

DEADLY
REUNIONS
BOOK 2

***WHEN A
HEART STOPS***

A NOVEL

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To my wonderful family and friends.
I couldn't do this without you.

And to Jesus Christ,
my Lord and Savior—
and my reason for writing.
I pray people see you on every page!



1

TUESDAY, 2:40 A.M.

If she moved, would she die? Serena Hopkins kept her eyes shut and lay as still as possible in the king-size bed, doing her best to keep her breathing even.

Which was becoming more impossible by the second.

As her fear increased, so did the rate of her heartbeat and respirations.

Was he still there?

A slight rustle to her left answered that question. A sliver of moonlight through her window cut a path across the room, allowing enough light for her to see shadows.

A drawer slid open, then closed with a light click.

She opened her eyes into a narrow squint. How did he get in? Where was Yoda, her golden retriever?

Terror made her shudder.

The figure at her dresser paused. Looked around. She felt his gaze land on her.

What should she do? Move and draw attention to herself? Continue to pretend to be asleep?

Please, Lord, please.

Her cell phone lay on the end table, could she grab it fast enough and dial?

Not a chance.

Another chill slid through her. Why hadn't her home alarm gone off? The tremble started in her hands and quickly spread.

No! She couldn't move. Curling her fingers into fists, she did her best to still them.

Her eyes moved back to the figure. His attention had moved from her to another drawer. What was he looking for? How much longer would he look, and if he didn't find what he wanted, would he turn to her? Wake her? Threaten her? Worse? Her mind registered the slender, lanky build of the intruder.

He went for the next drawer. Slid it open. He turned to look over his shoulder at her and she slammed her eyes shut.

Serena's heart thudded in her chest. Surely he could hear it. *See* it. Was he still watching her? She let her eyes crack. No, his focus was on the drawer in front of him. Slowly, inch by inch, never taking her gaze from the person's back, she slid her hand toward the end table.

The drawer slid shut. A whispered curse brushed her ears. He hadn't found what he was looking for. He knelt. She heard a popping sound and froze. His knees. Somehow that simple sound demoted him from terrifying monster to dangerous human.

A low, almost nonexistent grunt filtered to her.

Her fingers brushed the phone on the edge of the nightstand. The phone teetered.

No! It couldn't fall.

Straining, nearly strangling on the need to keep her breathing even when she wanted to gasp in huge gulps of air, she managed to snag the phone with her thumb and forefinger.

She pulled it toward her, slowly, painstakingly silent, until finally, she had it under the covers with her.

Now what?

Would the touch screen light up the room even under the cover of the blanket?

She had to chance it.

And she had to light the screen so she could see the numbers. Right now, she wished she had a phone with buttons one could just feel and know exactly what number it was.

There was one button on this phone she could find by touch. The one that would light the screen. But if she hit the numbers, the rest of the touch pad would make noise. If she'd left the phone on ring instead of vibrate.

She couldn't remember.

Panic nearly smothered her.

He was in the closet. Maybe he wouldn't hear it.

Maybe.

She pressed.

Not a sound. Squinting, still watching his back as he searched, she suppressed a relieved sigh when he never paused.

The phone was on vibrate.

Thank you, Lord.

Her intruder disappeared farther into her walk-in closet.

Now was her chance.

Fingers still wrapped around the phone, Serena pushed back the covers as silently as possible and swung her legs off the edge of the bed closest to the door. She finished dialing 9-1-1 and pressed Send, keeping her hand over the screen to minimize the light.

Even as the phone rang and the 9-1-1 operator picked up, Serena was moving toward the open bedroom door. Her bare feet never made a sound on the hardwood floors.

But she couldn't speak into the phone yet.

She slipped out of the bedroom and into the hall. Her goal was the back door to the garage.

And then she heard him curse.

"Serena, where are you?"

The silky-smooth low voice shot new terror through her as she used a precious second to debate her next move. Getting out of the house was no longer an option. He would be on her before she got the dead bolt turned.

Footsteps—terrifying, unhurried footsteps—came her way. “I’ll find you. You can’t be far.”

She spun on her heel and hurried as silently as possible to the spare bedroom. Hopefully, he would expect her to make a run for one of the doors that led outside.

Serena closed and locked the bedroom door and turned to answer the operator, who was asking, “. . . Is someone there? What’s your emergency?”

Serena held the phone to her lips and whispered, “104 Bennett Drive. Someone’s in my house.”

Her foot kicked something soft. And warm.

“Yoda,” she whispered. Grief welled up in her as she placed her hand on Yoda’s chest. And felt a beating heart.

Relief replaced the grief, but she didn’t have time to do more than offer the unconscious animal a soft pat. She tossed the phone on the bed, the operator still talking. Hurrying toward the closet, she flipped on the light and blinked as her eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness.

Serena pulled out a locked box.

And froze as the bedroom doorknob rattled.

“Serena, I know you’re in there. Give it up, honey. If you just give me what I want, I’ll leave you alone.”

Sure he would. Fingers shaking, she went to the nightstand, opened the drawer, and pulled out the key.

It took three tries, but she finally managed to get the box open.

“I’m running out of patience, Serena. Open the door or I’ll kick it in.” He did sound irritated. And that made her blood churn. She was an irritant to him. A mere bother.

