

New York Times and *USA TODAY* Bestselling Author

JACI BURTON

This secret is a killer...

"Hot, sexy romantic
suspense at its best!"

—*New York Times* bestselling
author Lora Leigh

THE HEART OF A KILLER

Jaci Burton

The Heart of a Killer

Аннотация

Before the Special Forces hero has even unpacked his bags from twelve years of active duty, he's embroiled in murder—corpses bearing the brutal trademark he's seen only once before—on the worst night of his life. The last time Detective Anna Pallino saw Dante Renaldi, they were in love. Now, he's part of the connection to a string of fresh homicides and a horrible assault Anna only survived thanks to him. More than anything, Anna wants to trust Dante. But as the bodies and the coincidences stack up, Anna will have to decide, and fast: Is the man she owes her life to the very same one who wants her dead?

No one said coming home would be easy. But for Dante Renaldi, it's murder.

Before the Special Forces hero has even unpacked his bags from twelve years of active duty, he's embroiled in murder—corpses bearing the brutal trademark he's seen only once before—on the worst night of his life.

The last time Detective Anna Pallino saw Dante Renaldi, they were in love. Now, he's part of the connection to a string of fresh homicides and a horrible assault that Anna only survived thanks to him.

More than anything, Anna wants to trust Dante. But as the bodies and the coincidences stack up, Anna will have to decide, and fast: Is the man she owes her life to the very same one who wants her dead?

Praise for the novels of Jaci Burton

“Sexy, smart, edge-of-the-seat romance... Jaci Burton always delivers a great read.”

—New York Times bestselling author Lara Adrian

“In the hands of the talented Burton, the characters leap off the page and the romance sparkles as the sex sizzles.”

—RT Book Reviews on *The Perfect Play*, Top pick!

“Hot, sexy, romantic suspense at its best!”

—New York Times bestselling author Lora Leigh on *Riding on Instinct*

“Burton continues to display a deft hand as she combines emotional drama with plenty of sizzling sex and dangerous

action.”

—RT Book Reviews on Taken by Sin

“Burton brings the heat, jazzing her otherworldly suspense plot with numerous passionate interludes, without letting the explosive good vs. evil saga flag. Hot sex, fierce battles and an impending sequel make this title worth hunting down.”

—Publishers Weekly on Hunting the Demon

The Heart of a Killer

Jaci Burton



www.mirabooks.co.uk

For Charlie, a man whose support is limitless, whose patience is endless and whose love keeps me going every day.

Thank you for helping me live this dream.

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

Prologue

St. Louis, Missouri

Twelve Years Ago

Five minutes till closing time. Anna Pallino scrubbed down the counters at the ice-cream shop while keeping her eye on the clock. They'd be walking in any minute, hoping for free ice cream while she closed up. They always showed. They were predictable. She loved that about them. Her guys. The brothers, though not

by blood.

She bent down to put away the cones, when she heard the bell tinkle above the door. She smiled as she stood.

Yup. Always predictable. There they were—Dante, Gabe, Roman and Jeff.

Her heart tripped a beat when she settled her gaze on Dante. He was hers. Her boyfriend, the first guy she'd ever fallen in love with. Tall, with dark brown hair, blue eyes, everything she'd ever dreamed of in a boyfriend.

He grinned and swung into his seat at the counter.

“Rocky Road, please, Miss Pallino.”

She gave him a stern look. “I’m sorry, sir, but we’re closing.”

He rose, leaned over the counter and batted those dark, sinfully too-long lashes at her. “Aw, come on, baby. Not even for me and my guys?”

She laughed, went around the counter and locked the door, closed the blinds and turned the sign to Closed. “So what kind of mayhem did you guys get into tonight?”

“Best behavior, Anna,” Gabe said, leaning his elbow against the counter.

If Anna hadn’t fallen madly in love with Dante, she would have with Gabe. What girl wouldn’t, with his jet-black hair and mesmerizing sea-green eyes. He was broader than Dante and nearly as tall. He and Dante were the same age, and at nearly eighteen, they were the oldest of all the guys.

But she’d fallen hard for Dante, and after that she’d never

even thought about another guy. And with her being just sixteen, Anna was jazzed about having an older boyfriend. She was the envy of all her friends. Though her father wasn't totally thrilled about her choice of boyfriends. But Dante was always on his best behavior around her dad. And with Dante living at George and Ellen Clemons's house, there wasn't much her dad could say. It was a good foster home and they were a stern but loving family who'd raised a lot of great kids. Even her dad thought so. He was thawing on Dante.

"Yeah, Ellen would have our asses if we got into any trouble," Dante added.

"Isn't that the truth?" Jeff nodded. "We have to behave or Momma will kick our butts."

"She isn't our mother," Roman said, his head down, his expression sullen. "She and George are our foster parents."

"Oh, can it, Roman." Dante shoved an elbow into Roman's ribs. "They're the best parents we've ever had in all our shitty lives and you know it. Why don't you give up the poor-lost-boy act?"

"Yeah," Jeff said. "We're together. We don't get in trouble. We eat three squares and they're nice to us. They're good parents."

Roman shrugged. "I guess."

"No 'I guess' about it," Gabe said. "You're just pissed off because you lost the race over here." Gabe nudged him. Roman nudged back, and soon the two of them were tangled in arms and elbows and laughing, which made Anna exhale as the tension receded.

She couldn't imagine what it must be like to grow up without parents, shuffled from foster home to foster home. She'd known them since her freshman year, when she'd met Dante and the rest of the guys. They were like brothers to her. Well, all except Dante. Definitely not a brother to her. "How about some ice cream?"

"That's why we're here, isn't it?" Jeff grinned and leaned over the case, scoping out the flavors.

They told her what they wanted and she served it up. While they ate she finished putting everything away, then bagged up the trash. "I'm going to take this out back while you eat. Then we can go watch movies at my house. My dad rented a couple of horror movies for us."

"I'll take that out back for you." Dante stood and started to come behind the counter.

"Nope." She held out her hand. "It will only take a sec. Finish your ice cream. I want to get out of here."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. Your job is to watch over the horde. Make sure they don't drip or break anything or I'll have to start cleanup all over again."

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a wink.

Anna laughed, grabbed the trash and headed out the back door of the shop into the alley. The Dumpster was a short walk over.

The ice-cream shop was set in a series of tall buildings, mainly offices that housed banks and corporations. The shop stayed

open late anyway because of the movie theater across the street. Kids always stopped by after the last show. But that meant there were no restaurants or retail and the alley was deserted at night. Creepy as hell for all the kids who worked at the shop, but Anna enjoyed the quiet. Her tennis shoes squicked on the wet ground, the sound echoing off the walls of the buildings.

It was so hot tonight. It had rained earlier and she dodged puddles and discarded soda cans and miscellaneous trash as she made her way down the dark alley. Humidity sucked the breath from her and she was wet with sweat by the time she got to the Dumpster.

She lifted the lid, holding her breath as she hoisted the trash into the container, then hurriedly dropped the lid. Ugh. She hated this part. It smelled so bad in there, like something died. She always imagined something decaying in there, like an animal or even a body. The drawback of having a police-detective father and listening to horror stories at the dinner table about where he'd found the latest victim. Yeah, this alley would be a perfect dumping spot, too. Isolated, no one around at night to witness what went down.

And now she'd crept herself out. Great.

Shuddering, she turned to head back to the shop, when an arm snaked around her waist and jerked her backward.

Her scream went unheard as his hand clamped tight to her mouth. She squirmed, trying to get away, but his other arm was a band around her, pinning her arms tight to her sides. She kicked

out, but he dragged her behind the Dumpster, then fell with her, immediately turning to drop on top of her.

Rocks jabbed into her back as she hit the ground, the breath knocked from her. He was so heavy. His hand was still over her mouth.

No. No!

Her heart pounded so fast she felt the slamming against her chest. She couldn't breathe. Nausea surged in her throat. She was going to throw up. The ground was wet from the rain earlier tonight. It stunk behind the Dumpster. What did he want? He was rolling on top of her, pinning her with his body.

She needed to scream, to let Dante know where she was, but the man's hand still clamped tight over her mouth.

"Don't scream, bitch, or I'll kill you," he whispered against her ear.

She felt something sharp against her throat. A knife.

Oh, God. Oh, God. She froze, tried to still her shaking body, not wanting to do anything that would make him stab her.

Was she going to die?

His breath was bad, just as bad as the garbage in the Dumpster. She felt something hard between her legs as he moved against her.

Please, help me. Somebody help me.

The guys weren't far away. Did she leave the back door to the shop open? She couldn't remember. If only she could scream they might hear her. She was sweating and cold, shivering so hard.

Something underneath her was scratching her. She struggled to push him off so she could catch a breath, but he was stronger than she was.

Please get off me. I just want to breathe. I can't breathe!

They'd come help her. They'd get here in time. If only she could scream. She had to get out of this. This couldn't be happening to her.

She squeezed her eyes shut.

Buttons scattered across the alley as he jerked her blouse open, revealing her little pink bra. She'd worn the blouse for Dante, her favorite blouse. Pink and white checks with tiny heart buttons. She'd even chosen white shorts to match. She was lying on the filthy ground now in her white shorts, felt the moisture from the ground seeping through, knew they'd be ruined. She was ruined. Tears pricked her eyes, the burn making her blink. She didn't know whether to keep her eyes open, to try to see what he looked like, or keep them shut so she wouldn't recognize him, so he might let her live.

What was it her dad had always tried to teach her? She couldn't remember. She didn't want to be here. She wanted to be inside the shop with the guys. The guys were in there. They'd help her.

He grabbed her breast, squeezed it hard. It hurt. Oh, it hurt. He moved the knife down along her throat to her chest.

"You're mine, bitch. Always mine."

He cut through her bra. She was shaking so hard now that chills racked her body. He bent down and licked her nipple.

Bile rose in her throat and she turned her head away. She wouldn't watch. She couldn't.

But now she remembered what her dad said. Fight. Don't give in.

This was different. No way was she going to die. She'd do anything not to die.

Then he cut her. Oh, God, he was cutting her. It burned like her skin was on fire. She felt the warm trickle of blood down her chest. Nothing had ever hurt this bad. She couldn't believe this was happening.

And then she knew. He was going to kill her.

Her dad was right. She had to fight. If she was going to die, she wasn't going to go lying here and letting him do what he wanted to her.

She opened her eyes, stared at him, memorized his face. She wanted him to know she saw him. Then she bit down on his hand and he jerked it away. Taking that brief second, she opened her mouth and screamed. He slapped her so hard she couldn't think through the dizziness.

He clamped his hand over her mouth again, his other hand jerking at her shorts.

Please, please, somebody help me!

"Anna's taking a long time with the trash." Dante got up and went behind the counter toward the back door.

"You know she gets mad when you go back there," Jeff said.

"I don't care. I should have taken the trash out for her. I don't

like her out there by herself.”

“You just wanna go out there so you can kiss her,” Roman said with a roll of his eyes. “I’m ready to go watch movies.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dante said as he opened the back door, and heard the scream.

He pushed off the door and ran like hell, not even bothering to see if the others followed. He ran so hard his legs burned, his whole body shaking in fear.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw a guy scrambling to his feet near the Dumpster. And he saw feet—tennis shoes. Anna’s.

Shit. Shit. He skidded to a stop at the Dumpster.

Anna was on the ground, her clothes undone. It was pitch-black out there, but he could see her, pale and shivering and bleeding.

Goddammit.

“Grab him!” He motioned to Gabe and the others as they whizzed by him.

Dante had dropped to his knees in front of Anna. She was bleeding at her chest. Her blouse was torn, her face swollen. Tears welled in his eyes and emotion he’d never felt before filled him. He wanted to grab her and cry. He hadn’t cried since his parents...

Hold it together for Anna.

“You okay?”

She nodded, jerking the tattered edges of her blouse together.

“How bad are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re bleeding.” He pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket. “Let me see.”

She squeezed her hands tight over her chest.

“Anna, baby, let me see how bad it is.”

She lifted tear-filled eyes to his and it shredded a hole in his heart, especially when she dropped her hands and her blouse fell away. The guy had cut her bra in half. Dante swallowed and patted at the spot where the bastard had cut her, just above her left breast. There, he’d carved the shape of a heart.

Goddamn. Son of a bitch. Motherfucker.

Rage blinded him. Dante heard his own breath sawing in and out, felt his blood pounding in his ears. He wanted to tear the guy apart. But right now he had to focus on Anna. He forced himself to smile down at her as he pressed the handkerchief to her chest. He unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged it off his shoulders, leaving him in only his tank top.

“It’s okay. It’s going to be all right. Put this on.” He helped her slide her arms into his shirt, then buttoned every single button. “You stay right here and I’ll be back for you, okay?”

She looked up at him, her bottom lip trembling. Then she gave him a brief nod. She was alive. That’s all that mattered.

Dante stood and turned to where the guys had cornered the bastard who’d done this. He’d hurt Anna. Dante didn’t even want to think about what else he’d done to her.

Anger and rage and guilt boiled inside him. The guy stood there with a smart-ass smirk on his face like he didn't have a care in the world.

"She okay?" Gabe asked as Dante stepped beside him.

Dante swallowed. "He hurt her. He cut her." Dante put his hand on his chest where Anna's wound was.

"Fuck," Gabe whispered.

They all knew, would all feel the same fury that someone would hurt Anna.

Sweet Anna, who didn't have a mean word for anyone, who would never hurt anyone.

The others stepped away as Dante came toward him. The guy jerked back as if he was going to run.

Oh, no, you don't.

Dante tackled the guy before he could get away, flinging his body on top of him. It was insane after that. Instinct kicked in, all those years of street fights with fists and knives. Of survival, of doing whatever it took to stay alive, of defending those who couldn't defend themselves.

Anna hadn't been able to defend herself. This guy was twice her size.

Men didn't hurt women.

The guy rolled and kicked Dante away, then sprang to his feet, pulling a knife. A bloody knife—Anna's blood.

