety sheen of a lover. He sounded almost... dangerous. And danger didn't belong in the spa. Their first priority was to protect the privacy of the guests.

"Er... Ms. Ortiz?" Naomi glanced at Sarah, one of the receptionists, whose brow wrinkled as she studied her computer monitor behind the receptionists' desk. Naomi knew she was stalling—she didn't need to look because she'd checked Ms. Ortiz into the elite Tamarind Lounge almost two hours before.

Naomi's aunt Becca also stood at the receptionists' desk, stepping aside from her spa hostess duties to allow Naomi to handle Dr. Knightley, but Aunt Becca's eyes had a sharp look that conveyed her message clearly to Naomi: the clients' privacy and wishes come first.

Naomi cleared her throat. "Are you her physician?"

Dr. Knightley frowned down at her, but she kept her air of calm friendliness. He grimaced and looked away. "Er... no."

Naomi blinked. He could have lied, but he hadn't. "If you'll wait here, I can see if Ms. Ortiz is available to come out here to see you." If Jessica declined to come out, Naomi didn't want to think what Devon's reaction would be.

His eyes grew stormier. "Couldn't you just let me walk in back to see her?"

"I'm sorry, but we can't allow nonfamily members into the back rooms. And men are not allowed in the women's lounges." Especially the secluded Tamarind Lounge, reserved only for Tamarind members who paid the exorbitant membership fee.

"Naomi, surely you can make an exception for me?" He suddenly flashed a smile more blinding than her receptionist's new engagement ring.

His switching tactics—from threatening to charming— annoyed her more than his argumentative attitude. She crossed her arms. "I'm afraid not." She had to glance away to harden herself against the power of that smile.

"You don't understand. It's important that I see her, and it won't take long." He leaned closer, using his height to intimidate.

He had picked the wrong woman to irritate. Maybe her frustrated attraction made her exceptionally determined to thwart him. Her jaw clenched and she couldn't help narrowing her eyes. "Joy Luck Life Spa has many high-profile clients. If we let anyone into our elite lounges, we'd lose our sterling reputation for privacy and discretion."

"You don't understand how important this is—"

"Dr. Knightley, so nice to see you again." Aunt Becca stepped forward and inserted herself between the good doctor and Naomi's line of vision. She held out a thin hand, which Devon automatically took. "Why don't I set you up in the Chervil Lounge while Naomi looks for Ms. Ortiz?"

Aunt Becca whirled around faster than a tornado. Her eyes promised trouble if Naomi didn't comply. "Naomi."

Aunt Becca's taking charge of the conversation seemed to drive home the point that although Dad had left Naomi in charge of the spa while he recovered from his stroke, she still had a long way to go toward learning good customer relations. Part of her wanted to be belligerent toward Devon just to prove she was in the right, but the other part of her wilted at her failure as a good manager.

She walked into the back rooms and paused outside the door to the Tamarind Lounge, consciously relaxing her face. Deep breath in. Gently open the door.

Softly pitched conversation drifted into silence. Two pairs of eyes flickered over her from the crimson silk chaise lounges in the far corner of the luxuriant room, but neither of

them belonged to Jessica Ortiz. Vanilla spice wafted around her as she headed toward the two women, trying to glide calmly, as the daughter of the spa owner should.

"Good morning, ladies. I apologize for the intrusion."

"Is it already time for my facial?" The elderly woman gathered her Egyptian cotton robe around her and prepared to stand.

"No, not yet, Ms. Cormorand. I've come to ask if either of you have seen Ms. Ortiz."

An inscrutable look passed between them. What had Jessica done to offend these clients in only the couple of hours she'd been at the spa? Jessica seemed to be causing the spa more and more trouble recently.

The other woman finally answered, "No, she left about a half hour ago for her massage. I thought she was with you."

Naomi cleared her throat to hide her start. Jessica's appointment was at eleven, in fifteen minutes, not now.

"Yes, doesn't she always ask for you when she comes?" Ms. Cormorand blinked faded blue eyes at her.

Naomi shoved aside a brief frisson of unease. Jessica should be easy to find. "Which massage therapist called for her?"

"Oh, I don't know." Ms. Cormorand waved a pudgy hand beringed with rubies and diamonds. "Someone in a blue uniform."

Only one of almost a hundred staff workers at the spa.

"Thank you, ladies. Ms. Cormorand, Haley will call you for your facial in fifteen minutes." Naomi inclined her head and left the room, trying to let the sounds of running water from the fountain in the corner calm her growing sense of unease.

Where could Jessica have gone? And an even juicier question: Why did Devon Knightley need to speak to her?

She peeked into the larger Rosemary lounge, which was for the use of spa clients who were not Tamarind members. Several women chatted in small groups, but no Jessica Ortiz. Naomi hadn't really expected Jessica to forgo the more comfortable elite lounge, but the only other option was checking each of the treatment rooms individually.

She headed into the back area where the therapy rooms were located, navigating the hallway scattered with teak and bamboo furniture, each sporting East Asian cushions and throws, artfully arranged by Aunt Becca. Had Jessica switched to a different massage

therapist? And had someone forgotten to tell Naomi in the excitement of Sarah's new engagement?

As she moved down the hallway, she started noticing a strange, harsh scent suffusing the mingled smells of sandalwood and vanilla. Not quite as harsh as chemicals, but not a familiar aromatherapy fragrance, a slightly discordant counterpoint to the spa's relaxing perfume.

She knew that smell, but couldn't place it. And it didn't conjure up pleasant associations. She started to hurry.

She first looked into the women's restroom, her steps echoing against the Italian tile. No sound of running water, but she peeked into the shower area. A few women were in the rooms with the claw-foot bathtubs, and a couple more in the whirlpool room, but no Jessica. No one using the toilets.