She had no doubt that if he got his hands on her, she was dead.

How long would it take for the cops to arrive?

A few minutes at least.

“Serena!”

It just registered that he knew her name. So this wasn’t some random break-in.

Still, she refused to answer him.

Her fingers worked the magazine into the Glock 17. Her father’s gun. The one he insisted she learn how to shoot and handle as well as any police officer.

Her palm racked the slide at the top and the round chambered. The semiautomatic pistol felt comfortable, reassuring. Some of her terror dissipated. Enough that her hands steadied.

Now all she had to do was pull the trigger as many times as it took. Surely seventeen bullets would do the trick. “I have a weapon!” she hollered. “And if you come through that door, I’ll use it!”

A pause. Then a low laugh. “Sure you do, Serena.”

Gripping the gun with both hands, she lifted the pistol and fired.

The bullet slammed into the door.

She heard a scream, another curse.

Then the sound of sirens filled her ears. Seconds later, through the window, flashing blue lights filled the room.

“The cops are here! Leave now!” she ordered, wishing her voice didn’t tremble with each word.

A loud boom hit her ears and the bedroom door slammed open. His slender frame filled the opening and his malevolent green eyes met hers.

Serena felt a cold chill invade her and knew she was going to have to shoot to kill.

“Please, don’t make me do this,” she whispered.

He lunged toward her and she pulled the trigger for the second time that night.

2

THURSDAY, 6:15 P.M.

“It’s time,” he breathed. “Are you ready?”

An anxious longing twisted inside the listener. “I’m ready. I’ve waited a long time for this. But why now?”

“Doesn’t matter why now.” Then he laughed and rhymed, “I’ve missed the game, it’s time to play, I have the name, you pick the day.”

“What are the names?”

“Leslie Stanton and Kelly Popour.”

He reeled off the street addresses. “Call me when it’s done.”

3

SUNDAY, 10:45 A.M.

Leslie's hand shook as she stared down the barrel.

Kelly Popour sat at the table, arms shackled at the biceps, effectively holding her in place. She pleaded, "Don't, Leslie, don't!"

But Leslie didn't have a choice. Not if she wanted to live. Her heart shuddered as she looked to the left. To the person who'd brought this nightmare down on them.

"Why?" she whispered. "Why?"

An insane giggle reached her and she knew her life would never be the same. If she even had a life after tonight.

"It's your turn, Leslie," the voice singsonged. "You lost the hand."

Leslie looked at the cards scattered across the table. Nausea welled up, gagging her. The bullet in her shoulder caused it to burn like someone had touched a blowtorch to it.

She couldn't do it. She simply couldn't. Her mind scrambled for a plan, a way to escape. And the only way to do that was to end the life of the person who'd snatched her from her home two days ago.

But she couldn't turn the gun on her captor either. The steel bar attached to the table ensured the gun would point in only one direction.

Toward her best friend, Kelly.

And Leslie had been warned. If she didn't pull the trigger, she would die.

The only way to live was to pull the trigger. "God! Help me!"

Her finger tightened and Kelly flinched, screaming as she ducked her head into her shoulder. "Don't! Don't!" The shackles kept Kelly bound to her chair.

Leslie felt the bite of her handcuffs. The ones around her ankle, binding her to her own steel chair that had been bolted to the floor. No shackles this time. The shooter didn't have shackles.

A sharp pain sliced through her shoulder, and her arm convulsed.

"Do it, Leslie. Kelly pulled the trigger on you, didn't she? What's keeping you from doing the same?"

She couldn't do it. Glancing at the one who was now in control of whether she lived or died, Leslie suddenly knew without a doubt she wasn't going to live much longer.

With a deep breath, she set her jaw, determination sliding through to push the terror aside a fraction. If she was going to die, she wouldn't die a murderer.

She dropped her arms, heard the gun clatter to the table as the steel bar fell over. "I won't do it."

She felt something slam into her forehead and knew no more.

4

MONDAY, 7:02 A.M.

Dead, dark eyes stared up at her, and Medical Examiner Serena Hopkins suppressed the shiver that slid over her. The feeling was unwelcome—and unexpected—since she saw dead bodies on a daily basis.

Ignoring her odd reaction, Serena leaned in and examined a small package with a bright red bow. It lay on the woman's midsection with her rigid hands grasping it. If she didn't know the woman was dead, Serena would think she was lying there, stretched out on the bench, taking a short nap while waiting on someone to wake her.

Only this woman would never again wake up.

Serena let her gaze move down the body, taking note of the pink hoodie jogging jacket over a white T-shirt, matching pink jogging shorts, skinned knees, and bare feet.

Detective Katie Isaacs cleared her throat. "Well?"

Serena watched as the bomb squad van pulled away. It hadn't taken them long to examine the package and declare it nonexplosive. But Serena wouldn't open it. CSU, the crime scene unit, would take care of that. Her job was the body. "I would say she's been dead anywhere from eight to thirty-six hours. She's cold and stiff. From the hole in her forehead, I'll make a wild guess and say that

was the cause of death. But until I do the autopsy, I won't know for sure. I can say for certain that she wasn't killed here, though."

"Not enough blood," Katie stated.

Serena nodded. Head wounds bleed profusely, but this woman . . . "Not *any* blood. At least none that I can see." Serena pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes on the woman's head. "Something's just not right . . ."

