

MALLORY
KANE

HIGH SCHOOL
REUNION



INTRIGUE ...

Mallory Kane

High School Reunion

Аннотация

Someone wanted FBI special agent Laurel Gillespie dead. And with good reason. Her not-so-discreet investigating into the decade-old suicide of a high school classmate indicated it may have been murder. Now the killer was determined to stop Laurel from discovering the truth. Police Chief Cade Dupree resented Laurel's invasion on his turf. Not only did she stir up trouble in his town, she also stirred up feelings inside him. But when a madman targeted Laurel, Cade vowed to protect her at all costs. Could they learn to trust each other in time to outwit a cold-blooded murderer?

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“I’m taking you back to my house and locking you in.”

“Lock me in? Not a chance. In fact, I think I’ll run back over to the crime scene.”

“The hell you will. Okay fine. We’ll review the files together.”

“Good. I’m glad you finally see it my way.”

Cade shook his head. “Trust me, Gillespie. I do not see it your way. That’s not why I’m doing this.”

“It’s not? Then why are you?”

“Maybe it doesn’t mean much to you that someone’s obviously trying to harm you, but it does to me.”

That stopped her. Laurel’s eyes widened. “It does?”

“Yeah.” Feeling flayed open by his unintentional revelation, he scrambled to think of a flip answer. “Yeah. Because if anyone around here is going to shoot or strangle you, it’s going to be me.”

MALLORY KANE HIGH SCHOOL REUNION



For my brave, heroic mother.
Mama, I miss you every day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mallory Kane credits her love of books to her mother, a librarian, who taught her that books are a precious resource and should be treated with loving respect. Her grandfather and her father were steeped in the Southern tradition of oral history, and they could hold an audience spellbound with their storytelling skills. Mallory aspires to be as good a storyteller as her father. She loves romantic suspense with dangerous heroes and dauntless heroines, and often uses her medical background to add an extra dose of intrigue to her books. Mallory lives in Mississippi with her computer-genius husband, their two fascinating cats, and, at current count, seven computers.

She loves to hear from readers. You can write her at mallory@mallorykane.com or care of Harlequin Books.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Cade Dupree—When his older brother died and his dad had a stroke, Dusty Springs Police Chief Cade Dupree gave up his FBI career to return home for his father's sake.

Laurel Gillespie—A forensic criminologist with the FBI's Division of Unsolved Mysteries in Washington, D.C.

Kathy Adler—A closet alcoholic and the leader of the Cool Girls clique in high school, Kathy has the other girls under her thumb. Did she use them to pull off the ultimate humiliation of a geeky classmate—a faked suicide that was really murder?

Mary Sue Nelson—One of the Cool Girls. Is her silly, blond-bimbo persona real, or a clever act that hides a sinister intelligence?

Debra Honeycutt—Quiet and sweet, Cool Girl Debra may have been caught up in a high-school prank gone bad. But someone thinks she knows too much.

Sheryl Posey—The fourth Cool Girl is a cagey survivor who figured out a long time ago that survival meant becoming a hired gun. Whoever can do her the most good gets her loyalty. Did she kill to protect what she knows?

Ralph Langston—A self-remade high school nerd wanted the prestigious Science Medal for himself. Was he jealous enough to commit murder and cover it up as a suicide? Or is he just an opportunist cashing in on another's secret?

Ann Noble—The super-efficient secretary to the mayor of Dusty Springs hides a lot under her practical suits and glasses. But does she know anything about the death or is she bluffing?

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Chapter One

FBI Special Agent Laurel Gillespie rang her friend's doorbell for the third time.

"Come on, Misty," she muttered. "Answer the door."

She rested her hand on her Glock .23 and eyed the carved, wooden front door. No way could she break it down. But she remembered from childhood that the Wallers' back door was half glass—one quick whack with the butt of her gun and she could be inside.

She rubbed the back of her neck. It had been prickling ever since she'd driven into Dusty Springs. She didn't want to be here. Didn't want to run into anyone she knew from high school.

"Come on, Misty. Where are you?" Laurel knew Misty Waller as well as she knew herself. Her best friend from grade school was dependable to a fault—practically obsessive-compulsive. It wasn't in her nature not to be where she said she'd be.

Laurel had called her as soon as she'd landed in Memphis, just like they'd agreed. But Misty hadn't answered—not her home phone or her cell.

So Laurel had picked up her rental car and driven the forty-five miles south to Dusty Springs, Mississippi, in record time. She'd called several more times, but Misty had never answered.

Something was wrong. And that was why she'd tucked her paddle holster into her waistband at the small of her back before

she'd approached the door.

She rang the doorbell one last time. The chime echoed hollowly throughout the house.

She drew her weapon and carefully turned the doorknob, expecting resistance. It turned!