The mirrored makeup area had a handful of women, but again no Jessica. Naomi smiled at the clients to hide her disappointment and growing anxiety as she entered. She noticed some towels on the floor, a vase of orchids a little askew, and some lotions out of place on the marble counter running the length of the room, so she tidied up as if she had intended to do so, although the staff assigned to restroom duty typically kept things spic and span.

She peeked into the sauna. A rather loud ring of laughing women, but no Jessica.

Back out in the central fountain area, the harsh smell seemed stronger, but she couldn't pinpoint where it came from. Had a sewage pipe burst? No, it wasn't that sort of smell. It didn't smell rotten, just... had an edge to it.

She entered the locker area, although the Joy Luck Life Spa "lockers" were all carved teakwood cabinets, individually locked with keys. The smell jumped tenfold. Naomi scoured the room. Maybe it came from a client's locker? No. Maybe the dirty laundry hamper?

Bingo.

She flipped open the basketweave lid.

And screamed.

Chapter Two

The scream pierced Devon's eardrums. Beside him, Becca Itoh started. The heavy wooden double doors she'd just opened, leading to the men's lounge, clunked closed again as she turned and headed back down the corridor they'd walked.

"Where—?" He kept up with her, but not easily—for a woman in her fifties, she could book it.

"The women's lounge area." She pointed ahead as she hustled closer. "Those mahogany double doors at the end."

Devon sprinted ahead and yanked open the doors. "Stay behind me."

Becca ignored him, thrusting ahead and shouting, "Naomi!" as they entered a large circular entry area with more corridors leading from it. "Naomi!"

A door to their right burst open and Naomi Grant spilled into the entry room. "Aunt Becca!" Her face was the same shade as the cream-colored walls. "There's blood in the women's locker room."

"Blood?" Becca reached for her as Devon pushed past her into the room she'd just exited.

Despite the urgency, he couldn't help but be awed by the fountain in the center of a vast chamber with a veined-tile floor. Scrollwork signs on the walls pointed to "sauna" and "whirlpool" and "locker room." Luckily, no women appeared. He veered right.

He almost wasn't sure he'd actually arrived in the right place, but the carpeted room lined with teakwood locking cabinets was in line with the luxurious entry hall of what he realized was the women's bathroom.

The metallic smell of blood reached him. He followed his nose to the basket hamper in the corner, filled with bloody towels. It reminded him of the discarded gauzes from his orthopedic surgeries, bright red and a lot more than the average person saw.

This was not good.

He returned to the two women. Naomi's hands were visibly shaking, although her voice remained low and calm. "And I couldn't find Ms. Ortiz."

Jessica's name still caused the reflexive crunching of his jaw. But he'd never wanted any harm to come to her—she wasn't a bad person, they had just clashed too much on personal matters. And now she was missing, and there was an immense amount of blood in the bathroom. Devon's heart beat in a light staccato against his throat. She had to be okay.

"Where else have you looked?" He scanned the other corridors leading from the fountain entryway. He'd need guidance or he'd get lost in this labyrinth.

“I haven’t checked the therapy rooms yet.” Naomi nodded toward the larger central corridor, which ended at another set of double doors.

He headed toward them when Becca reached out to grab his arm in a bony but strong grip. “You can’t just barge into private sessions.”

“Why not?” He turned to face the two women. “There’s blood in your bathroom and Jessica Ortiz is missing.”

Naomi’s light brown eyes skewered him. “Do you really think it’s wise to cause a panic?”

“And I suppose you have another option?”

“Sessions don’t last more than an hour or ninety minutes. We’ll wait for those to finish—if Jessica’s just in one of those, there’s nothing to worry about. In the meantime, we’ll check all the empty session rooms,” Naomi said.

Becca turned to leave and said over her shoulder, “I’ll check on the schedule at the receptionists’ desk to find out which rooms have clients and when the sessions end. I’ll call you on your cell.”

Naomi turned down a corridor in the opposite direction, this one lined with bamboo tables draped with shimmery, lavender-colored fabric so light that it swayed as they moved past.

It reminded Devon of the papery silks he’d seen in Thailand, giving the spa a soothing and very Asian atmosphere. His heartbeat slowed. Jessica was probably fine and had accidentally taken someone else’s session in her artless, friendly way. She’d emerge from a facial or a manicure in a few minutes and wonder what all the fuss was about.

A group of three therapists turned a corner. They spied Naomi and immediately stopped chatting amongst themselves, although not fearfully—more out of respect that the boss was suddenly in front of them.

“Girls, have you seen Ms. Ortiz?” Naomi’s smile seemed perfectly natural and warm—inviting a rapport with her staff, yet not too cozy. If Devon hadn’t noticed her fingers plucking at the linen fabric of her pants, he wouldn’t have known how anxious she was.

Two of them shook their heads, but the tall blond woman to his left nodded and pointed directly across the corridor. “I saw her talking to Ms. Fischer about an hour ago before Ms. Fischer went in for her manicure.”

His heartbeat picked up. “An hour ago?”

The blonde eyed him with a hard look, but a quick glance at Naomi seemed to allay her suspicions. He had the impression that if her boss hadn't been by his side, he'd have been thrown out, even if it took all three women to do it.

Naomi was shaking her head. "Ms. Cormorand saw her leave the Tamarind lounge only thirty minutes ago."

His hopes popped and fizzled.

The blonde jerked her head at the nearby door. "Ms. Fischer is almost done in room thirty-five if you want to talk to her anyway."

"That's a good idea. Thanks, Betsy."

Betsy nodded, and the silent trio headed down the corridor and around the corner.

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