Straight dark hair, slender, tall, athletic.

But there was something familiar . . .

"I don't want to move her until Mickey gets here." Mickey Black, the CSU photographer, would get the pictures from every conceivable angle before Serena would move the body. And then he would take more pictures. But she could take in as much information as possible while she waited on him.

As she continued to study the woman's face, recognition finally came like a punch to the gut. "I know her." Stunned, Serena straightened and looked at Katie. "Her name's Leslie Stanton. She was in my graduating class in high school. You were a senior when we were freshmen."

Katie took another look, then shook her head. "She doesn't look the slightest bit familiar to me."

Serena lifted a brow. "Death has a way of messing with a person's looks. I'm sure she would prefer the yearbook picture." She paused. "Where's your partner?" Serena had no idea how Hunter Graham worked with Katie Isaacs. The woman could be crass and downright rude, but she and Hunter had developed a relationship that worked for them.

And Serena had to admit Katie seemed to have mellowed a bit since being shot a few weeks ago.

Katie said, "He and Alexia took a little trip trying to track down her father."

Hunter Graham and Alexia Allen, two of Serena's closest friends, needed the break from the trauma they'd just lived through four

weeks ago. Someone had been after Alexia and almost succeeded in killing her.

Fortunately, she'd escaped and Hunter was determined to stick close while she searched for the father she hadn't seen in ten years.

Katie shielded her eyes with her hand and looked at the crowd behind the tape. "Chad's here working with some of the other officers asking questions, trying to find someone who saw something."

Detective Chad Graham, Hunter's brother and a bit of a loose cannon. But likable enough and a good detective. He was going through a nasty divorce, but Serena noticed he was learning to leave his personal life at home while he focused on the job.

Another man caught her attention. Tall, with broad shoulders and reddish blond hair, he was an all-around good-looking man. "Hey, isn't that Colton Brady? What's he doing here?"

Katie looked over her shoulder. "Yes. He was transferred to our department two weeks ago. Word's out that he has his eye on the captain position when Captain Murdoch retires in a few months."

Serena bit her lip. "Huh." She watched him move through the crowd, stop to speak to officers, and then engage in conversation with Chad. He had an air of authority around him. It would be interesting to see if he got the captain's job.

Mickey arrived and, after briefly greeting them, got to work.

Serena stepped back, tilted her head toward Katie, and refocused on her news. "So they found Alexia's father?"

"They think so. With all the feelers they put out, they finally got some hits. A homeless shelter director in Charlotte, North Carolina, said he thinks the man's been staying there for the past week."

Serena continued her observations, making notes and studying the area around Leslie.

When Mickey finished snapping, he said, "We can turn her now. I'll snap while you move her."

After positioning the gurney next to the bench, Serena motioned for one of the CSU members to help her. Together, they hefted

Leslie onto the body bag, placing her facedown. Serena stepped forward and moved the woman's head. The condition of the back of Leslie's head brought Serena up short.

"Bullet went through the back," she muttered to herself. "And he cleaned her up."

"What?" Katie looked up from her notepad.

"Look. The bullet went out the back of her skull, but there's no blood, brain matter, nothing. And her hair's clean, freshly washed—and not by her, I can tell you that."

"Now that's just . . . weird." Katie's nose wrinkled as she waited for Serena to continue.

"Sure is." Serena frowned. "Do you find this kind of creepy?"

"Creepy?" Katie lifted a brow. "You're a medical examiner and you find a dead body creepy?"

Smirking, Serena said, "Cute." Then her frown returned. "By creepy, I mean this is the second classmate to be murdered in the last month." From the corner of her eye, she saw Rick Shelton climb from the white CSU van. It had taken him long enough to get here.

"You're talking about Devin being the first?" Katie asked. Devin Wickham had been killed a little over four weeks ago, starting a weeklong reign of terror for Alexia. When Serena nodded, Katie said, "But Devin's killer was caught."

"True." Serena's mind continued to turn over the possibilities as she gathered evidence and placed it in bags to be delivered to the lab. She would handle the body; CSU would cover everything else.

Rick walked up and Serena asked, "What are you doing here? Don't you have a lab to run?"

Head of the crime lab, Rick didn't go out into the field much anymore. He rolled his eyes. "When you're short staffed, you do what you gotta do. That was one reason it took me awhile to get over here. Had to pull people out of bed. Third-shift workers don't like first shift, so some may be a little grumpy. Just ignore it." He started issuing orders to his team and Serena turned back to the detective.

Looking puzzled, Katie chewed her bottom lip. Walking forward, she stood next to Serena and studied the gift they'd removed from the dead woman's hands.

Serena noticed Katie wince as she moved her left arm. "You're back at work a little soon after being shot, aren't you?"

The detective shrugged with her good shoulder. "Can't stand sitting around doing nothing. I'm on light duty for the next couple of weeks. But I can go to a death scene, write reports, and do a little investigating. I leave when I get tired."

Katie had been shot protecting Alexia from the person who'd murdered Devin and eventually grabbed Alexia. But the shooter had been killed in jail and couldn't have been responsible for this new death.

"What's up with this present? Who is it for? Is it hers? Did someone give it to her? Or was she going to deliver it?" Katie machine-gunned the questions and made Serena blink.