Anger so deep it boiled in his bones raged inside Dante. He saw the blood on the knife and thought of what Anna had gone

through. No way was this dude getting out of the alley. The guy waved the knife at Dante, but he was no match for the four of them. They'd gotten into more fights together than Dante could count and they were damn good at working together.

Dante stared him down, holding his attention as Gabe moved behind the man and grabbed his arm, jerking the knife out of his hands.

Fury took hold, then. Dante pulled his arm back and let it swing full force at the guy's face. He staggered as if he was high or something, but Dante didn't care. His fist connected with the bastard's nose and Dante felt the impact, satisfied by the crunching sound. The guy didn't say a word, just pulled to his feet again, ready for more.

Yeah, he had to be tweaking or something to get up after the punch Dante gave him. Dante shoved him back down and the others jumped in, and then it was fists and feet and blood and the guy didn't stand a chance.

He didn't know when the dude had stopped moving, but at some point Dante was out of breath and his fists hurt. He backed off.

"Stop. He's done for." Dante moved away, pulled the others off.

They stood there looking down at the guy who looked nothing like he had when they'd first come on the scene. He was a bloody pulp of a mess. Dante kicked at him, but he didn't move. He was out cold.

He went to Anna, bent over her.

“Anna.”

She stared at her attacker, didn't look at Dante.

“Anna.” Dante touched her and she flinched. He reached for her shoulders. “It's Dante. Look at me.”

She turned to him, then her eyes filled with tears. “Oh, God. Oh, Dante.” She fell into his arms and he lifted her, pulled her against him while she sobbed.

He wrapped his arms around her and lifted her. “Come on, let's take you inside.”

They took Anna back to the shop and sat her on one of the stools. Dante grabbed some paper towels and wet them so he could wipe her face.

“Is she okay?” Roman asked.

“Don't know.” Dante focused on Anna.

She was crying hard now, shook her head, trying to talk even though he knew she had to be hysterical. “He grabbed me from behind, dragged me behind the Dumpster. He ripped my blouse and my bra.”

Dante sucked in a breath.

“He cut me, here,” she said, unbuttoning his shirt enough to show them all the heart-shaped cut.

“Jesus,” Gabe said. “I'm going to kill him.”

“Not if I do it first,” Roman said.

“You got there before he...” She bent her head down and wept, her fingers clutching Dante's shirt together.

Shit. “Let me help you.” Dante rebuttoned the shirt, felt her body shaking, then looked up at Gabe. “Go grab that scum and bring him in here. We need to call the cops.”

Gabe nodded and motioned to the others. “Come on.”

Gabe and the others left Dante and Anna alone.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let you go out there alone.”

“Not your fault.”

She could say that, but it didn’t matter. “We’ll call the cops and your dad. They’ll take care of this.” Because Dante had failed to.

Chin resting on her chest, she gave a short nod. “Okay.”

Gabe burst through the back door, out of breath. “Dante. I think he’s dead.”

Dante whipped around. “What?”

“He ain’t movin’,” Gabe said. “I tried to wake him up and he didn’t move. We tried to pull him to his feet, but he just went down again like...dead weight. When I went to feel for a pulse I got nothin’.”

“It’s true,” Jeff nodded, his face ghost-white. “He’s dead. Oh, man, he’s dead, Dante.”

Dante turned back to Anna, whose eyes widened. This wasn’t good. “I’ll go check it out.”

She scooted off the bar stool. “I’m going with you.”

“No. You stay here.”

She shook her head and gripped his hand. “Don’t leave me in here by myself. Please.”

He blew out a breath, torn between wanting her to stay put,

calling the cops and wishing none of this had happened. He should have just taken the goddamn trash out for her. Then it wouldn't have happened at all. "I'll have one of the guys stay with you."

"I'll hang in here with you, Anna," Gabe said, moving next to her.

She shook her head, that stubborn chin of hers lifting as she squeezed Dante's hand. "No. I need to see him."

He sighed. "Okay. Stay right next to me."

They walked outside. He tried to keep her away from the guy, who was still lying there right where they'd left him. Roman and Jeff were standing over him. They stepped aside when he and Gabe got there.

Dante turned to Gabe. "Stay with Anna while I check this out."

Anna resisted, but Dante turned to her. "This is as close as I'm letting you get to him. Understand?"

She nodded, still shaking.

Gabe pulled Anna to his side. Dante went over to the guy and nudged him in the side with his shoe.

"Get up, asshole."

Nothing. He kicked him harder this time.

"Come on, get up."

He kneeled and put his fingers on the man's neck, searching for a pulse. He couldn't find one there, or on his wrist. God, he was a bloody mess and Dante didn't want to do it, but he leaned

down and laid his hand over the guy's chest.

The body was warm. He was still warm. But there was no heartbeat, no pulse.

Dante looked up at his brothers. "He's dead."

"Shit. Sonofamotherfuckingbitch." Jeff tore at his hair and started pacing back and forth. "Now what do we do, Dante? We killed him."

Dante stood. "We go back into the shop and we call the cops."
"No."

Dante turned to Anna. "What?"

Anna shook her head, tears streaking down her face. The hysteria had gone, replaced by a calm awareness of exactly what to do. "You have to get out of here. All of you. Now."

Dante went to her, put his hands on her shoulders. "Anna We killed this guy. We were protecting you. Besides, he came at us with a knife. It's kind of self-defense."

"I know that and you know that. But you all have juvie records. You know how it'll look. You still beat him up and now he's dead. You all have to get out of here. I'll call my dad and he'll take care of this."

Dante shook his head. "No. I can't let you do that. I'm not leaving you."

"He's right, Anna," Gabe said. "We can stand up for this."

"No, we can't," Jeff said, his hands balling into fists as he paced. "I don't want to go to Juvie again. We got a nice family and I wanna stay there."

“Me, too,” Roman said, sniffing back tears. “Let Anna call her dad and make this go away.”

“What are we, a bunch of pussies?” Dante stared them all down. “We did this. We can handle it.”

She took them in with her gaze, and knew she’d do anything to make sure they stayed safe.

Anna pulled Dante to face her again. “I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to you. To any of you. You saved my life. God only knows what that...guy...would have done to me if you hadn’t showed up.”

Tears fell down her cheeks. She didn’t bother trying to swipe them away.

Dante folded her against him. “Anna, it’s okay. You’re okay. We’ve been through worse.”

She pushed on his chest and shook her head. “No. I won’t let anything bad happen to you because of me. Please, just do this for me. Please.”

“Let’s go inside.” He wrapped his arms around her and led her back inside.

“What do you want to do about him?” Roman asked.

Dante looked over his shoulder at the dead guy. “I guess we leave him there for now.”

“What if somebody comes?” Roman asked.

“Not much we can do about it.”

Once inside the shop again, Dante checked Anna’s wound. The bleeding had stopped and all she felt was a raw throb she was

determined to ignore. She wished she could ignore everything that happened. Concentrating on something other than herself would help. She wiped her face and hands, lifted her chin and stared them all down, determined they were going to see things her way.

“I want you all to go. Now. Hurry, before someone finds the body. I’m going to call my dad and we’ll figure out what to do.”

“That’s not right,” Dante said. “You shouldn’t have to deal with it.”

“I’ll have my dad. He’ll help. I’m not going to have you be charged when it was you all who saved me. Now go. Please.”

“She’s right,” Roman said. “You know what they’ll do to a group of juvies who beat a guy to death, even if he did attack a girl first. We could have just pulled the guy off her, held him and called the cops. We didn’t have to beat him up. We didn’t have to kill him.”

“Come on, Dante,” Jeff said. “We can’t handle any more on our records. We’ll lose the house, our family. I can’t do more time.”

Dante paced the shop. “It’s not right for this to come down on Anna. Hasn’t she been through enough?”

She stopped him, cupped his face with her hands. “You saved my life tonight, Dante. All of you. Let me do this for you.”

The pain in Dante’s eyes, the guilt she saw there, hurt her more than that jerk outside did. “He hurt you. We had to make him pay.”

Tears welled in her eyes. "I know. Now let me thank you the only way I can. Go on. I'll handle this."

Dante shook his head. "No, Anna."

Roman gripped Dante's shoulder. "She wants to do it. Let her."

Anna grasped his hand. "I'll call my dad right away. Dante, please."

No way was she going to have him take the fall for this. She'd stand here all night if she had to and argue with him. But finally, he nodded and she exhaled.

"Fine. We're outta here." He pressed his lips to hers, soft and gentle. "Call your dad right now."

"I will."

"We'll head out the back door. We're going to move the... body...behind the Dumpster so no one sees him."

"Okay. And I've got his knife."

The other guys walked out the door. Dante stood there, his fingers wrapped like glue around it as he looked at her. "Lock it behind us."

Anna bolted the back door as soon as the guys left and ran for the phone. Her father picked up on the first ring.

"Daddy?"

"Anna? What's wrong?"

As soon as she heard his voice, she fell apart.

"Daddy, someone hurt me."

One

Present Day

He shouldn't have come home. He'd promised to stay away, but maybe it was finally time.

Nothing much was different in the old neighborhood. The only thing that had changed in twelve years had been him.

A lot had changed for Dante Renaldi in twelve years. The last time he'd been here had been the night he and the guys had killed someone in an alley. He'd left town right after that with Anna's father's help—more like his insistence—and he hadn't been back since. And in those twelve years he'd mastered the art of killing.

So maybe he hadn't changed much at all.

He vowed he'd stay away. Nothing was going to bring him home again. But one person could bring him home—his foster mother, Ellen Clemons.

Anna's father, Frank Pallino, might have asked him to walk away after that night—and never come back. And he had. But he owed everything he was to George and Ellen Clemons. Those were two people he could never walk away from. He trusted them.

They knew where he'd gone after that night, where he'd been all these years. They didn't know what had happened that night—he owed Anna that much. But he'd stayed in touch with George and Ellen over the years so they'd never think he'd walked away from them after everything they'd done for him.

So when Ellen contacted him and asked him to come home for her and George's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, there was

no way in hell he was going to say no.

Twelve years, thousands upon thousands of miles and a few wars since then, he figured it was time to come home. He'd earned that right, especially after Afghanistan. If Frank Pallino didn't like it, too fucking bad. He'd kept his part of the bargain. He'd left, he hadn't tried to get in touch with Anna in all this time, or with any of the guys. And he had no clue what was going on with Anna.

Coming home could finally give him some answers.

Anna was the big question he was tired of wondering about. He needed to know, had spent too many nights bedding down on foreign soil, staring up at the stars and thinking about her. The only visual he could drum up was her in a shredded pink-and-white blouse, that damn heart-shaped carving on her chest and all that goddamn blood.

Seemed like the only thing in his head these days was blood. He saw plenty of it when his eyes were open, and he saw Anna's when his eyes were closed.

He didn't want that memory anymore. Time for some closure, to remove some of the blood from his mind.

His plan was to get in, get out, make it fast. He'd do his duty to Ellen and George, check on a few things, then leave. He didn't intend to stay. He was used to not staying long in one place, so he planned to treat this like a mission. All he had to do was get the intel he needed, then move on. It wasn't as if he and the guys were friends anymore. Or brothers. There wasn't going to be a

reunion.

Once he left he'd find a nice beach for R & R and erase a whole lot of shit from his memory bank.

He'd rented a car at the airport, a nice nondescript midsize piece of junk. It wasn't military issue and there wasn't a chance in hell he'd be driving over a bomb, so this car suited him just fine. He almost felt like a regular guy.

Almost.

Ellen had invited him to stay at the house. He smiled at that. To her he'd always be a kid. One of her kids, one of the many who passed in and out of their lives, but to the Clemonses, they were all "their" kids.

And okay, he wasn't a heartless bastard. He was here, wasn't he? But he wasn't going to sleep in a race-car bed.

He hadn't checked into a hotel yet, just wanted to cruise the old neighborhood to see what was what. Same houses as always, same parks, same sweltering-as-a-motherfucker kind of summer night when the humidity could suck the very life from you, and if it didn't, the mosquitoes would. It was this kind of night he remembered from twelve years ago, a night so hot you couldn't take enough showers to wash the sweat off.

He thought about dropping by George and Ellen's house, but that could wait until tomorrow. It was late and they had kids he didn't want to wake up.

Tonight he wanted to see the old haunts, check into his hotel and get on the right time zone. Tomorrow would be soon enough

for whatever reunions had to be done.

He was actually looking forward to seeing George and Ellen, the last foster parents he'd had before Frank Pallino got him emancipated and into the service of the United States Army. Dante wasn't sure if that was the best thing that had ever happened to him, or the worst. But considering he'd been about to turn eighteen and had no prospects for college or a future, Frank Pallino had probably done him a favor. He had skills now he never would have had if not for the army. Either way, what was done was done, and it was better than jail or God only knows what would have happened to him. He owed the man.

He supposed he owed a lot of people.

The streets were wet tonight. A hard summer thunderstorm had come down just as he'd walked out of the airport. Dante had stood just outside the airport doors and watched the rain. It had reminded him of that night twelve years ago.

Full circle again.

Maybe he shouldn't have come back. As he'd sat at the rental car place watching the rain sheet sideways onto the pavement, the memories pummeled him, those twelve years sliding away. He could still see the alley, could still see Anna the way she looked when he and the guys had walked into the ice-cream shop that night. She'd been decked out in pink and white, her button-down shirt with the little puckers all over it, her dark brown hair in a high ponytail and her caramel-brown eyes mesmerizing him like they always had.

He wished he could remember her eyes and her smile instead of her tears and all that blood. He wished he could remember the happy times instead of the trauma that bastard had inflicted on her that night.

He exited off I-44 at Hampton and headed south, turning down Wilson toward the Hill. The old brick houses all looked the same with their small front porches and well-manicured lawns. Some of the restaurants had changed names, but a lot hadn't, owned by the same Italian families for generations.