Instinctively, she flattened her back against the door facing as her boss's voice echoed in her ears. Every suspicious circumstance is a crime scene until you prove it's not.

And right now, too many things weren't adding up. Misty never left a door unlocked.

Carefully, she nudged the door open, cringing when the hinges creaked. She angled inside, leading with her weapon, her senses on full alert. The sight that greeted her in the foyer sent alarm thrumming through her.

Scraps of paper littered the floor, lit by the blue glow that flickered from the living room to her left.

TV with no sound. Another habit of Misty's from high school. She'd always studied in front of the TV with the sound turned off.

But not with the lights off.

Laurel pressed her back against the wall, prepared to lead with her gun. A muffled thud sent her heart rate soaring.

"FBI," she called. "I'm coming in. Identify yourself."

A plaintive yowl echoed through the doorway. A cat. Of course. Misty had always had a cat.

Taking a deep breath to steady her pulse, Laurel stepped around the door facing, her Glock at the ready. The cat bumped

her leg.

On the floor in front of the couch, silhouetted in the TV's eerie glow, she saw a crumpled form. Her fingers tightened on her weapon and her heart rate doubled. "Misty? Is that you?"

No response.

She fought to keep her breathing even. Training had taught her that danger sent the pulse sky high—three-hundred beats per minute or more. But training also taught her how to control it. She had to keep her cool.

She felt for the light switch but couldn't find it. Swinging her weapon around one more time, she squinted in the dim blue light. The living room looked like the day after a ticker-tape parade. Photos and scraps of paper were scattered everywhere. No sound reached her ears except the discordant hum of an ancient window air conditioner.

She eyed the body on the floor with growing apprehension. "Misty?"

Nothing. She crossed the room, careful to keep her back to the wall and her finger on the trigger. One glance at the woman's pale face and hair told her it was her friend. Blood blackened the left side of her head.

She held her breath and watched Misty's chest. There—a faint flutter.

Thank heavens. Misty was alive. Laurel hated to leave her friend lying in her own blood, but neglecting the basics could get them both killed.

So, gripping her weapon more tightly, Laurel edged her way through the dining room and into the kitchen. She quickly and efficiently cleared the house.

Whoever had attacked Misty was gone.

Back in the den, she knelt beside her friend. “Misty? Honey? Can you hear me?”

She didn’t answer. Laurel reached for her cell phone to call 9-1-1.

“Damn it.” She’d left it in the car, plugged into the charger. She glanced around. An old-fashioned dial phone sat on a side table, but from her position Laurel could see the naked wires. Whoever had attacked Misty had jerked the phone out of the wall.

She moved to stand, and the toe of her pump touched something. It was a baseball bat that had rolled partway under the couch. Laurel nudged it with her foot. There was wet, shiny blood on the end of it.

She hated to leave Misty alone, but she had to get to her phone. She had to report an assault with a deadly weapon.

Someone had attacked her friend and left her for dead.

POLICE CHIEF CADE DUPREE turned onto Misty Waller’s street and parked near the corner. He’d been investigating a report of a break-in at the Visitor Center of Dusty Springs’ brand new convention complex when the call came in.

Mrs. Gardner, Misty’s neighbor, was frantic, because

someone was lurking around their street. That was the word she'd used. Lurking. To hear her tell it, people had been lurking all afternoon.

A break-in and a lurking in one evening—that was more crime than he'd seen since he'd left the FBI to take over his dad's job as chief of police of Dusty Springs. His mouth curved into a wry smile as he walked down the sidewalk toward the Wallers' house.

Not quite what he'd pictured himself doing after completing his training at Quantico. Still, at least this job wasn't dangerous. Or interesting.

A curtain fluttered in Mrs. Gardner's window. Cade resisted the urge to wave at her as he spotted a rental car parked in front of Misty's house.

That was what he'd figured. The lurker was a friend of Misty's in town for the high-school reunion.

He pushed up the brim of his cap and squinted in the bright sunlight. The driver's side door was open, and a well-rounded backside above long shapely legs faced him. Not Misty. This bottom was skinnier, sexier. And those legs...

"Evening, ma'am," he said, as he approached the front of the car.

The woman tensed, then straightened. The car's interior light glinted off blue steel.

Gun. Cade rocked to the balls of his feet and moved his hand to his belt holster. "Hold it right there."

She froze.

“Now set that gun down on the car seat and straighten up slowly.”

She obeyed. As she straightened, the car’s light caught coppery highlights in her collar-length hair. She held out her hands in a nonthreatening gesture.

Her brows lowered and her mouth dropped open for a split-second, but before he could wonder what she found surprising, she composed her face and looked him straight in the eye.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I’m FBI.” She slowly pulled her jacket aside to reveal the distinctive badge pinned to her waistband.

“FBI?” Unwelcome memories assaulted his brain. The excitement of making it to Quantico. The sense of purpose that the FBI had chosen him. But then his older brother had died, his father had suffered a stroke and he’d had to give up his dream and return to Dusty Springs.