"I don't know," she answered. A chilled sensation crawled up the back of her neck and a sense of foreboding surrounded her. Her eyes scanned the crowd, probing, seeking. Was the killer here, watching her work? Reveling in the chaos he'd created?

Nobody looked out of place. The crime scene photographer snapped shots of the crowd. The cops held the growing masses back, trying to give Leslie the dignity she deserved. Unfortunately, she had been placed on a park bench right along the jogging path. In full view of the gawkers.

And the news media. The Channel 7 news van pulled up followed by Channel 10, and Serena winced. Just what they needed. Fortunately, more police arrived at that moment and would help keep the media and their cameras away. They'd tried to make the crime scene area large enough to keep the body out of range of sight, but the layout of the park made it impossible. They would just have to deal with it.

Turning back to Leslie, she gathered every last scrap of evidence from the poor woman's body and handed everything over to Rick.

He curled his fingers around the handle of the evidence bag. "I'll get this to the lab and see what I can get for you, but until you find the original crime scene, it's going to be a tough one."

"I know. And unless someone tips the cops off," she shrugged, "you know as well as I do that finding where she was killed is a shot in the dark."

Rick nodded and looked at the present Serena had immediately tagged and bagged to avoid any kind of contamination of evidence that might be on the outside of the package. "Want me to take that now?"

"Sure."

His eyes gleamed. "I'll let Christine take care of this one."

Serena bit her lip to hide a smile. Alexia had told her that Rick was in love with Hunter and Chad's sister, Christine Graham. Christine worked in the lab with Rick. "I'm sure she would appreciate that." She tilted her head. "How is Christine doing with taking over the high school reunion planning?"

For a moment Rick's eyes blanked at the change of subject, then he shrugged. "Fine. I think she's enjoying it in spite of Lori dying." Lori, the committee's former leader, had killed Devin Wickham and then kidnapped Alexia. "The committee thought about canceling it but then decided they didn't want to let murder be the theme of their ten-year reunion. If they don't go through with the plans for it . . ." He shook his head. "What are you going to think of whenever anyone mentions their ten-year reunion?"

Serena realized Christine was right. They needed to have the reunion.

Katie and Chad walked up together. Chad said, "We're going to inform Leslie's family and see if they can answer a few questions for us. We need a timeline of her whereabouts for the last few hours. Maybe if we can figure out who saw her last, we'll find her killer."

"Sounds like a good idea. I'll be at the morgue. Just let me know when they're ready to see her."

Chad nodded and, together, he and Katie left.

Serena noticed the frown on Rick's face as he looked to the black and silver package, then back to Leslie. "What is it?" she asked.

His eyes continued their perusal. "I'm not sure. There's something vaguely familiar about this whole scene."

"What do you mean?"

The frown deepened. "Again, I'm not sure. I'll have to think about it, but it's like this crime is ringing some sort of bell for me."

"Something you worked on before?"

"Nope." He shook his head. "Something I read. Maybe. Or heard in a lecture." He shrugged. "It'll come to me. If you get anything else, bag it and bring it to me."

Rick left and Serena turned back to Leslie. Sorrow swept over her and she firmed her jaw. Leslie had been a quiet girl who kept to herself but was friendly and smart. To see her now made Serena furious, sad—even a little shocked. The same way she'd felt when she'd been called to Devin's murder.

Swallowing her emotions, she zipped the bag, stopping at the woman's face. Staring down at the life cut short, she felt sorrow seize her.

"I'm sorry, Leslie," she whispered. "I'm going to find who did this to you."

"Still talking to the dead?"

The quiet voice behind her made her freeze. And her heart gave a startled thud before settling back into a faster than normal rhythm. She finished zipping the bag. "Almost every day."

"Do they ever talk back?" Dominic Allen stepped into her peripheral vision and pushed his sunglasses to the top of the short red curls that lay tight around his head.

"All the time." Serena kept her voice even, hoping the sudden tremor in her hands wasn't noticeable as Dominic took one end of the gurney without her asking. Together, they pushed it to the back of the vehicle where Serena opened the door. "What are you doing here?"

“I’ve got two more days of medical leave. Supposed to be recovering from my surgery.”

Serena knew from Alexia about Dominic’s surgery. He’d been a bone marrow donor for his mother, who suffered from aplastic anemia. “Glad to see you’re feeling better.”

“Pretty much back to 100 percent.” A smile crossed his lips. “I’m not here officially. Hunter knew I’ve been climbing the walls from sheer boredom, so when he got this call, he sent me a text. I’ll fill him in once he gets back in town.”

She eyed him. “And that’s the only reason you’re here?”

He paused. “You got me. He said you’d be here and I need to talk to you.”

“About?”

“Jillian Carter.” Dominic’s smile faded. “He wants me to quietly look into Jillian’s disappearance. I have access to resources he doesn’t have.”

Serena felt the tremor ease, but a ball of ice formed in her gut. “Really? Why?”

“Because we want to find the man who got away. The person behind Alexia’s kidnapping is still out there and she’s not truly safe until he’s caught. His main concern seemed to be finding Jillian. When he had Alexia, he questioned her at length about how to find Jillian. When she finally convinced him she didn’t know, he left orders for Lori to kill her. Thankfully, Alexia got away. But . . . we still need to find the person behind everything. So . . . we find Jillian, we find our mystery man.”