Saint Ambrose Church still stood, proud and signaling the old Italian legacy of the Hill. Some things never changed. He toured the old streets where he and his brothers used to hang, wondering which, if any, his real mom had lived in. He had an Italian name, that much he knew. His parents had never married, and he'd never bothered to search his ancestry, figuring there was no point in looking for people who either didn't want to or couldn't keep him. He'd had his foster brothers, and the Clemons family who'd taken him in at fourteen and given him almost four years of the best family life a kid like him could have ever hoped for. That had been good enough.

He left the Hill and made a beeline for Forest Park. The park was deserted, but well lit to keep people like him and his friends from loitering at night. He loved the curving roads that led toward the zoo, the Jewel Box, the art museum, all the places the Clemonses had taken him. They'd made him feel as if he finally belonged to a real family.

His only other family had been his brothers. Now, those were some memories, like the nights they'd sit in the park and get drunk or just kick back and talk shit, at least until the cops would chase them out. Those were the good times, when he felt as if he was part of something—part of a unit of people who had your back, who would go to the wall and die for you if it came to that.

He'd found the same thing in the military to some extent, but that was by necessity, not by choice. You had to trust your unit or you'd die out there. He'd made friends, but not brothers. He'd left his real brothers twelve years ago, and he hadn't even told them why, or said goodbye.

Now he just felt alone. Even back home, he was still alone, roaming the deserted streets where once he was in a packed car full of his brothers. Or with Anna.

His cell phone buzzed, so he pulled to the curb and dragged it out.

It was Ellen. "Did I wake you?"

"No. I was out driving around. I was going to come by tomorrow. I got in late, so I didn't want to wake the kids you have staying there."

"Well, there's a problem."

He went on immediate alert. "What's wrong?"

"George isn't here. He went out earlier tonight and isn't back yet."

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know, honey. He didn't tell me. I'm a little worried."

Dante shifted his gaze to the clock on the car dashboard. It was one in the morning.

He knew George Clemons. George was a military man, rigid in his routine. Bedtime was nine for the little kids, ten for the teens, and eleven for the adults. Unless there was an emergency, you didn't deviate from the routine. And he adored his wife. Unless things had changed a lot in the twelve years he'd been gone, something was off.

"You two have a fight?"

Ellen laughed. "We don't fight, Dante. You know that. I love that man the same now as I did the day he asked me to marry him."

And that's what he'd liked about living with them. Stability without tension. The Clemonses were solid. George wouldn't just walk out on Ellen and leave without a word. Which meant something was wrong.

"I'll be right over."

Dante parked in front of the house just as a hot-looking black Harley pulled into the driveway.

The guy took off his helmet and turned to shoot Dante a glare.

No way. Taller, his arms covered in tattoos and he definitely had a lot more muscle showing under that leather vest than he'd had when they were kids, but Dante would know Gabe anywhere.

Gabe laid the helmet on the back of the bike and headed toward him, a smirk drawing his lips up.

"Finally decided to come back, huh?"

Dante pulled Gabe into a quick hug, then drew back. “It was more like a command that I be here for their anniversary.”

Gabe nodded. “Nice of you to show up. And good timing, too.”

“Yeah. Ellen call you about George?”

“She’s worried, and you know her. Nothing fazes her.”

“Let’s go inside.”

Dante knew Ellen would be happy to see him, but the tight squeeze she gave him spelled a lot more than happiness.

She was past the point of worry and well into terrified.

Now it was up to him and Gabe to settle her down and hopefully figure out where the hell George was while Ellen wrung her hands together and paced the kitchen.

They’d remodeled, torn out the tiny kitchen where he and the guys used to cram their growing, oversize bodies around the tiny table. Now it was bright, with lots of overhead lighting, and a sturdy solid wood table sat in the place of the old metal one. You could seat an army there.

Ellen had coffee ready when they’d walked in. He sat at the table and downed the brew, stared up at the only woman he’d ever considered a decent mother to him. She looked as worried as she’d sounded over the phone, her short, slightly graying red hair mussed from dragging her hands through it.

“He didn’t say anything about where he was going?” Dante asked.

She shook her head and wrapped her fingers around her mug.

Her hands trembled. “No. I figured the boys—we have three right now, all in the raging throes of puberty—had just gotten on his nerves tonight and he needed to drive it off.”

“You’d think after years as a drill sergeant there wasn’t enough attitude in the world that would annoy him,” Gabe said. “We never got on his nerves, and if we couldn’t rattle him, I don’t think anyone could.”

The corners of her mouth lifted. “True enough, but he’s older now. His patience isn’t what it used to be.”

“Okay, so maybe that’s all it is,” Dante suggested. “He went for a drive and he’ll be back.”

“I thought so at first, but a half hour, hour at most and he’d have been home. He’s been gone three hours.”

“Flat tire or car trouble?” Dante suggested.

“He has his cell. He’d have called me to let me know. He’d never let me get worried like this.”

“I assume you tried to call him?” Gabe asked.

“He didn’t answer.”

That wasn’t good. Dante didn’t want to say it, but the one thing George and Ellen had taught him was to be a straight shooter. “Maybe we should call the police, find out if there’ve been any accidents.”

She sank into one of the chairs. “I’ve been putting that off. I could call Roman.”

“Wait,” Dante said. “Roman? Why?”

“Roman’s a detective,” she said.

Dante shifted his gaze to Gabe, who shrugged. “I know. Go figure, right?”

This whole night so far had been mind-boggling. “Okay, call him.”

Ellen went to get her phone, a tremor in her hand as she flipped through the numbers. She pressed the button and held the phone to her ear, waiting, her gaze focused on Dante and Gabe.

“Roman? It’s Ellen. I’m sorry to call so late, but it’s George. He seems to be missing.”

She paused a beat. “No, I don’t think there’s anything to worry about, but Dante thought—” She smiled. “Yes, he’s back for the anniversary party. Yes, we’ve kept in touch over the years. He’s fine, honey. But about George...”

Dante listened while Ellen told Roman about George.

Roman a cop. He didn’t see that one at all. Then again, he’d never asked Ellen about the guys. His conversations with her had been short over the years, just enough to catch up with her and George, to tell them he was okay. That had been it. Never about his brothers.

He hadn’t wanted to know about them, hadn’t wanted to think about them, or miss them.

But now, he realized he’d missed a lot. He shifted his gaze to Gabe. Motorcycle and tattoos. What the hell had he been up to all these years?

Ellen hung up and laid the phone on the table. “Roman’s working a case, but he’s going to send some uniforms out around

the area to search for him.”

Dante could do more. “Is George’s phone like yours?”

“Yes.”

“What’s his cell-phone number?”

She gave it to him. Dante pulled out his phone and entered the number. “I’ll be right back.”

He went out to his car and grabbed his laptop from his bag, came back inside and set it up.

“That looks like all symbols or a foreign language. Is it?” Ellen asked, looking over his shoulder while he worked.

“Not really.”

Gabe leaned over and took a look, then arched a brow. “Dude, where the hell have you been?”

Dante didn’t answer. There’d be time for explanations later, after they found George.

“What are you doing?” Ellen asked.

“Triangulating George’s position via his cell.”

“You can do that?”

“I can do that, provided his cell is turned on or isn’t damaged.”

It didn’t take long. Tracking began to pinpoint the location of the phone on the map, drilling down from the state to the city to the cross streets.

Dante’s blood turned cold. He lifted his gaze to Gabe. His gaze narrowed.

“No way,” Gabe said.

There? That location?

What the fuck?

“Did you find him?” Ellen asked.

No way was he going to tell Ellen. Not yet. Not until they knew something.

“I don’t know, but Gabe and I will go check it out. You stay here in case he comes back.” He stood and grabbed his phone. “What’s Roman’s number?”

She gave it to him and he made the call. Roman was shocked to hear from him, even more surprised about where Dante wanted to meet, but said he was finishing up his case and he’d meet them there.

They walked outside and he turned to Gabe. “You following?”
“Right behind you.”

Neither of them stopped to talk it over. There was nothing to say. Not until they got there.

The drive took about ten minutes. Nothing in the city took long to get to. As he drew close to the one place he didn’t want to revisit while he was here, his muscles tightened. The last time he’d been here...

He didn’t want to remember that night, didn’t want to relive it. He’d come back to erase those ghosts of the past, not be reminded of all that blood, of what he and his brothers had done, of what had happened to Anna that night.

But as he pulled down the side street and parked just before the alley, a feeling of dread overcame him.

The one thing he’d learned over the past twelve years was to

trust his instincts, his gut. It had never been wrong, and when something felt bad, he was usually right.

This felt bad. Just this once, he wanted to be wrong.

Gabe pulled his bike behind him and the two of them got out.

“I don’t like this,” Gabe said. “Something’s wrong.”

“Agreed. This smells like a setup.”

“Anyone else know you were coming in besides George and Ellen?”

Dante shook his head.

A black sedan pulled down the street and parked behind Gabe’s bike.

Dante smiled as Roman exited the car, dressed in jeans and a polo shirt.

Roman had changed, had filled out. He was muscled, his light blond hair darker now and cropped short.

Dante met him halfway, holding his hand out to shake Roman’s. Roman pulled him into a hug.

“I can’t believe you’re here, man. Where the hell have you been?”

“Here and there.”

Roman stepped back. “It’s been too long. You just disappeared after...” He shifted his gaze to the alley. “After that night.”

“I know. I needed to get away. I’m sorry.”

Roman nodded. “I understand. It was rough on everybody.”

Dante wanted to ask about Anna, but now wasn’t the time.

“You ready to check this out?”

“You really think George came here?”

Dante shrugged and shoved his fingers into the pockets of his cargo pants. “That’s where I tracked his cell.”

“How the hell could you track his cell?”

“I have ways.”

Roman slanted a curious look his way. “I want to hear about that.”

“Me, too,” Gabe said. “But let’s get this over with first.”

Dante drew in a breath and nodded.

They rounded the corner into the alley, and it was like slamming back in time.

He’d been in the midst of war, been shot at, had ducked for cover as the world exploded around him. He’d been wounded in the line of duty and had spent hours, minutes, seconds wondering if he’d just drawn his last breath.

But he’d never been through anything as awful as that night twelve years ago, when he’d seen Anna lying there covered in blood.

He’d never wanted to come back here again. Ever.

“You okay, Dante?”

He gave Roman a curt nod. “I hate this place.”

“Me, too.”

“Ditto,” Gabe added. “Let’s hurry up and get out of here. This place creeps me out.”

The Dumpster loomed like a monster in the dark, still

positioned in its same spot in the center of the long alley. Now a streetlight shined over it like a monument to that night, forever marking the spot where they killed someone.

“Why here?” Roman asked.

“I don’t know. This is where his phone tracked to.”

“That makes no sense. George doesn’t even know about that night.” Gabe paused, looked at Dante. “Does he?”

“I didn’t tell him.” Dante looked at Roman.

“I didn’t, either.” They started moving again.

“Jeff wouldn’t have said anything, either,” Roman added.

“Which means George would have no reason to come here,” Dante said. “If anyone had told George, Ellen would find out. Who would want her to know?”

“None of us,” Roman said.

The closer they drew to the Dumpster, the tighter Dante’s throat became.

When he saw the shoe, he stopped.

No.

“What?” Roman asked, then followed the direction of Dante’s gaze. “Oh, shit.”

They ran the rest of the way, Dante pushing past the Dumpster to land on his knees on the wet asphalt. His hope that it was an old drunk sleeping it off was obliterated by the sight of the blood, the torn shirt and the heart-shaped carving on George’s chest.

Same as Anna’s.

Dante felt for a pulse, but George was already cold. There was

nothing. He was dead. He lifted his gaze to Gabe and Roman and shook his head.

“Jesus Christ,” Gabe whispered as he looked down at George’s body.

“I think I might be sick,” Roman said, crouching down next to Dante. “This is just like— What the fuck, Dante?”

Dante couldn’t speak yet, could only stare at the beaten body of his foster father—his father. The tough but loving man who had been a rock in his life, who had given him a home, had shown him that discipline didn’t mean beatings, that love was unconditional, that no matter how many times he’d screwed up, he’d still be loved.

George was dead, killed the same way he and his brothers had killed that guy in the alley that night. And there was a heart carved into George’s chest the same as Anna.

What the hell did it mean?

His head swam with questions. He turned to Roman, who had pulled his radio to call it in.

Dante took another look at George, then pushed off his knees and stood, looking around the alley, searching for something... anything that would give him a clue as to why the fuck this had happened.

“Who did this?” Gabe asked, looking as lost as Dante felt.

“I don’t know. Ellen said he went out earlier, she thought for a short drive. She tried to call him when he didn’t come back, but she didn’t get an answer.”

Roman had already gone to his car and come back with his evidence kit. He'd gloved up and leaned over George's body, swallowing hard as he checked George's pockets.

"Yeah, here's his phone." He tucked the phone in an evidence bag and slid his fingers into the other pocket of George's jeans, paused and pulled out a clear plastic bag filled with white powder.

"What the fuck is that?" Dante asked

"My guess is cocaine," Gabe said. "About an ounce."

"And you know this how...?" Dante asked.

"Because he works for Paolo Bertucci," Roman said.

"The mob-guy Bertucci? That family's still around?"

Gabe didn't say anything, just turned his attention to the bag.

"What's George doing with coke in his pocket?"

"Good question," Roman said.

The scream of police sirens interrupted any further discussion.

Roman bagged the coke as the uniforms arrived. Dante wished they could hide the drugs, but he knew they couldn't.

George, with coke? Had he come here to do a deal? It made no sense.

Black-and-whites blocked off both entrances to the alley. In short order, yellow police tape roped off the alley, and crime scene techs began working the area. The medical examiner had arrived and was looking at the body.

And Dante still hadn't called Ellen. He wouldn't call her. He'd have to do this in person. Did Ellen know about the drugs?

God, right before the couple's anniversary. What was he going to say to her?

Another unmarked car pulled up at one end of the alley in front of the tape. Another detective, he imagined. He'd let Roman handle him.