Serena gave Dominic a wary look and said, “Sounds kind of like setting up a trap for Jillian to walk into.”

Dominic rubbed a hand down the side of his face. “Maybe, but we were hoping it would be a trap for the guy who had Alexia kidnapped. Not for Jillian.”

Still unsure about that whole plan, she said, “And you think I can help?”

“Alexia said you were the last one to talk to Jillian. Everything that happened to Alexia has something to do with Jillian. We just need to figure out what.”

“Jillian called me a couple of months ago,” Serena admitted, “but she didn’t say much. Asked a few questions, then said she was coming home.”

“But she didn’t say when?”

“No. She said she had a few things to take care of first.”

“You said she asked you questions. I need to know what those were.” He gestured to Leslie. “After you get her taken care of, will you meet me for a cup of coffee?”

Dominic asking her out. She’d dreamed of this day since she was twelve. Only it wasn’t a date. Not really. “I might be able to do that.” Proud of the cool tone she managed to achieve, Serena motioned for help to get Leslie into the back of the vehicle.

Dominic offered his assistance once again and together they got Leslie situated and the doors shut after her.

Serena pulled off her gloves and disposed of them in the hazardous waste bag. She finally turned and got a good look at Dominic Allen. He still looked as good as he had the last time she’d seen him. She’d been fourteen, he’d been seventeen.

His red hair and emerald green eyes still made her heart flutter. “Give me a couple of hours to get things wrapped up.”

Dominic slipped her a card. “My cell number is on here. I’ll be waiting.”



Standing next to his car, one hand on the open door, the other wrapped around his keys, Dominic paused and watched the very competent Serena speak to the coroner. At five feet nine, she looked exotic with her olive skin, flashing blue eyes, and straight black hair. Right now, she wore it pulled up into a ponytail, but he could envision it flowing around her shoulders.

He blinked and shook his head, remembering the feel of her skin as she'd taken the card from his hand. Her fingers had scraped his palm and his heart had trembled at the contact.

Weird. Very weird. But intriguing. She'd been his kid sister's best friend all through grade school, middle school, and high school. Because of his father's penchant for alcohol and swinging fists, Serena had only been over to the Allen household occasionally.

And he had to admit he'd noticed she was a cute kid, then a pretty preteen. And he also had to admit if she'd been older, he'd have been interested. Then everything had fallen apart and he'd fled, doing his best to leave his memories behind him.

Only now he had a feeling Serena would play a prominent role in his thoughts, and it was a feeling he wasn't sure he was comfortable with.

Serena could very easily become a distraction for him and that was something he couldn't afford right now.

Then she turned and gave him a small wave.

And he decided maybe he could live with one distraction.

Dominic slid into his car and cranked it. He wondered how long he'd have to wait before Serena called him.



The game was off to a rocking good start. Excitement boiled as the killer stood amongst the masses, back behind the newly placed yellow tape, taking delight in the chaos caused by the discovery of Leslie. Leslie hadn't wanted to play the game right. She'd cheated and stolen the fun. When the toys broke or weren't fun anymore, they had to be thrown away and replaced with a new one.

Replacing Leslie would be a challenge.

The killer shifted, twisting fingers that had gently washed Leslie's hair only hours before.

Already, anticipation for the next name burned inside.

Another call would come.

Two more names would be whispered.

Who would it be? Excitement at the unknown churned even as impatience escalated. Who?

Eenie meenie miney moe.



“She received the package in the mail last week.”

“What’s in it?” Senator Frank Hoffman tensed as he awaited the answer. He’d been desperate to get his hands on the package they’d discovered was en route.

A brief moment of silence echoed over the line. “I don’t know, she beat me to it. When she signed for it, all I had time to see was the return address from California. I checked out the name on the package and had a buddy of mine in law enforcement do a facial scan. Investigative Reporter Julie Carson is definitely Jillian Carter.” He paused. “And now she’s disappeared again. I think the PI I put on her spooked her somehow. He can’t find a sign of her anywhere.”

Frank slammed his fist onto the desk. His coffee sloshed over the side of his mug. Ignoring it, he leaned forward, fingers gripping the phone he had jammed to his ear.

“We found her, only to lose her? I thought you said you had this covered.”

“I do.” The voice never changed in pitch or tone, but Frank still shivered. He might think he was calling the shots, but he had to admit—if only to himself—that the person on the other end scared him a little. The voice continued, “I’ve found someone to take care of the problem. When the time is right, the problem will be resolved.”

“What kind of someone?”

“Someone who knows exactly what needs to be done and will do it without hesitation.”

“Does Serena know she’s a target?”

Another pause. “She may suspect something after the break-in.”

“Break-in? What break-in? Did you have something to do with it?”

“I did. We failed to find what we were looking for.”

Frank grunted. “We seem to be having a lot of that lately.”

“Serena has a gun and knows how to use it. The guy I hired to get the package is now in a coma in the hospital. Fortunately, his prints aren’t in the system.”

Fear shot through Frank. “Can he be traced back to you in any way?” If he could, he could be traced to Frank.

“No.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Frank paused, and regained control. “We need to get her out of the picture, to stay out of her house to give us time to search it. And then when we find what we’re looking for, get rid of her.”

“I know. And I’ve got it covered.” Satisfaction sounded in the voice and Frank felt slightly better. Slightly.

“And how are you going to accomplish that?” he asked.

“I’ve already set things in motion.” A light chuckle graced the line. “It’s amazing how contacts you once wished buried forever can come back to save your skin.”

Well, that was good to know. Maybe.

“I want to know what’s in that package.” Frank forced calm into his tone. “It could lead us to Jillian.” Or it could land him in prison.

“I’m working on it.”

“Work harder.”

5

MONDAY, 11:45 A.M.

Serena straightened and stretched, her back aching, her thoughts whirling. She examined the gunshot wound one more time, content that her findings were correct. “The gunshot in her shoulder didn’t kill her. Slowed her down and hurt like crazy, I’m sure, but it didn’t kill her. The one to the forehead did the trick.”

Paul Hamilton, her assistant, nodded his agreement. Serena made the Y-cut and they started on the organs. Serena talked as she worked, recording her findings to be sure she didn’t forget anything when it came time to write the report.

Paul took the liver from her. He would weigh it, record it, and then move on to the next organ.

They worked in a practiced synchronized harmony that came with doing this many times. When she finished with the internal exam, she did another external one on Leslie’s legs. As she did, her thoughts went to the man she’d shot in the head and who now lay in a coma four floors above her.

The 9-1-1 call had confirmed the fact that Serena had acted in self-defense. No action would be taken against her. However, she wanted the man to wake up and tell her why he’d targeted her. It was no random break-in. He’d called Serena by name.

“You okay?” Paul asked.

She glanced at the handsome young man in his late twenties. His dark hair set off his light blue eyes, and the dimple in his left cheek had charmed just about every woman he’d come into contact with at the hospital.

Serena found him to be a top-notch assistant who’d also become a friend in the year that they’d worked together. At first she thought he might have some romantic feelings toward her, but when she didn’t encourage him, he backed off and now seemed content with a good friendship. “I’m fine. Just thinking.”

“About the man you shot?” His dimple flashed at her.

She lifted a brow. “You’re getting pretty good at that mind reading stuff.”

He grinned, his blue eyes twinkling. “It’s called spending a lot of time with someone and getting to know her.”

“Hmm. I suppose.”

“Ready for me yet?”

Paul jumped and Serena gasped, startled at the sudden question that came from behind her. She whirled to see Dorie standing in the doorway.

Dorie laughed, then sobered. “Oops, sorry, didn’t mean to sneak up on y’all.”

Heart still thumping with the adrenaline surge, Serena placed a hand on her chest and gulped. “It’s all right. We’re just about finished here.”

Dorie King, the morgue janitor, was about fifty pounds overweight, but she moved her pear-shaped body easily, never seeming to tire while she worked. The woman could have been anywhere between thirty and fifty with straight auburn, chin-length hair, and dark brown eyes.

Even though Dorie was a recent hire, Serena had come to appreciate her unique sense of humor and cheery outlook on life. Working a swing shift wasn’t easy, but Serena had never heard the woman complain.

Which was a miracle in itself considering what she had to clean up sometimes.

“Can you tell me about her?” Dorie asked, pointing to Leslie.

And Dorie had an insatiable curiosity about all of Serena’s patients, as she hoped one day to have Serena’s job. A fact Dorie had told her with gleeful satisfaction. Then laughed. “Well, not your job, but I do want to be a medical examiner one day. What better way to get there than from the ground up?”

So Serena did her best to teach Dorie every chance she got.

Looking at the clock, she gasped. There would be no time for teaching today. “Oh Dorie, excuse me, I’m sorry, but I have something I have to do today. Paul can fill you in if he has time.” No names would be mentioned and nothing about the crime. When she taught, she kept to the facts of the autopsy. And Dorie knew better than to ask for anything more.

Paul clicked his tongue with regret. “Sorry, Dorie, I’m off to a dentist appointment.”

Dorie shrugged. “Oh well, maybe next time.”

“You bet.” Paul smiled as he shrugged out of his lab coat.

A knock sounded on the door and Serena turned to see a man in a blue business suit, matching tie, and black loafers.

She asked, “Can I help you?” Then she frowned. “How did you get in?”

He shuffled his feet a bit, then looked at Leslie still stretched out on the table. Serena felt unease slide up her spine. Glad she’d covered Leslie to her shoulders, she looked at Paul and Dorie, who stared at the intruder.

“Sir?” Serena questioned.

“Um, yes, I’m sorry.” He blinked his gaze away from Leslie, then focused on Dorie and Paul. His eyes narrowed as he seemed to shake off whatever had distracted him and said, “I saw it on the news. About Leslie. I wanted to come see her. Come see if it was true.”

Compassion stirred. Had this been Leslie's boyfriend? "I'm sorry. We usually use the viewing room. I just finished up her autopsy."

"How did she die?"

Serena's uneasiness returned. "Again, I'm sorry, but unless you're family, I really can't reveal anything about her death or medical information."

"It's all right." He shook his head. "She was shot, wasn't she?"

"I believe that information was on the news."

He nodded. "Along with the picture of her laid out on the park bench holding a gift."