Dante folded his arms and waited while the car door opened. The lights were shining on them, so he couldn't see the detective coming at them until he—no, make that she—moved in front of the lights.

He caught the flash of badge clipped to her belt, which was attached to a very nice set of hips, the swing of a dark ponytail and the piece attached to her holster. His gaze lifted to rounded breasts in a polo shirt, and some very wide, very shocked amber eyes.

No fucking way.

Anna.

Two

Anna Pallino's steps faltered when she entered the alley.

First, because she was in this godforsaken alley again, a place she hadn't set foot in since that night twelve years ago. Now she was back again, and someone was dead in the alley. Again.

Second, Dante Renaldi was back.

Those were enough to justify the stutter in her step.

Roman greeted her.

"What the hell is this?" she asked as she caught sight of Gabe standing next to Dante. "Old-home week? Dante comes back and

you three decide to have a reunion here?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then why am I here?” Something had obviously happened, but why would Roman call her to this crime scene? Because Dante was here?

And why the hell was Dante here?

She hated questions with no answers.

“Thought you’d want to know. That’s George Clemons back there.”

Third reason she almost tripped over her own feet. “George? Oh, my God, Roman. I’m so sorry. What happened?”

He laid his hand on her arm to halt her forward progress. “You need to know, Anna. He’s been beaten to death.”

She sucked in a breath and grabbed onto Roman, fighting to stay in the here and now. “And? There’s more. Tell me.”

She saw the reluctance in his eyes. “Tell me.”

“Someone carved a heart in his chest. Right where...” He glanced down at her shirt, at her left breast.

Oh, God. No. The heart carving just like hers. Her scar throbbed and she resisted the urge to touch it, to rub the ache away.

George Clemons, beaten just like the guys had beaten Tony Maclin that night.

She took a slow, long breath, then let it out. “I don’t understand.”

“Anna.”

Dante appeared beside her, but she had no time for him. Not now, not when her vision was nothing more than a pinpoint of light.

She had to focus on the scene and only the scene. It was the only thing that was going to get her through this.

She pushed past them both. "I need to see it."

"Don't," Roman started, but she was already on her way to the body. To George Clemons, a nice man who'd raised foster children ever since he'd been discharged from military service.

And his wife, Ellen. Poor Ellen.

She knelt beside the body. Richard Norton was on the scene already, thank God. She was glad to have the chief medical examiner on this case.

"What have you got?" she asked, pulling on her gloves.

"Warm body. Based on liver temp and lividity I'd say he hasn't been dead more than a few hours at most. Won't know cause of death until I do the autopsy. He's a bloody mess."

That he was. Someone beat him badly, worse than the guys had ever pounded on Tony Maclin.

"This is interesting," Richard said, pointing to the heart carved into George's chest.

"Yes, it is."

"Someone loved him to death, I guess."

She grimaced. "So not funny, Richard."

Richard grinned. "Hey, I thought it was one of my better lines."

“George Clemons, our victim here, was Roman’s foster father.”

His smile died as he looked over his shoulder to where Roman stood with Dante and Gabe. “Oh. That’s a pisser.”

“Anything else you can tell me?”

“Not until I get him cleaned up and try to figure out what killed him. I don’t see any obvious bullet or stab wounds on the body, other than the carving here, but like I said, he’s a mess.”

“Okay. When will you autopsy?”

“Probably sometime tomorrow or the day after. I’ll check my schedule and let you know.”

She patted his shoulder. “Thanks.”

She stood and walked the scene, looking for evidence, then moved over to talk to the crime scene techs.

“Find anything?”

“No,” one of the guys said. “It’s like whoever did this vacuumed the place up after he was done. There’s nothing. Not even a gum wrapper. The only evidence is the victim himself. But we’re picking up whatever we can.”

“Okay, thanks.”

She turned around and there he was.

Twelve years. Twelve goddamn years and not one word.

“Anna...”

“When did you get back into town?”

So much for the reaction Dante had hoped for. If Anna was surprised or shocked to see him, she was sure masking it well.

“Couple hours ago.”

She looked to George, then back at Dante. “Just in time to kill your former foster father?”

Dante scratched his nose. He’d laugh if this whole scene wasn’t so sad.

“I think you know better than that.”

“You think I... That’s so funny, coming from you. I don’t know anything about you. You’ve been gone for twelve years, you suddenly show up here and now there’s a dead body in the alley. A body you’re connected to.”

“You’re serious?”

“Yes, I’m serious.”

“Anna,” Roman said, “I don’t think Dante—”

“You stay out of this. You’re related to the victim. You can’t be on this case.”

Roman opened his mouth, then closed it. “Fine. You take it.”

“I intend to.”

“Here’s his cell phone and wallet. George left the house about 9:00 p.m. tonight, said he was going for a drive, but didn’t come home.”

“Is that unusual for him?” she asked.

“His wife said it was,” Gabe explained. “He wouldn’t be gone that long without calling.”

“So how did he end up here, and how did you all end up here?”

“We were with Ellen Clemons,” Dante said. “She called Gabe and me, worried about George, so we went over there to see if

we could help.”

She finally turned to Dante. “And you just happened to find him here?”

“I found him via his cell phone.”

She frowned. “How?”

“I have a program on my laptop. It’s not hard if you have the right equipment.”

Her gaze drifted south for half a second, and his lips curved. When she lifted her head and met his smiling face, she seemed more irritated than ever.

“What equipment?”

“Laptop. Software.”

“I’ll need to see it.”

“Got a warrant?” If she could be difficult, so could he. She was wasting her time looking at him as a suspect.

“I can get one.”

“Then do it. And while you’re doing it, why don’t you spend some time chasing down who really killed George, because it wasn’t me.”

“He’s right, Anna. This is a waste of time,” Roman said.

She inhaled, let it out. “Maybe, maybe not. It’s my job to look at everyone.”

“You’re pissed at me,” Dante said. “I get it. I deserve it. But you’re not thinking clearly right now and you’re mixing personal stuff with business.”

Her brows shot up, then knit. She took a step toward him.

“Believe me, Renaldi, I know exactly how to do my job. And if you think for one second my feelings are hurt over you, then you’re dead wrong. My job is first and foremost on my mind here, so shut up and stay out of my business.”

This was a different side to her, something he’d never seen before. She was a completely different Anna.

“Where are you staying?”

He shrugged. “Hotel, probably. I don’t know yet. I’ll get it figured out.”

“Fine.” Anna shot a glance at one of the uniforms. “Get his location and phone number for follow-up.” She jotted down notes. “What else?”

Roman handed her the evidence bag containing the drugs. “Also found this in his pocket.”

Anna’s brows lifted. “Looks like coke or heroin.”

“It’s coke,” Gabe said.

She shifted her gaze to Gabe. “You would know, wouldn’t you? Bertucci has a lock on distribution and sales in the city. You know anything about this?”

“Not a thing,” Gabe said.

What the hell was Gabe into? Dante wondered. Expert on drugs and drug dealing?

“Was he doing a drug deal here?” Anna asked.

“No idea,” Roman said. “But George didn’t do drugs.”

“So you think this was planted on him by the killer?”

“That would be my guess.”

“Okay, I’ll turn this over to Forensics.”

It was fascinating watching Anna, all grown up and in charge now, directing the forensics team, handling evidence, taking photographs and leading everyone in the scene.

She caught him watching her and shot him a look he’d never gotten from her before. A mature kind of cold inspection. He didn’t like it at all. The last time he’d seen her they’d been in love. Her looks had been warm.

But Dante had left town. So maybe she was still just a little pissed off at him about that. And maybe he couldn’t blame her for giving him an icy, hard stare.

Plus, the circumstances of them meeting each other again weren’t exactly ideal.

“That’s all for now. I have work to do.”

She walked away.

“So Anna’s a detective, huh?” Dante looked at Gabe after Roman went to talk to Anna.

“Yeah.”

“Kind of a hard-ass, isn’t she? That’s new.”

“You’ve been gone a long time, Dante.”

“I guess I have.”

He’d imagined a lot over the past twelve years, but Anna becoming a cop wasn’t one of the things he’d thought about. Her married with a couple kids, yeah. Becoming a schoolteacher or a nurse, he could totally picture. He’d even thought the worst, like that traumatic night would turn her to drugs or make her a

runaway. A hundred other nightmarish things he'd never wanted to pop into his head had. And he'd taken responsibility for all of them—thoughts that had left him in a cold sweat and guilt that made his stomach feel empty and sick. But a cop? He'd never included that in possible scenarios for Anna.

She looked comfortable in the job, directing the uniforms and whispering with the medical examiner. She knelt next to the body, pointing here and there and actually touching George.

The Anna of twelve years ago would never have done that.

This wasn't the Anna of twelve years ago.

He supposed he had the answer he was looking for. Anna was fine. She'd survived what had happened here in the alley, had moved on with her life and had become a success.

And now there was George's murder in the alley.

What happened here?

Roman walked over to them. "You two are sprung. Dante, let me know where you are once you get settled."

Dante nodded. "Will do." He headed over to Anna, who stood over the crime scene techs as they worked the scene. The coroner's assistants had wrapped the body and were putting it on the gurney.

"I have to tell Ellen." God, he didn't want to do that.

She nodded. "I'm sorry. I'll go with you. I need to ask her some questions."

"This is going to be rough for her."

"I know it will. I still need to ask the questions."

“And I understand that. Which is why I’ll be with her.”

“Okay. We’re wrapped up here. You two going to Ellen’s, too?” she asked, looking at Gabe and Roman.

“Yeah,” Roman said. “Since we found George, I think it’s important we’re all there for her.”

Gabe nodded. “Someone needs to get in touch with Jeff, let him know what happened. I’ll take care of that and then I’ll catch up with you at Ellen’s.”

“All right,” Anna said. “I’ll meet you all there.”

Dante thought about how he was going to tell Ellen on the drive back to the Clemons house. There was no way to prepare her for this. She knew as soon as she opened the door and saw Roman, saw Anna, saw the badge.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?”

Dante took her hand. “Let’s go inside and sit down.”

She trembled as he put an arm around her and led her to the sofa. She sat, and Roman slid next to her. Gabe came in right behind them and took up position behind Ellen.

“You remember Anna?” Roman asked.

“Of course. How are you?”

Anna didn’t smile. “I’m fine, Mrs. Clemons. I’m sorry to have to tell you this—”

“We found George,” Dante said, interrupting Anna.

Ellen shifted on the sofa to face him. “Where?”

“In an alley off Lindell.”

Her bottom lip trembled and tears filled her eyes. She

squeezed Dante's hand. "Is he dead?"

Dante nodded. "Yes, Ellen. Someone killed him."

She reached up, covered her mouth, then burst into tears. "Oh, God. Oh, no. George."

Dante pulled her into his arms and let her sob. Her loud crying woke the kids staying there. Roman and Anna went to talk to them, assured them Ellen was okay, but that something bad had happened to George. Coming from violent households, this wasn't anything new for these kids. Still, Dante felt bad for them, too. Here they had hopes of a stable life. Now, their lives had been shattered again.

Ellen's life had been shattered, too, in a way she'd likely never recover from. And there was nothing Dante could do to make this better for her.

Dante went into the kitchen to get Ellen some water. Gabe followed. "You get in touch with Jeff?" he asked Gabe.

"Yeah. He's out of town. He's as wrecked about George as the rest of us, and as confused about where it happened. None of this makes sense, man."

Dante nodded. "Tell me about it."

He brought Ellen a glass of water and box of tissues. After a while, she stopped crying and contacted a friend, who came over and collected the kids. Once they were gone, as typical for Ellen, she sat, straightened her shoulders and looked at them.

"Tell me what happened."

Anna looked to Dante. She was giving him the opportunity to

take the lead, to decide how much to tell her.

She deserved the truth. All of it.

Dante grasped Ellen's hand. "He was beaten to death. And... someone carved a heart in his chest."

Ellen sucked in a breath and held her hand up to her heart. "Who would do this?"

Dante wished he could tell her about the connection to that night twelve years ago. But he wouldn't. He couldn't. Not without betraying his brothers—and Anna.

"We don't know yet, Mrs. Clemons," Anna said. "But we'll do everything we can to find out."

"Thank you," she said, then turned to Roman. "Will you work the case, too?"

He nodded. "They won't want me to because George was my father, but I'll do everything I can to be involved."

She held out her hand and Roman grasped it.

This was family. Dante had missed it. And he'd come home too late to save it.

"There's more," Anna said. "An ounce of cocaine was found in George's pocket."

Ellen's eyes widened. "Drugs? George doesn't do drugs. Never did."

"Do you have any idea why he would have had drugs in his pocket?" Anna asked. "Maybe one of the foster kids was mixed up in drugs and he was interceding on their behalf?"

Ellen shook her head. "No. None of the boys staying with

us have drug-related issues. I can't think of any reason he'd be involved in that. George was strict about no drugs in this house. You took drugs or brought any into this house, you were in deep trouble with him. He'd personally call the police on one of the kids if he found drugs. For him to be found with drugs—" her eyes watered "—it's an insult to his memory."

"We're all pretty sure it was a setup, Ellen," Gabe said, laying his hands on her shoulders. "The police will get it figured out."

She grabbed for a tissue. "But in the meantime, they'll put in the record that he was found with drugs on him. And that doesn't sit well with me. George would be so hurt by that."

She shuddered out a sob, and Dante wanted to make this all go away. He wanted to back up one more day, get here sooner. He wanted to stop all this from happening.

Could he have?

Dante didn't want to leave Ellen, but she said her two younger sisters were coming over. There were funeral plans to be made, and he didn't want to get in the way. They all took their leave with the arrival of her sisters. Dante promised to come back tomorrow. She grabbed him in a fierce hug.

"Don't disappear."

He kissed her cheek. "I'm not going anywhere. I promise. And if you need me—for anything—you call."

She pulled back, her eyes shimmering with tears. "I will."

They all walked outside, and Dante looked up at the clear sky. God, it was still hot out, and he had no idea what time it was.

Late.

Roman and Anna were huddled near his car, whispering. Arguing. Roman finally took off, and so did Gabe, leaving the two of them together.

Anna was about to get into her car, but Dante headed her off.

“Anna.”

Her head shot up and she pinned him with a glare, but didn't say anything.

He'd forgotten how beautiful her eyes were. As a teenager, she'd been so pretty with her hair always in a ponytail, her face shaped like a heart, her skin dark in the Italian way, her eyes the color of the finest whiskey. And her mouth—he'd never truly been able to appreciate her mouth, with her full bottom lip that begged for the tugging of a man's teeth.

He hadn't been quite a man yet, hadn't had the time to fully appreciate Anna, never got to see her blossom into a woman.

She was so pretty at sixteen. Now? She could stop traffic.

It had been a rough night. The kind of night when a man thought about grabbing what he wanted before it was too late.

He'd denied himself what he wanted for a long damn time. Things like home. Family.

Anna.

His jeans tightened as she stared at him and he stared back, but he didn't think she was lusting after him the way he lusted after her, since she was probably thinking he was guilty of some kind of crime. Or maybe she thought he was guilty of a lot of

sins that had nothing to do with the murder tonight.

He probably was.

“You need something?” she asked.

Loaded question. “Not really.”

“Then I need to go. I’m busy.”

She was brushing him off.

He wasn’t going to let her.

“Anna.”

“What?”

“I haven’t seen you in twelve years. Have a cup of coffee with me.”

Three

Anna’s stomach clenched. Just being in the same vicinity as Dante Renaldi again made her dizzy. His presence brought up memories she’d shoved so far into the past she hadn’t thought about them in years.

Or tried not to think about them. Tried like hell not to think about them.

Until tonight.

Coming upon that murder scene in the alley tonight and seeing Dante had stolen every breath in her lungs, had made her legs go weak. Her first instinct had been to turn around and walk away—no, run away. She’d almost called another detective in to take the scene, but she refused. This was her job. There’d be no excuse for walking. Plus, Dante, Roman and Gabe had been there and she’d needed to know why.

She didn't like it. It had all been too much like twelve years ago, the night humid and smelling like recent rain, the asphalt streets slick and mirrorlike as she'd driven onto the scene. She'd seen plenty of dead bodies and people standing over dead bodies since she'd been on the force, had worked plenty of crime scenes with Roman. It wasn't until she'd spotted Dante and Gabe that the shock of awareness had hit her. The familiarity had cloaked her in heavy memories she still hadn't been able to break free from, clouding her thoughts and jumbling her normally stellar police process. She was organized and relentless in pursuit of a case. Was this fate getting back at her for her part in what happened twelve years ago?

Fate was awfully fucked up sometimes.

"Well?"

She lifted her head, found Dante staring at her. Losing herself in thought wasn't like her, either.

"Well, what? I said I was busy."

"I asked you to have a cup of coffee with me."

"I'm on duty, Dante."

"Later."

"I won't be finished for a while."

"I'll meet you in the morning."

She sighed, feeling suddenly tired. "Why?"

"Because I want to talk to you."

"Why?" She knew it was juvenile to repeat the question. She was stalling.

“Have coffee with me in the morning and I’ll tell you why.”

And so, apparently, was he. She should say no, walk away. Maybe then he’d go and leave her alone, leave the memories alone.

But for some reason, she couldn’t let it alone. Curiosity, maybe. And maybe he had some information on George’s death. A cup of coffee and some conversation could yield some info.

“Fine. Meet me at Uncle Bill’s Pancake House at seven-thirty.”

“See you then.”

She didn’t exhale until he walked away from her and got into his car.

She climbed into hers and drove to the precinct, her body on autopilot while her mind tried to process everything that had happened tonight.

A body in the alley, killed just like the guys had killed Tony Maclin. Beaten to death. And not just any body, but George Clemons, the boys’ foster father.

A connection.

Then the heart carving, just like hers.

Shoving the thoughts aside, she drove into the parking lot of the Metro police station, turned the engine off and sat there, needing a minute or two to collect her thoughts and just breathe.

What did it all mean? And why did it happen just as Dante came to town?

Was he the connection?

The station was always quiet at night, she thought as she walked in. She could use a little quiet right now, some time to think about the events of the night. She sat down at her desk and picked up the now-cold coffee, grimacing at the bitterness. She dumped it in the trash and went to the machine for a soda, then stared out the window at the few cars that passed by this time of night, wondering where they were going and what they were doing. Going to work, getting off work, leaving the bars?

Where was Dante right now?

Not that it mattered.

She still couldn't believe he was back after all these years, after all this time and finally having reconciled herself to never seeing him again. She didn't know whether to be angry or curious or how to feel about the ache inside her chest that had settled there ever since she'd seen him tonight.

There'd been too much to process at the crime scene. Being in the alley again. Seeing the guys there. The body and how George was killed.

Dante.

And she'd still had to do her job.

This was a nightmare.

She took the drink back to her desk and stared at her computer monitor, knowing she had a report to file, and knowing she wouldn't fill in the background information of what she knew had happened twelve years before.

But the past had just collided with the present, hadn't it?

She didn't like mysteries like this. And she definitely didn't like questions without answers.

She rubbed that spot on her chest that always hurt on rainy nights, then opened a new investigation file to make some notes.

She looked at her watch: 3:00 a.m. and damn if she wasn't already anticipating that breakfast.

Four

Anna was an hour and a half late, figured Dante wouldn't hang around and wait for her, or maybe wouldn't show up at all.

She hoped he wouldn't be there. One less thing she'd have to deal with. She was tired and she wanted to go home, take a shower and forget the night had happened.

She walked in and took a look around. He was easy to spot since it was past the breakfast rush hour. There were only two other tables occupied. Dante sat in a booth at the rear of the restaurant, his back to the wall.

Interesting.

She told the hostess she was meeting someone and headed toward where Dante sat nursing a cup of coffee, two menus sitting on the edge of the table.

"You waited." She slid into the booth.

He lifted his head, smiled at her. "Yeah."

"Sorry I'm late. Paperwork had to be done."

He shrugged. "If you didn't show, I'd head out."

"So you ate already?"

"I got hungry after an hour or so, figured you'd chickened

out.”

She bristled. “I don’t chicken out.”

He didn’t reply, so she poured coffee from the carafe on the table. “You sleep yet?”

“No. I’ll sleep later.”

“Where are you staying?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know yet.”

“So maybe you’re not staying?”

He lifted the cup to his lips, then smiled. “Trying to run me out of town, Detective?”

He was saved from her biting retort by the waitress, who took her breakfast order—actually her dinner order.

“You look tired. Long night?”

She nodded.

“Why the night shift?”

She took a long swallow of coffee. “More crime happens at night. Less time spent sitting at a desk. We’re out on the streets and that’s where I like it. Besides, I don’t have a shift. People don’t die on shifts. I work when I work.”

He leaned back in the booth and studied her with his unfathomable gaze. Years ago she couldn’t get enough of his eyes, could stare into them for hours, getting lost in the blue depths until she’d lost track of time. She used to think she was the luckiest girl in the world that Dante Renaldi had chosen her as his girlfriend.

They’d sit together in secluded spots like this and make all

kinds of plans about their future together.

Until that one night changed everything.

And then Dante had up and left without a word.

So much for their pledge to spend forever together, no matter what.

“You thinking about work, or about me?” he asked, forcing her gaze from her cup of coffee and her thoughts away from the past.

“Work.” She wouldn’t tell him her thoughts had been centered on him. He didn’t need to know that him showing up had dredged up memories she’d long ago buried.

“Any leads on George?”

“I can’t tell you that. It’s an ongoing investigation, one in which you might be a suspect.”

He laughed, and the sound rippled through her nerve endings.

“You aren’t serious about that. It was George who was killed. My foster father.”

She shrugged. “So?”

“And I just got here.”

“I hear better excuses than that from people who pulled the trigger with witnesses standing right in front of them.”

“And probably lousy excuses from those who didn’t. Isn’t it your job to weed out those who did from those who didn’t?”

Wasn’t he a smart-ass? “Yes.”

“Then I guess it won’t take you long to figure out I had nothing to do with George’s murder.”

She drained the cup and refilled, not taking her eyes off Dante while she poured.

“You’re wondering about my motivation for showing up all of a sudden after twelve years, and ending up right in the middle of a murder.”

“You have no idea what I’m thinking.”

“Some things come back pretty easily.” He shrugged. “I used to know a lot about your thoughts.”

“I was sixteen at the time, Dante. I didn’t have too many thoughts back then that didn’t center on you. Pretty easy to figure me out.”

He leaned forward, clasped his hands together. “And now you’re all complex?”

She frowned. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. It’s easy enough to tell.” He leaned back. “You’d have to be with the job you do. Solving crime requires a lot of thought.”

She cracked a smile. “Any particular reason you’re trying to flatter me?”

“Just stating the obvious. No flattery intended. You can’t be a fumbling dumbass and make detective.”

Settling in and talking to him was easy. She hated that he’d made it so easy.

Her food arrived and just in time, since her stomach grumbled. Vending-machine food for the past ten hours just hadn’t cut it. She was starving. She dived in as if she hadn’t eaten

in... God, she couldn't remember when she'd had her last decent meal. Ignoring Dante, she put all her concentration into shoveling food in her mouth, not coming up for air until she'd scooped the last of her eggs onto her last bite of toast. She avoided licking her fingers because she had company at the table, instead used her napkin to wipe her hands.

When she looked up, Dante was studying her again.

“What?”

“You used to pick at your food. I was always afraid you were anorexic.”

She snorted. “I wasn't. I was a picky eater. Clearly, I'm not one now.”

“Obviously. You crammed every bite of food from that plate into your mouth. I was waiting for you to lick the plate clean.”

“I pondered it, then decided against it. You might have been appalled.”

He laughed. “Hey, if you're hungry, go for it. Or you could just order another meal.”

She drained her orange juice and set the glass and plate to the side. “Not necessary. I'm sufficiently full now.”

“It's nice to see you eating.”

“I've gained an appetite over the years.”

He shifted and looked under the table.

“What are you doing?”

He straightened, his gaze roaming from her face to the rest of her. “Checking to see if you have a hollow leg, because judging

from your body there's no way you can eat that much and not gain weight."

She laughed. "I burn it all off working. And it's not like I get three squares a day of food like this. Most of the time I'm lucky to grab a granola bar or crap from the vending machine at the precinct. A full plate like this is a rarity."

"You have someone at home to cook for you?"

Clever. "You mean like a housekeeper?"

"No, like a husband."

"Nice fishing expedition. No husband."

He leaned back. "Just figured by now you'd be married with kids."

"I am married. To my job."

"You're too beautiful to be married to your job."

"That's a sexist remark."

He didn't appear concerned, just took another sip of coffee, then said, "Okay, then. You're too beautiful to be without a man."

"I didn't say I was without a man."

"So you do have someone in your life."

"I didn't say that, either."

His lips curled. "Cagey."

Despite her intent to keep her conversation with him cool, she couldn't help but enjoy this cat-and-mouse game of Twenty Questions. "What about you? You certainly look like too much man to be without a woman."

He leveled one seriously hot look on her that made her toes

curl.

“How do you know I’m without a woman?”

She laughed, letting out some of the stress that had been tightening her shoulders. “I think if you had a woman somewhere you wouldn’t be sitting here with me.”

“You are a good detective.”

She lifted her cup to her lips and smiled. “That’s what my dad says.”

“See, this is what surprises me. You never wanted to be a cop like your dad.”

Her smile died. “Things changed.”

“You mean what happened twelve years ago?”

“I don’t want to talk about twelve years ago.”

“What if I do?”

“Is that why you’re back? To bring up the past?”

“No. I came to see you, to see everyone.”

She hated asking it, didn’t want him to think she craved the answer. But the question needed to be answered. “Where’ve you been?”

He shrugged. “Here and there.”

“That’s a lousy answer to give a cop.”

His lips lifted. “Yeah. But, really, not much to tell. I drifted, wandered, picked up work in one spot, then moved to another. I didn’t stay in one place too long.”

“I could find out where you’ve been.”

His grin widened. “You could try.”

“Are you challenging me?” Irritation made her breakfast coil up like an angry snake in her stomach.

He reached across the table and grasped her hand. “No. I didn’t come back here to piss you off.”

She pulled her hand away. “You’re working pretty damn hard on it.”

He inhaled, blew it out. “There’s nothing to tell you. I saw a lot of the...country. I was restless. And I needed to get out of here.”

Escape would have been nice for her, too. But that hadn’t been an option. “You picked a hell of a time to just pick up and leave, Dante.”

He stared down at his coffee cup, then back up at her. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

That was it? She’d been attacked, had gone through the worst trauma of her life, and the one person she thought she could count on had abandoned her when she needed him the most. And all he had for her in the way of explanation was “sorry about that”?

She stared him down, refusing to let him run this time. “You know, that’s just not good enough.”

To his credit, he didn’t flinch, instead held her gaze. “I know it isn’t.”

“Pretty interesting coincidence that you show up and George is killed.”

He drained the last of the coffee in his cup. “Lousy coincidence. I wish I’d been back sooner.”

“How much sooner?”

“Soon enough that I could have prevented it.”

She leaned back in the booth. “How could you have prevented it?”

“I don’t know. Someone lured him to that alley and beat him to death. If I’d been here maybe I could have stopped it.”

“Roman was here. Gabe was here. Jeff was here. None of them stopped it.”

His gaze shifted to the window where morning traffic crowded the street. “I know. I still think I might have been able to do something.” He turned his attention back to her. “Someone else knows about that night—about what happened.”

She’d been avoiding thinking that. “Or it could be coincidence.”

“Oh, come on, Anna. You’re smarter than that. It’s no coincidence he was killed in that alley. There’s a connection.”

“He was found with drugs in his pocket. It could have been a drug deal gone bad.”

“Yeah, right. And then they beat him to death and carved a heart on his chest.”

She shrugged. “I’m just thinking of all angles.”