Serena winced. "Yes. I didn't realize that made it on the news." She remembered the media trucks that had pulled up and her anger at their intrusion. She was still mad about that.

Again, his gaze bounced between Serena and Leslie, then back to Dorie and Paul. Serena said, "I think it's best if you contact Leslie's family about anything you'd like to know about her."

He backed toward the door. "Yes. Yes, I'll do that."

"Sir? I didn't catch your name."

But he was gone.

She looked at Paul and Dorie. "That was weird."

Dorie shuddered and blinked. "Definitely. We really need to talk to security about this. He shouldn't have been allowed down here."

"He probably said he was family or something and got one of the orderlies to let him in." Serena pursed her lips and then glanced at the clock again. She nearly shrieked as she snatched her cell phone to dial Dominic's number. It rang once.

"I wondered if you'd forgotten me." Dominic's deep voice rumbled in her ear.

"Um . . . well . . ."

His laughter followed. "I get it. I lose track of time too when I'm involved in work."

"Sorry." She knew she sounded sheepish. And she was. She hadn't meant to forget him. Normally, she set her phone alarm to remind

her when she had an appointment. “I can meet you now. You have someplace in mind?”

“The Java Stop?”

“That’s around the corner from here. I can walk over there in just a few minutes.” The hospital morgue was in the basement of Palmetto Hospital in downtown Columbia.

She hung up. Slipping off her lab coat, she made a mental note to call Rick Shelton on her way to meet Dominic. She really wanted to know what was in that package. She grabbed her purse, then opened a desk drawer and pulled out an envelope that held a special gift for the girls’ home she volunteered for. She smiled as she thought of the surprise and joy the check would bring to those who needed it.

“Want me to mail that for you?” Paul asked.

“No, that’s okay. I need stamps anyway. But thanks.” She would stop at the post office on her way back from lunch. “See you later, Dorie,” she called. She waved to Paul, who was gathering his stuff to leave.

He waved back. “Bye.”

Slipping her phone from her pocket, she dialed Rick’s direct number as she walked down the hall.

Voice mail picked up and Serena left a message for Rick to call her.

Pushing through the heavy glass doors, she exited the hospital and made her way to the sidewalk, busy with the lunchtime crowd. People passed her, walking shoulder to shoulder, jostling, nudging. “Excuse me’s” and “sorry’s” abounded. She moved toward the outer edge of the crowd and stuffed the envelope into her purse.

Horns honked, cars roared past. The smell of exhaust burned her nose.

The café was just ahead.

A tug on her purse, then a hard hit to her right shoulder made her cry out as she stumbled on the edge of the curb, twisting her right ankle.

Her purse slid from her shoulder and she felt herself falling, falling.

As though in slow motion.

Right into the path of an oncoming city bus.

Brakes screamed, voices cried out.

Serena felt panic choke her as she did the only thing she could think to do.

Keep moving.

Scrambling on all fours, the asphalt scraped her palms, tore at her knees through the fabric of her pants.

Wind rushed past her as the bus missed her by a mere inch.

Horns blared, tires squealed. And Serena came to a trembling halt in front of another car that managed to stop centimeters from her.

“Are you all right?”

“Ma’am?”

“Can you stand?”

The voices echoed in her ears. She couldn’t speak, couldn’t move, couldn’t stop shaking.

In the back of her mind, she registered the symptoms.

Shock.

A hand slid under her arm and gently helped her to her feet. She winced at the stinging pain lancing through her hands and knees and right ankle, but miraculously enough, she decided she was otherwise unhurt.

Grateful for the helping hand, she limped her way back to the sidewalk.

Her rescuer turned concerned eyes on her. “I think someone tried to steal your purse but dropped it when you didn’t let go right away. Are you all right?”

“I think so. Thanks.” She took the purse from him and winced at the sting in her hands.

He left and people continued on their way.

Serena stood still, leaning against the building until the worst

of the trembling ceased. People once again hurried past, anxious to get to wherever they needed to be.

“Serena?”

Her head snapped up to see Dominic pushing his way through the crowd, heading toward her, the frown on his face communicating his concern.

Reaching her, he stopped and looked down. At her hands. She hadn’t realized she’d been holding them palms up. Gently, he grasped her wrists for a closer look. “What happened? I saw all the commotion out here and thought I’d find out what was going on.”

Offering a slight shrug and a shaky grimace that she hoped passed for a smile, Serena said, “You might say someone just tried to throw me under a bus.”



Dominic had the crazy urge to offer comfort. “What do you mean?”

She shook her head, but the fear remained in those blue eyes.

He pulled her into his arms, wishing he could always be close enough to help.

Mild shock ran through him when she didn’t protest.

For a good minute, they stood huddled up against the side of the building, her face buried against the crook between his neck and shoulder. The scent of her shampoo wafted up and he inhaled. Then he got himself together and wrapped a hand around her upper arm. Clearing his throat, he said, “Come on, let’s go to the café and you can get cleaned up a little bit.” He paused. “Or would you rather I take you home?”

“No.” Her voice sounded husky. “I’ll be okay. Let’s go to the café. You’re right, I can clean up there. I want to hear what you have to say about Jillian.”