“There’s only one angle. Someone saw what happened twelve years ago.”

She looked around the restaurant. No one sat by them, but still she leaned forward. “But why George? He had nothing to do with it.”

“I don’t know. He had no connection to that night. That’s the

part that doesn't make sense."

To her, either. She had a lot of thinking to do, and she was too damn tired to do it clearly. She needed to recharge, then tackle it again once she'd had some sleep.

She picked up the bill and slid money to the waitress as she stood. "I need to go."

As she headed out the door, awareness of Dante on her heels pricked at her as she pushed through the front door and toward the parking lot.

"I invited you to breakfast. I would have paid."

She slid on her sunglasses and pulled her keys from her pocket. "I'm capable of paying for my meal. It was nice to catch up with you, but I'm tired and I'm going home."

"I'll follow you."

"I don't think so."

He had the nerve to smile at her. "I'm following you anyway. I want to make sure you get home okay."

"Are you serious? I'm armed. I'm a detective, for the love of God. And it's broad daylight. I've been taking care of myself for a lot of damn years now, Dante. Just because you swept back into town thinking—I don't know what the hell you're thinking—doesn't mean you need to start protecting me. My days of needing you as my bodyguard are over."

She stopped just short of blurting out that he'd failed as a bodyguard the last time she'd seen him, but the words stuck in her throat, refusing to come out.

Even she wasn't that cruel.

He moved in closer. "I'm sure you don't need someone to watch over you. I know you can take care of yourself. But I'm here and this is what I used to do. So I'm following you home."

She hated that he was here, messing up her life, making her want things she'd wanted for a long time, then pushed to the back of her mind, forcing herself to forget.

She inhaled the scent of him. Big mistake, because God help her, she wanted to put her hands on him, and in that moment she realized the feelings she had for him weren't dead.

More likely it was just that she hadn't been laid in a really long time. Dante was still a prime specimen of male beauty. Which was the only reason he had this effect on her. She needed a fast release of tension and he was a man.

But she already knew he wouldn't be a quick fuck and out the door. They had too much history.

And dammit, they'd never had sex.

That night twelve years ago had gotten in the way.

It still would.

She tilted her head back and offered up an uncaring shrug. "Do what you want. I'm going home."

She got into her car and pulled out of the parking lot, refusing to check and see if he followed.

She already knew he would.

What would happen when they got to her house?

She'd turn him away. Or maybe he'd just drive right past when

he saw she was fine, which of course she would be.

Just fucking fine.

Yeah, she was fine, all right. So fine she buried herself in her work to avoid alone time. Because alone time meant thinking about her life.

Or lack of one.

Wasn't that why she worked her ass off, agreeing to pull extra shifts all the time? So many of the guys had families and commitments. She didn't, so why not work?

Things might have been different for her if Dante hadn't left.

Then again, maybe they wouldn't have been different at all. Maybe their teen romance would have run its course and she would be right where she was now.

But she couldn't change the attack, couldn't change what had happened to her that night. And hadn't she always wondered what it might have been like if Dante had stayed? If she'd had him to hold on to, would she still feel so lost, so empty inside?

Ugh. Could she be more dramatic?

Lost and empty. Please. Her life was just fine.

And there was that fine word again, that word that seemed so...inadequate and unfulfilling.

She pulled into the driveway and opened her car door, so deep in thought she startled when Dante appeared right next to her.

"Jesus. How did you sneak up on me?"

He smiled. "I guess you are tired." He took the keys from her hand and headed toward her front door, making her run to catch

up to him.

“Hey, I can do that,” she said, fighting him for the keys.

“I’m sure you can.”

He stepped up to the front door, twirling her keys.

And stopped so fast she tumbled into his back.

“Dammit. Why don’t you look where you’re— What are those?”

“I don’t know. Got a boyfriend?”

“I already told you I didn’t.” She crouched down to pick up the flowers that had been left lying in front of the door.

“Don’t touch them.”

“What?” She tilted her head back to stare up at him. “What are you talking about? They’re just roses.”

Dante bent down to examine them. “There’s a card. You see what it says?”

She hadn’t noticed the card tucked in with the flowers. It was typed, not handwritten.

Did you like the gift I left you in the alley?

Her skin broke out in goose bumps, nausea bubbling up inside. She leaped up and backed away from the porch.

“Oh, shit. Goddamnsionofabitch. Who did this?” She whirled around, her hand on the butt of her pistol.

“Whoever it is might still be here, hiding, watching to see your reaction.” She saw Dante reach behind him, lift his shirt, saw him pull out a Glock. A few minutes ago she’d have asked him if he had a permit, would have used it as an excuse to find out

more about him.

Right now she was glad for the backup.

“Call it in,” he said. “And don’t go inside. I’ll look around.”

“Don’t get in the grass. There might be footprints.”

He turned to her. “I’m not an idiot.”

She cocked her head to the side as she lifted her phone. “I don’t know who the hell you are, Dante.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll talk about that later.”

Yes, they would.

She made the call, then started walking around the porch, looking for any evidence like footprints or discarded cigarette butts—any lucky clue.

Usually there weren’t such things, but sometimes one got lucky.

“I don’t see anyone lurking around the bushes or around your neighbors’ houses. I checked your backyard and the alley. There’s no one.”

Anna looked down the street, then up. This wasn’t going to happen to her again. She’d suffered the most incredible fear she’d ever known. Nothing would ever scare her like that again.

“I don’t know what kind of game he’s playing, but I’m not joining in.”

Crime scene techs showed up. Anna directed them to the flowers and card. They photographed and bagged the evidence. Anna had them wait outside and directed them to check for footprints and fingerprints while she unlocked her front door.

Dante put on a pair of gloves and nestled in right by her side. “You aren’t coming in with me.”

“You’ll have to arrest me to stop me, because for all we know he could be inside waiting for you, and you’ve got nobody backing you up.”

“And you aren’t a cop.”

His deep blue gaze bored into hers as he lifted the Glock and pointed it inside the house. “Trust me when I tell you I know how to use this gun. Either call for backup or let me go in with you.”

Her teeth hurt from grinding them. She nodded. “Fine. Stay behind me and do exactly what I say.”

She caught the slight lift of his lips. “Yes, Detective.”

She waited for the techs to dust and lift prints from the doorknob, then turned the knob and nudged the door open with her foot. Light streamed in from the gauzy curtains in her dining room, making it easy to see inside the living room.

“Nothing looks out of place,” she whispered to Dante. “I’m moving inside.”

She felt Dante on her left flank as she stepped in, her gun pointed slightly down, her finger poised on the trigger. She made a sweep left, then right, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. While she moved to the right, Dante swept to the left, opening the closet door while Anna headed into the kitchen.

Once they cleared those areas they went together down the hall and checked the two bedrooms and bathrooms.

Everything was clear.

“Nothing’s been touched. Nothing even looks like it’s been moved even an inch. He wasn’t inside.”

“Or he’s good at putting things back in place.”

She sighed. “I’ll let the techs in and have them dust for prints, but I don’t think he was in here. I’d know.”

“Yeah? How would you know?”

“Instinct.”

He nodded. “That I understand.”

“I’m going to have to give my captain an update on all this. This sucks.”

“First you need to get some sleep. There are dark circles under your eyes.”

He reached out, swept his thumb across her cheekbone.

His touch sent shock waves through her body. Unprepared, she took a hasty step back and stumbled. Dante caught her with his arm wrapped around her, tugging her against him, which only made things worse. He was warm—solid, and not at all what she wanted.

This was all too much.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Fine.” She jerked away from him and turned around, headed outside to the techs and led them into the house.

While they worked making a dust bowl out of her entire house, she contacted her captain and left him a message, letting him know about the flowers and card, then told him she’d give him a full report when she came on duty again.

Dante kept his distance, but she felt his gaze on her, as warm as his touch.

She didn't like the familiarity, the sense of closeness he wanted when she knew so little about him.

She had too many questions. Like why he had a gun and he'd swept through her house like a cop who knew what he was doing. Those were answers she was going to get from him.

He moved in next to her. "I know you're tired. And the tech guys are done now, so you can get some sleep."

She looked up and realized the CSU team had packed up and were leaving, shutting the door behind them. She hadn't even noticed.

"Okay, good."

She walked to the door and waited. He came toward her and stopped in front of her.

"If you'd like, I can stay."

"Stay and do what?"

His lips curled, and warning bells rang. She'd walked right into that one. She really was tired. "I don't need you to stay."

"He could come back."

"If he does, I can handle it."

Dante surveyed the double dead-bolt lock on her door. "I guess you're secure."

Anna felt anything but secure at the moment, especially since she was leaning against the door and Dante was about a quarter of an inch away from her, all that testosterone sending her libido

firing in a way it hadn't since...

Since the last time they'd been alone together. She'd been full of raging teen hormones back then, which she sure wasn't now.

Now she was a competent adult capable of taking care of herself, yet here he was, trying to act as if she was in need of saving.

She hadn't needed saving in a long time. These days she saved herself.

"You need to go."

He laid his palm against the door above her head, his body hot and enticing as he stared down at her with sea-blue eyes that made her want to dig her teeth into his shirt and rip it off, then bury her face in his neck and lick the bead of sweat that had formed there.

"Is that what you really want?" he asked.

His breath blew against her hair, and she was ten seconds from either self-combusting or grabbing him by the shirt, planting her mouth on his and taking him up on what he was so obviously offering.

"Yes, it's what I really want."

He paused, his lips curling in a smile that told her he knew it wasn't at all what she really wanted.

He slid his hand behind her, his touch making her tremble as his fingers swept across her back.

But then she heard the click of the doorknob. She moved to the side as the door opened.

“Okay, then. See you later.”

Her heart rate skipped double time, her palms were wet and her body tingled with the awareness that she was so affected by Dante she was shaking all over. And just as fast as he had her primed and ready to throw him to the floor and have her way with him, he was gone.

She wasn't over him at all. Not at all.

She hit the dead bolts, rubbed that spot on her chest with her knuckles and headed toward the bedroom, but she was damn sure not going to sleep now.

Bastard.

Five

Dante stood at the end of Anna's driveway and leaned against his car. He needed a few minutes to cool his body down, and the summer heat wasn't helping any.

So, okay, he figured following Anna home would piss her off. Maybe that's what he'd wanted to do, just to get a reaction out of her, to fire up that cool control that she wore like body armor.

He was glad he'd followed her, that he'd been here to see those flowers and that card.

What he hadn't counted on was the heat that had flared up between them.

Twelve years ago they'd had passion, but it had been young—intense yearning with nothing to show for it.

What passed between them inside just now had been very adult, very hot, and nothing like what they'd had when they were

younger.

But that wasn't what he'd come home for.

In fact, it had been a stupid move to go inside her house, to allow himself to even think he could get close to her again. He'd crossed the line and pushed the limits and become that almost-eighteen-year-old boy again, totally crazy over the sweet innocent girl he loved but knew he shouldn't have.

Now he was thirty years old and he still couldn't have her.

The rumble of a motorcycle turning down the street caught his attention. He walked toward the driver's side of his car as Gabe pulled to a stop and cut the engine on his Harley.

"Reminiscing about the good old days?" Gabe asked.

"More or less. What are you doing here?"

"Taking a ride. Thought I might find you here." Gabe looked up at the house, then slanted a glance back at Dante. "Though I kind of figured you'd be smooth enough to get inside."

"I was inside."

Gabe arched a brow. "Done already?"

Dante laughed. "Asshole. Listen, someone left roses and a note on the front porch for her."

Gabe grinned. "Secret admirer?"

"No. The note said, 'Did you like the gift I left you in the alley?'"

Gabe's demeanor changed in an instant, harsh anger slashing across his face. "Son of a bitch. The killer is stalking her?"

"I don't know. Her CSU team took the flowers and note in for

Forensics to go over, and they dusted the place for prints.”

“Any sign of forced entry? Was he in her house?”

Dante shook his head. “Doesn’t look like it.”

“Shit. What the fuck is going on, man?”

“I don’t know. We need to get everyone together to talk about it, though, figure this whole thing out.”

They both went silent then. Dante thought about George, about why he’d gotten mixed up in all this.

“You find a place to stay yet?” Gabe finally asked.

“No.”

“How long you plan on hanging out here?”

Dante cocked his head to the side. “I wasn’t going to stay long, but now that this thing happened with George I might have to change my mind about that. Why?”

“Because if you’re staying a few days or a week you can put up with a hotel. If it’s going to be a long visit, I could maybe help you out. If you’re looking to stay permanently—”

“I’m not staying permanently.”

“So which of the other two is it?”

“I hate hotels.” Which wasn’t an answer to Gabe’s question, but Dante didn’t have an answer. He didn’t know how long he was going to be here. It had been an impulse to come in the first place. He wouldn’t have, if not for Ellen asking him. And then George was killed. And now he’d seen Anna...

Gabe nodded. “Yeah, I hate hotels, too. Follow me. I have some friends that just built some condos. Some aren’t sold yet

and I can hook you up.”

“That’d be great, thanks.”

Dante climbed into his car and followed Gabe. The one thing he’d always loved about St. Louis was that it didn’t matter what your destination was. Nothing was very far away. You could get from the city to the country in a matter of fifteen minutes, minus rush-hour traffic.

The condos were nice. Things sure had changed around here. Progress. Old shit got torn up, and new stuff got built. That’s the way it had always been, and so Dante expected it always would be. Just because he had a vision in his head of what his hometown had looked like when he’d left didn’t mean time would stand still.

Buildings changed. People changed. Everything and everyone grew.

He followed Gabe to the parking lot of the main office. Gabe got off his bike and Dante got out of his car. “Just wait here. I’ll go talk to management and see what’s available.”

“Sure.”

These were pretty high-class condos. Gabe, in his worn jeans and sleeveless shirt and with his neck and arms covered with tattoos, didn’t seem the type to even know the management. But Dante knew all about labeling people. And assumptions.

Never assume anything.

Gabe was out a few minutes later with a grin on his face. “Building D. We’ll head west down the main road and turn right.”