A few minutes later, Serena came out of the restroom, limping slightly, favoring her right ankle. She had wet paper towels pressed

to her hands. "I think the bleeding is stopped." She bit her lip and frowned in disgust. "And I tore a hole in my best pair of pants."

He looked. "Ouch. Are you sure you don't want to go home?"

"And do what?" Another slight lift of her shoulders and she said, "I took some ibuprofen—that should kick in soon." She slid into the seat opposite him.

The waitress came over and they placed their order. Then Dominic asked, "So what did you mean, someone tried to throw you under a bus?"

"I'm not sure exactly what happened. One minute, I was going with the flow of the crowd, the next, I felt someone tug on my purse, then a hard shove against my shoulder. I fell into traffic and looked up to see a bus heading my way. I rolled and—" she swallowed—"somehow made it out of the way in one piece."

A shudder racked her and Dominic felt his protective instincts kick in. "You could have been killed."

"Believe me, the thought had crossed my mind," she said softly.

He frowned. "And you don't think it was an accident."

Their coffee and food arrived. She sighed. "I don't know what to think."

Dominic picked up his cup and took a sip. "Well, if it's not an accident, then that means you have someone who wants to hurt you."

She fiddled with her fork, then her napkin, then picked up her water and took a gulp. "It's possible, I suppose."

"You have some enemies?"

"Maybe."

He lifted a brow. "You want to tell me about it?"

"Someone broke into my house last week while I was asleep."

Dominic frowned. "What? How?"

"Good question." She took a bite of her salad. "I had the alarm armed and it never went off. My dog was drugged before she could warn me." She shrugged. "Then again, she's not really a good watchdog so I don't count on her for that."

“What was the intruder looking for?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I shot him before I had a chance to ask him.”

Dominic choked on his tea and grabbed a napkin before he could spew the liquid everywhere. Finally, he asked, “Excuse me?”

Her eyes flicked to his, then back to her food. “I had my dad’s gun in a closet. I managed to get to it, and now my intruder’s in a coma on the fourth floor of the hospital. The bullet entered his skull and did some damage, but he’s still alive.” She took another bite. She sounded blasé about the incident, but he could tell she was deeply disturbed by the fact that she’d shot a man. Before he could try to think of something to say that didn’t sound patronizing or just plain stupid, Serena said, “Tell me about Jillian, please.”

Dominic hesitated. Serena looked worn out, tired, and stressed. He wanted to protect her, comfort her, and tell her everything would be fine. But his gut said she wasn’t the type to believe it if it wasn’t true. He reached over and gripped her free hand. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Tears formed for a brief moment before she blinked them away. “Tell me about Jillian. Please.”

Dominic hesitated again, trying to get a read on the woman across the table. The beautiful woman with the shadowed eyes. She was hiding something and didn’t want to confide in him. Yet.

He could understand that. He had a few secrets of his own. But he still made a mental note to look into the shooting. He gave her fingers a light squeeze and reluctantly withdrew his hand. “We know she left town on the night of graduation. She must have used the cash you and Alexia gave her.”

Serena poked at her salad. She winced at the movement, her hand obviously in some pain, but continued with the details of that night. “I gave her several hundred dollars.” A slight smile crossed her lips. “I had all my graduation money in my wallet. I’d planned

to go to the bank that day, but there wasn't any time. Between us, we gave her almost a thousand dollars."

She didn't say it, but Dominic knew Serena had given the bulk of the money to Jillian. Alexia hadn't had much, and what she had, she'd needed for her own plans. "What was her emotional state?"

"She was frantic, scared, desperate to get away. So . . . we helped her."

"And you don't have any idea where she is now?"

Serena met his eyes. "None."

He believed her. "I've talked to her father. She hasn't contacted them one time since she left. Even missed her mother's funeral six years ago."

"She wasn't particularly close to her parents." Serena took another small bite of her salad and chewed. She swallowed and said, "But I'm sure she didn't know about her mother or she would have found a way to come to the funeral."

Dominic leaned back and tried to assess her. She was cool and composed even after almost being run over, possibly killed. And then he had caught the slight tremor in her fingers and figured she wasn't quite as together as she portrayed. "What did you find out about Leslie?"

"The autopsy showed mostly what I thought it would. The gunshot to her forehead killed her. Without the bullet, however, I can't tell you exactly what kind of gun it came from, but the small hole suggests a small caliber. Probably something like a .22 or a .32, but that's just a guess. There's no way to determine the caliber without the bullet. I can rule out some of the larger caliber bullets, of course, but . . ." She shrugged and Dominic understood. Simply put, without the bullet, they wouldn't know what kind of weapon they were looking for. Serena continued, "Marks on her wrists suggest she was tied up. Bruise around her left ankle looks like some kind of restraint was used there. No sign of sexual assault. The scraped knees could have happened before her attacker grabbed

her. Or while she was trying to get away from him. They're pretty recent scrapes, though." She set down her fork and frowned. "But there's no way to really tell."

"But why her?"

Serena lifted a brow at him. "That's your area of expertise, not mine." Her phone rang and she pulled it off the clip at her side. "Hello?"

She listened, frowned, and nodded. He sat up straight and studied her as she said, "Okay. Thanks for letting me know." She hung up and slowly put the phone back on the clip.

"What is it?"

"That was Rick. He said when he couldn't reach you, he tried me. He has something he needs us to see right away."