Dante followed him to the building and pulled up in front of

one of many cookie-cutter-type condos.

“Grab your stuff. I’ve got the key.”

Dante pulled his bag from the trunk of his rental car and followed Gabe to the door on the main level, just off the entrance. Gabe slipped the key in the lock and blissful air-conditioning greeted them.

“It’s furnished,” Dante said as he walked in. “Someone live here?”

“No. They keep it available for visiting corporate clients.”

“Uh-huh.” Dante laid his bag on the floor and checked out the spacious kitchen, oversize living room and two bedrooms. Everything he might need was here, from pots and pans to flat-screen TV and even a game console. The beds were freshly made and the place had a new smell.

He walked back out to the living area. Gabe was on the couch, the television was on and he was playing a game.

“Make yourself at home.”

Gabe grinned. “I am.”

“So where do you live?”

“Right across the walk from here.”

“Convenient.”

He took a seat next to Gabe and picked up the other remote, started punching buttons. It was a war game. Piece of cake.

“What exactly do you do now, Gabe?”

He lifted a shoulder. “This and that.”

Which was the same answer Dante had given Anna—totally

vague. “Which means what, exactly? That you’re a fry cook at the local burger joint, or that you’re an ax murderer?”

Gabe leaned to his left, punched a few buttons and knocked out Dante’s player on the game. “No, I prefer guns. You don’t have to get as close to the victim that way.”

Dante laughed. “Funny. But these condos are upscale, so you must be doing something.”

“Yeah, I’m doing something. Mostly freelance.”

Gabe killed Dante’s last player. Dante cursed. “Freelance sounds like illegal. What are you into?”

“You sound like Anna, always asking questions.”

“I’m not a cop, though. And you’re working for the Bertuccis now?”

Gabe started the next game. “Yeah. Paolo Bertucci. He runs the mob here in the city.”

“Your boss?”

“Yeah.”

Not the line of work Dante expected Gabe to get into. “For how long?”

“About two years.”

“Good work I guess.”

“It pays the bills.”

Working with the mob could be lucrative business. It could also get someone killed. “What do you do for Paolo Bertucci?”

Gabe was focused on the game, his fingers flying on the controller. Dante was trying to keep up, but Gabe was kicking

his ass.

“Jack-of-all-trades. Anything from running errands to enforcer duty.”

“You like the job?”

“Like I said...it pays the bills.”

Working for the mob also meant you kept your mouth shut, and Gabe wasn't stupid. Still...

“You think Bertucci's connections in drugs had anything to do with George's death?”

Gabe paused the game, shifted his gaze to Dante. “I don't know. He moves drugs in this city. Doesn't mean he's directly involved. He leaves that to the peons.”

“Like you?”

Gabe laughed. “I'm not a drug dealer, man.”

Which meant Gabe was higher up on the Bertucci food chain than just a peon.

They used to be as tight as brothers. Real brothers, not the foster brothers they had been. There had been no secrets between them. They'd known everything about each other, had spent many nights up in their room in the Clemons house where they'd been fostered sharing all the shit they'd been through as kids. It had bonded them because their hells of abuse and shitty childhoods had been so similar.

And now they were strangers circling each other, neither of them willing to divulge their secrets.

Dante leaned back on the sofa and dragged his fingers through

his hair. “Not much like the old days, is it?”

“Guess not.”

“You into something big?” Dante knew he had no right to ask, especially since he hadn’t told Gabe shit about himself.

“Just stuff I don’t want to talk about. With you, particularly, since I don’t know where the hell you’ve been the past twelve years.”

“You’ve been here the whole time?”

“No. Left right after...right after the thing went down with Anna. I had to get the hell out. That whole scene freaked me out.”

Damn. Gabe had skipped town the same time he had. “I didn’t know you’d left, too.”

Gabe slanted him a look. “I didn’t know about you, either, until after I came back. Where’d you go?”

“Dallas first. Big city, easy to get lost in. Figured I should get out of here, give Anna some space. I thought if I wasn’t around that whole mess would just disappear. Guess you must have had the same thought. How long did you stay gone?”

“I’ve been back here two years. I guess we all need to come home eventually, huh?”

Dante smiled at that. “Ellen asked me to come back for her and George’s anniversary.”

“Man, that shit sucks for her.”

“It does.” He didn’t even want to think about it. “Anyway, I agreed to come back because I figured it was time anyway.”

Gabe nodded. “So we both left right after the attack.”

“Looks like it. Roman and Jeff never left, though?”

“No, they both stayed.”

“Nothing is like I expected it to be,” he said.

“Why? Because you didn’t get a big welcome-home party?”

He shot Gabe a look. “No. I don’t know what I expected. Sure as hell didn’t expect to find out Anna was a detective. And, Roman, too. That’s a shocker. And you—look at you. All tatted up and gone biker. A real badass now.”

Gabe laughed and stretched his legs out in front of him, then popped his black shit-kicker boots up on the table. “The one thing I found out when I came back? The world around here didn’t stop turning just because I left.”

It sure as hell didn’t. Didn’t make Dante feel any better, but he’d done what he’d been asked to do, and he’d done it for Anna’s sake. At the time it seemed like the right thing to do.

It had been the right thing to do.

But at the time he’d thought Gabe would be around to watch over her. The others had been younger, not as well equipped to be her protectors.

“I didn’t know you were leaving,” Dante said. “I might have stuck around otherwise.”

“I didn’t know you had left, either. Sorry, man.”

Dante shrugged. “Not your responsibility. Anna managed okay, though. She had her dad to take care of her. How’s she seemed the past couple years since you’ve been back?”

Gabe grinned. “Feisty. Driven. She’s out to get the bad guys

in a big way.”

In the short time he'd seen her at the crime scene, he could see that about her.

“Which means what, exactly? That the two of you meet up more often than not?”

“You might say that.” Gabe chuckled.

Curious, Dante leaned forward. “Something else going on with you and Anna I should know about?”

“Like what?”

He didn't want to ask. But he needed to know. “You have something going on with her?”

Gabe frowned. “Why would you think that?”

“You showed up at her house this morning.”

Gabe let out a soft laugh and shook his head. “You dumbass. It's not like that. I look out for her.”

“Maybe you're not the right person to be doing that, considering what kind of business you're in.”

“Yeah, and you think you're better equipped to do it, mystery man?”

“Hell, I don't know.” Dante stood and walked to the window, raked his fingers through his hair. “I'm talking out my ass, Gabe. I'm tired. I've been up all night.” He turned to face his onetime best friend and brother. “It's good to see you. I'm glad you're here. And thanks for giving me this place to stay.”

Gabe stood. “Get some sleep. I'll check in with you later.”

He held out his hand. Dante clasped his arm and pulled him

in for a tight hug.

He never got close to people, hadn't since he'd left here. Gabe and the others had been the only people he'd truly counted on. They were the only ones he'd ever told his secrets to. He trusted them with everything without question.

Or he had at one time.

Like Gabe had said—everything had changed in twelve years.

“It's good to have you home again,” Gabe said.

“It's good to be home.”

He was surprised to discover he actually meant it.

Anna was armpit deep in the thing she hated most—paperwork—when Dante strolled into the squad room and made a beeline for her desk.

She frowned. “Who let you in?”

“Some guy named McClaren.”

“Remind me to withhold his donuts.”

“Funny.”

He made himself at home by sliding into the chair next to her desk, extending his long, lean legs out in front of him. He wore a dark gray T-shirt that stretched tight across a very well-developed chest, his muscled biceps peeking out from the hem of the short sleeves.

And just like before, the stupid sex chemicals in her body roared to life. God, now that he'd grown up he was devastating, which she would have already been well aware of if he hadn't left her twelve years ago.

She refused to be attracted to him. She intended to stay angry. His reappearance had brought unpleasant things, just like the last time she'd seen him.

He might even be considered a suspect. She wasn't about to be attracted to a suspect.

She turned her attention on him, determined to remain cool and aloof.

“Something you want?”

He gave her a half-lidded look that made her squirm in her chair, so she chose to ignore him and concentrated on her paperwork instead.

“I take it you're busy?”

“Master of the obvious, aren't you?” she replied while not really studying the file in front of her.

“Want me to help?”

She lifted her gaze to his. “You a cop?”

He smiled at her. She'd always loved his smile. He'd made promises to her with that smile. Promises he hadn't kept.

“Not a cop, no.”

“Then you should leave and let me be one.”

“I thought I'd hang out with you awhile and we could catch up. Maybe we could go grab something to eat.”

“I'm on duty, Dante.”

“You're doing paperwork, Anna. Unless your captain thinks it's a bad idea for me to be here and throws me out.”

She wished. As far as her captain knew she could be

interviewing a witness or an informant at her desk. And he wasn't even at the precinct at the moment, so the likelihood of him throwing Dante out were as remote as James Patterson strolling into the squad room to interview her for his next book.

She should be so lucky.

"Catch any bad guys tonight?"

"I think they stayed inside out of the heat."

"Smart of them."

"What about you?"

"Did I catch any, or was I one of them?"

He was a mind reader. Her lips curved while she made some notes in the file and closed it. "You said it, I didn't."

"I'm not a bad guy, Anna."

"So you say."

"Anything on George yet?"

"I'm not discussing a case with you, especially one you're directly involved in."

"Indirectly."

"Whatever." And no, she hadn't found a thing, something she noted in the file she opened next. Unfortunately, she had no suspects. There were no prints at the scene and no witnesses. The only reason George Clemons was dead was a direct link to that night twelve years ago. And because of all of them.

Because of her.

Then there was Dante conveniently showing up at the same time a murder was committed. A murder of someone he was tied

to.

And she knew nothing about Dante or where he'd been. No record, no priors, he showed up in no criminal databases, which she supposed should have relieved her, but the odd thing was he showed up nowhere. At all. It was as if he didn't exist after he left here. Which made her more suspicious, not less.

She knew a lot of guys worked odd jobs for cash, so they never reported income, but for twelve years? Come on.

It made her wonder even more what the hell he'd been doing for the past twelve years. And why he was suddenly back. He said he was back for George and Ellen's anniversary party. But then George turned up dead. She didn't like it. Not at all.

As much as she wanted to keep the past where it belonged, as much as she didn't want to encourage Dante, especially after last night, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to get close to him, to find out where he'd been and what he'd been doing while he was gone. Because if he was connected in any way to George's murder...

"Anything on the flowers and note?"

She shook her head. "Forensics got no prints, which doesn't surprise me. The scene around my house came up clear, too. It's just like the alley."

"What about the alley?"

Dammit. "Nothing. Never mind."

"Talk to me, Anna."

"No. I'm not discussing this investigation with you."

She laid her head in her hands.

“Tired?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Did you sleep?”

“I got a little.” Mainly what she got was a whole load of frustration, staring at the ceiling and fantasizing about Dante.

Hot, steamy fantasies. Naked ones.

Ugh.

As if late June wasn’t already hot enough...

Cool fingers swept across her neck, pressing in and massaging the tight muscles there. For a split second she forgot she was at work, that there were other cops there.

Then she jerked her head up and shrugged his hand off. “Stop that.”

His lips curled. “You don’t want me to stop.”

“You said that yesterday.”

“You didn’t want me to stop then, either.”

She looked around, expecting to find the entire squad room of cops staring at her.

No one was even in the room.

Shit.

“You can’t do that here.”

“Where would you like to do it?”

She sighed. “You’ve been back in town for a little more than one day. We hardly know each other anymore. Why the hard press to get in my pants?”

He took a seat in the chair. “Is that what I’m doing? I was just

asking you out for a meal.”

She slanted him a look. “You’re asking for a lot more than a meal.”

“What if I want to get to know you again, figure out what you’ve been up to all this time.”

“We aren’t going to find out any more about each other over a meal today than we did yesterday.”

He laughed. “One short conversation? You think that’s all we have left?”

“I don’t have time for relationships in my life, Dante. I’m busy.”

“I didn’t ask you for a relationship, Anna. There are things we need to talk about, and you know it. We all need to talk, not just you and me.”

He wanted more from her than talking. She knew it and he knew it. She hadn’t been a cop for seven years—a damn good cop—by ignoring signals and body language. Dante’s body language told her a lot about his intentions.

Intentions she had no desire to act on.

Okay, maybe she had desires, but she knew nothing about him.

“You want to talk, how about you start by telling me the truth about you?”

He leaned back, a look of wariness on his face. “What truth?”

“About where you’ve been for the past twelve years.” And why he left in the first place.

That shut him up.

“And why you show up here and suddenly someone close to you is dead.”

Now he looked pissed. A sure sign of something to hide. “Circumstance. I had nothing to do with George’s death.”

“So you say. But it sure is a coincidence that George is murdered—” she looked around to make sure no one had wandered into the squad room “—in a place very familiar to you, that no one knows about, on the same night you come back after being gone for twelve years. I’d like an explanation for that one, Dante.”

“So would I. I’d also like an explanation why after the murder someone left you a love note and flowers showing off about the murder. And it couldn’t have been me since I was with you on the scene.”

She opened her mouth to argue the point, but instead clamped it shut.

“We do have a lot to talk about, Anna. You, me, Gabe, Roman and Jeff. Our past has suddenly been dumped right into our laps again. And like it or not, we have to deal with it.”

She didn’t like it.

“I’ll think about it.”

“You do that.”

Great. A get-together with the same people she’d been with twelve years ago.

A reunion she didn’t want to have.

Dante sat in his car and stared at the nondescript brick

building that housed the metropolitan police station. Cops wandered in and out as he pondered what his next step would be.

Why hadn't he just told Anna where he'd been and what he'd been doing for the past twelve years?

Because his life was a big giant secret and he never knew from one minute to the next where it would take him or what his identity would be when he got there. And he knew better than to just start spilling his guts.

He didn't exist, not officially, and the fewer people who knew that the better.

If he was lucky he could get in and out of town without anyone knowing who he was and what he did.

His superiors would like that a lot.

He'd done the right thing by not saying anything, even if the end result had been the mistrustful look in Anna's eyes.

He'd been the one who put that look there in the first place, so he was going to have to own it.

Which didn't mean he'd have to like it.

He started up the car and drove away.

Six

Sleep had been an illusion, a fantasy. Anna had come home after getting off duty, stripped off her clothes and climbed into a hot shower to scrub the remnants of the day from her body, her mind filled with the possibilities of this case.

By the time she'd crawled into bed, the thick shades pulled down to block out the morning sunlight, she was exhausted. But

sleep had been in fits, and dreams had been filled of that night twelve years ago, of being pinned down and helpless, the burn and screaming pain of a sharp knife carving into her chest. And suddenly it wasn't her anymore, but George, a shadowy figure standing over him as he cried out for help, the tip of a knife glinting silver and menacing in the moonlight.

She woke with a gasp, her hand immediately going to her chest to rub the ache that never seemed to go away. Dragging her hand through her hair, she got up, dressed and made coffee.

Cup full of life-infusing brew, she stepped out onto the back patio.

It was brutally hot outside already, the humidity rising like the steam coming off her coffee. She took a seat on a cushioned chair, glad she had a shaded patio to cool her bare feet. If it was this hot in June, what was August going to be like?

Unbearable. And this kind of heat bred crime.

But she wasn't on duty right now and she'd barely brushed the cobwebs out of her mind. It wasn't time to think of work yet.

She sipped her coffee and watched the birds peck at the feeder in the corner of the yard. She'd impulsively bought it this spring, thinking her backyard needed some life and color—much like her life—but hey, she had to start somewhere, and the yard was easier. She'd added flowers and bushes, and had spent a couple weekends digging into the dirt with her shovel, sweating her ass off and loving every minute of it.

She didn't need a social life if she had a backyard project, did

she? Try telling that to her father.

Now she had to remember to water everything and put seeds in the bird feeder, but at least she had something out here to look at besides a couple trees and some grass.

She sipped her coffee and smiled at the birds fighting over the seeds.

The only thing missing from her life now was a rocking chair and a cat.

She laughed, thinking her dad would not be amused by that thought. He was already bitching about her getting close to thirty and not giving him grandchildren.

As if that was a priority.

As if any man would want to deal with all the baggage she'd bring to a relationship, the scars from the past, both physical and emotional. She could hardly stand getting naked in front of a man. Nudity required explanation of her scar, and since she'd never told the truth about that night, she had to lie about how she'd gotten it. Sex was much better in the dark, wearing some clothes. Not that she had a problem with sex. She liked it just fine, but the whole relationship and marriage thing? No thanks.

As if she was even interested in getting married and having children, anyway.

Her work hours were shit, she had frequent nightmares, the past still had a stranglehold on her and she liked her independence. She dated rarely, slept with men even more infrequently and took her sexual frustration out on her job.

Yeah, she was one hell of a catch.

Her cup empty, she went inside to refill and saw her phone vibrating across the kitchen counter.

It was a text message from Dante asking her to call him when she woke up.

She pressed the call button and he answered on the first ring.

“I didn’t expect you to answer me right away,” he said. “Figured you’d still be asleep.”

“I don’t need a lot of sleep.”

“So you’ve said. You ready to meet with all of us tonight?”

No. She didn’t want to meet with any of the guys, but figured Dante would keep insisting. And if he didn’t, Roman would. Roman worried like an old woman. “I guess so. How about pizza at my place at six?”

“Okay. I’ll round everyone up. I’ll bring the beer.”

“Won’t this be fun.” The best kind, too—they’d be talking about a murder, and she’d have to once again relive that night.

She clicked the phone off and leaned against the counter, ignoring the throb of the scar on her chest.

There had to be an explanation for George being killed in the alley, for the uncanny resemblance of his murder to the death of Tony Maclin. And for the carving of the heart on the victim’s chest.

But there was also the matter of the flowers and the card. No explaining that away as coincidence. Someone had wanted her to know about the murder. The flowers had been a gift. A sick gift,

and there was no way to neatly tie this up as a coincidence, no matter how much she wanted to.

She had time, so she headed to the medical examiner's office. Richard Norton hadn't autopsied the body yet and she wanted to take another look.

She walked into the nondescript one-story brick building, which was always cold as a tomb even outside the examination rooms. She figured they deliberately kept it that way to discourage visitors, but on a day as hot as this she welcomed the arctic temperature indoors, passed her way through security and signed in to view the body being held in storage downstairs. The attendant outside the room went in with her.

She pulled the sheet back. George hadn't been cleaned up yet—they'd do that when they autopsied him, but the carving on his chest resembled hers. Same location, left side of the chest, crude, as if it had been done in a hurry just to make a point. His wound looked deeper than hers, though, as if someone had dug down hard with the knifepoint. She wondered if George had still been alive when the killer had taken the knife to his chest.

Tony Maclin had been toying with her when he'd carved the heart into her skin. She still remembered the burning pain, how much it had hurt.

Had George felt the pain? Or had he already been beaten so badly he couldn't feel anything at all by that point, not even the knife cutting into his skin?

Her scar tingled. She wanted to rub it, to remember, but the

tech's presence prevented her from doing so.

We're connected now, George. You're not alone.

"See something on him?" the tech asked.

"No. Just wanted to take another look, see if there was something I missed."

She covered him with the sheet and the tech closed the drawer.

It had been a waste of time to come here. She didn't know what had drawn her.

She stared at the silver drawer where George Clemons lay and thought how easily that could have been her twelve years ago. If the guys hadn't been there, if they hadn't rushed to her rescue, she could have ended up on a slab in this ice-cold room, dead at sixteen.

Everything she was now, everything she'd worked so hard to become, would have been obliterated that night in the alley. She'd have been buried underground, locked in a box, surrounded by dirt.

The room got hot. Her vision began to swim and her throat tightened, cutting off her breath.

No. Not now. This couldn't be happening.

She had to get out of here.

"I'm done," she said, forcing her breaths to slow down even as dizziness took over.

This was such a shitty time for a panic attack.

She pivoted and pushed through the double doors, already feeling the cold clamminess, the numbness in her fingers and

face.

Get out. Get out now.

“M.E.’s behind schedule but has him on tap for tomorrow,” the tech remarked casually as they walked into the elevator. “You coming back to watch?”

Anna nodded, barely focusing on his words as he pushed the button and the elevator pitched and rolled. Nausea rose in her stomach and she leaned back against the wall for support. She needed to lie down, to feel something cool against her face.

She’d never fallen apart in front of anyone. If someone found out, they might tell her she couldn’t do her job.

Could the tech see her sweat? Did he notice how pale she was? She tried to stay calm, to keep from breathing too fast.

When the doors opened, she walked slow and easy past the desk, but as it was, she could barely walk at all. She could no longer feel her legs past the pins and needles stabbing them.

“See you tomorrow,” the tech said, waving her off.

“Yeah, tomorrow.”

Her car seemed a thousand miles away as she shoved the door open, the blast of summer heat only making the queasiness worse. She was going to collapse right here on the front steps. She needed to lie down, to curl up in the fetal position so she could breathe.

But it was so hot out here. A few more feet, then she’d be in the car. She could turn on the air-conditioning and lie down.

She breathed in and out as fast as she walked, which only made

it worse, she knew, but once the panic hit the only thing that mattered was getting to safety, being able to shut the doors and lock everyone out.

She weaved through the lot and knew she looked like a drunk. She could only hope no one saw her.

A few more feet. Just a few more feet. She fumbled in her pants pocket for her keys. Where were her keys, dammit? Finally she grasped them, dug them out and hit the remote, the sweet sound of the car unlocking her salvation. Sweat poured down her face and back as she grabbed the door handle and slid inside, punched the lock and started the engine.

She cranked the A/C down to the sixties, punched up the fan, the sick feeling overwhelming her as she breathed in short pants, trying to remember to take in slow breaths and exhale easily.

She pushed the seat back as far as it would go and leaned over, shoving her head between her knees.

This was going to pass. She was going to survive it.

She was drenched in sweat, but the cold air-conditioning was a lifeline. Every minute that passed had her chest loosening up so she could draw a breath. Within fifteen minutes she could lift her head without wanting to pass out or throw up. She swiped her wet hair away from her face and looked around, thankful no one had come

by the car to see her embarrassing show of weakness.

When she was no longer shaking like a leaf, she put the car in gear and headed home.

Dante made sure to arrive at Anna's house earlier than everyone else. He wanted a chance to talk to her first.

When she opened the door, she looked gorgeous. Her shorts and tank top showed off incredibly toned legs and arms.

But she also looked pale and tired, with those dark circles still under her eyes. And that worried him.

"You don't look like you slept at all."

She pulled the door open. "If I want that kind of browbeating I'll go see my dad."

"How is he, by the way?"

"Doing okay, other than being grouchy as hell. He had to retire a few years ago because of a knee injury."

"Job related?"

"Yeah. Went running after a suspect and blew out his ACL when he tripped in the dark. After a couple surgeries, it was obvious he wasn't going to be able to work as a detective again, so he took early retirement."

Dante followed her into the living room. "Bet that pissed him off."

"Like you wouldn't believe."

He held up the case of beer he'd brought. "Where do you want this?"

"Fridge is fine."

He put the case in her refrigerator and pulled two out, handed one off to her after popping the top off.

She pulled her legs up and crossed them, took a long swallow

and sighed.

“Long day?” he asked.

“Day off. But yeah, still a long day.”

“Maybe you should have caught up on some sleep.”

She lifted her head and looked at him. “I get the idea this whole sleep thing weighs on you.”

He laughed. “It does when it looks like you haven’t had much of it lately. Working too many hours, or is it nightmares that keep you awake?”

He’d cut a little close to the truth, so she decided to change the subject. “Do you think everyone will be here by six?”

“I know evasive tactics when I see them, Detective. But in answer to your question, yes, they’ll be on time.”

“Did you get hold of everyone?”

“I got hold of Roman and Gabe, and Roman said he’d call Jeff.”

“Okay.”

“So on your day off did you do any detecting on the case?”

She wasn’t about to tell him about her ridiculous trip to the morgue to stare at George’s body. “No.”

“You working this case by yourself?”

“Well, Roman can’t since George was indirectly a relative.”

“But no other partner?”

“No.”

“I thought you cops always worked with partners.”

“Not always. And we’re short-staffed, so we work cases alone

or with uniforms. Roman and I aren't partnered, though we have bumped into each other on cases now and then."

"Funny that you both ended up in law enforcement. He's the last person I would have expected to become a cop."

She took another drink of her beer and wrapped her hands around the bottle, making sure to keep her focus on Dante, on the present, and not on the past. "I would think you would have been more surprised that I ended up in law enforcement."

His lips curled. "That, too, but Roman was always a little wild and undisciplined. You at least had the familial background for it."

"People grow up and change. Maybe the incident twelve years ago altered Roman's perspective enough to make him want to pursue law enforcement."

"I guess it did change some of us. Or maybe it affected all of us in some way, affected the choices we made in our lives after that night."

Cryptic words.

She wanted to ask him if that night had changed him at all, and if it had, how. He was catching up on all of them. But his secretiveness was beginning to piss her off.

The doorbell rang and she rose to answer it.

Gabe was at the door, with Jeff.

"I hope someone ordered pizza," Jeff said as he strolled in with his usual abundance of showmanship. "I'm starving."

Dante had never thought he'd be back here, let alone reunited

with the old gang in one place. With Jeff and Gabe showing up, and Roman walking in a few minutes later, it was as if he hadn't been gone.

They were all older now, but the smiles and laughs were the same. They were different, and yet the same.

Jeff had come in wearing a suit—a suit, of all things. No way would Dante have predicted that.

“A suit, Jeff?”

Jeff waggled his brows. “Gotta maintain my slick image with the ladies, ya know?” He flicked the lapels of his jacket. “They like me suave and sophisticated.”

Anna rolled her eyes and slapped a beer into Jeff's hand. “He's in insurance sales. Hence, the suit.”

Dante laughed. “Is that right? And how are insurance sales?”

Jeff popped the top off his beer. “People keep drivin' cars, buyin' houses and they keep dyin'. Business is good.”

“And ninety-five percent of his customers are women. Go figure,” Roman said, taking the other beer Anna offered.

“Can I help it if the ladies like me?” Jeff asked, throwing his arm around Roman.

Dante always thought Jeff and Roman looked the most like brothers. Both about the same height and with light hair, Roman's was more surfer-boy blond, whereas Jeff's was sandy, but Dante and Gabe used to tease them about being the golden boys.

“So any wives or kids?” Dante asked as he sat on the sofa next to Jeff.

“Oh, God, no. I’m still playing the field, hoping like hell never to get caught.”

Dante laughed.

“How about you?” Jeff asked.

“No. Not married yet.”

“I’m so glad you’re back, man. I missed you. It was rough when you and Gabe left.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry. I didn’t know he left the same time I did.”

“Where’ve you been?”

He was going to have to answer that question soon. Probably sooner rather than later, judging from the way Anna hovered on the edge of their conversation. “Around. Here and there.”

Jeff laughed. “That sounds like you don’t want to answer. Like you’ve been in jail or somethin’.”

“No. Not jail.”

“On the beach in Bali with the perfect woman?”

Dante laughed. “Uh, no.”

“Hey, man, I can dream, can’t I? I always pictured you running some con with a sexy brunette, then taking the money and leaving the country, living out your days in luxury.”

Jeff always had a vivid imagination. It’s how he’d survived a hellish childhood filled with abuse.

“I like the way you think, Jeff, but no. That sounds more like your fantasy.”

Jeff took a long gulp of beer and nodded. “Yeah, that’s me. Always on the lookout for the perfect woman.”

“Who’s running away from you,” Gabe replied, sliding into an unoccupied chair. “Which is why Jeff is still single.”

Dante shook his head. “The more things change…”

“The more they stay the same,” Roman said, taking a spot on the sofa on the other side of Dante.

“What about you, Roman?” Dante asked.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.