Cade forced his attention back to the woman. “What’s going on?”

“Misty’s hurt. I need to call 9-1-1. I left my cell phone in the car.”

“I’m 9-1-1. Do we need the EMTs?”

“Yes. She’s got a blow to the head.”

Cade didn’t stop to ask any more questions. He sprinted up the steps and through the front door.

“The living room,” the woman called out.

He rounded the doorway and saw Misty crumpled on the floor. He crouched beside her. There was blood matted in her

hair.

“Misty, you all right?” Damn, that was a lot of blood.

Misty stirred and moaned. Relief loosened his tight neck and shoulders. “Lie still. I’m calling an ambulance.”

He punched a preset number. “Get the EMTs over here,” he barked. “The Wallers’ house. Misty’s hurt. And no sirens. Don’t wake all the neighbors.”

The FBI agent’s heels clicked on the hardwood floor, but Cade kept his attention on Misty. “You’re doing fine, Misty. Hang in there another couple of minutes.” He patted her hand, then spoke to the agent. “I don’t think the injury is serious. She may have a concussion.”

“The weapon’s right under your feet.”

“So you found her like this?”

“That’s right.”

“You didn’t see anyone leaving the area? Didn’t pass a vehicle?”

“No.”

“How’d you get in?”

“The door was unlocked.”

Cade swiveled and eyed her. He hadn’t taken the time to examine the door. “Unlocked?”

She nodded, looking past him at Misty. “Yes. Definitely. And no sign of forced entry. It doesn’t make sense. She has an obsession about locking her doors.”

He heard a truck pull up outside. Within seconds, heavy

footsteps on the wooden porch announced the arrival of the EMTs.

“Here we go, Misty. They’re going to take good care of you.” He rose from his haunches and moved out of the way so the EMTs could check her out.

He met the FBI agent’s gaze and found her watching him with a pensive expression.

She blinked, and then held out her hand. “I’m Laurel Gillespie. You don’t remember me. I was a year behind you in school.”

“Gillespie?” he repeated absently.

Laurel saw the blank look in Cade’s eye and her heart sank. She knew he wouldn’t remember her, but that didn’t make it any easier.

He stepped aside as the EMTs lifted Misty onto a gurney. He was close—too close. She could smell his aftershave. It was fresh and subtle. Sexy.

Dear heavens, she was really standing next to Cade Dupree, her high-school crush. She’d thought that by now, ten years after she’d graduated from high school, she’d have forgotten his confident stance, his broad-shouldered, slim-hipped silhouette.

Now that the threat of danger and her worry about Misty were over, she was practically shaking with reaction. Partly from finding Misty collapsed and bleeding, but partly from seeing Cade.

She turned her head. His handsome, familiar face was only a few inches from hers, his thick lashes lowered as he watched

Misty. He hadn't changed except that his face had more character and his body had filled out with lean, hard muscles.

Her pulse fluttered as his gaze met hers and roamed over her face. How could she still remember that voice, those long powerful legs, that lanky frame? And his sky-blue eyes. She'd swooned over those eyes in high school.

He sent her a taste of his killer smile. "So—Laurel Gillespie," he drawled, "FBI agent."

Despite the unwelcome return of her adolescent jitters, Laurel bristled at his patronizing tone. She'd thought she was prepared for Cade Dupree. She wasn't.

He straightened, and rested his hand on the butt of his gun. He was chief of police—the job his dad had held for as long as she could remember. And he was taking charge of the crime scene.

Laurel took a deep breath. She wasn't about to wait for him to order her out of the house.

"I'll take charge of the front. Keep people out." She turned on her heel without waiting for an answer.

Great. She'd put herself exactly where she didn't want to be. In full view of the entire town of Dusty Springs.

She felt like a threshold guardian as a parade of curious neighbors tried to get inside. She had no trouble flashing her badge to turn away the owner of the hardware store and his wife, or a young mother with a toddler in her arms, or a couple of teenage boys, all of whom gasped in awe when she informed them that the house was a crime scene. But she dreaded running

into any of her former classmates.

Her memories of high school were of not fitting in, of the nightmare of braces and glasses, unruly red hair and painful shyness.

Within a few minutes, a familiar man in his early fifties, wearing a badge and a gun, walked up to her. Behind him, a younger man in a misbuttoned police uniform shirt carried a roll of yellow crime-scene tape.

“Evening, Laurel. That is, Special Agent Gillespie. I didn’t know you were an FBI agent.”

“Officer Evans, hi.”

“Cade—Chief Dupree—called us to tape off the scene. He said you might need some help.” He punched a thumb backward through the air. “This is Officer Shelton Phillips.”

She nodded at Phillips and smiled at Officer Evans. “Thanks,” she said gratefully.

Just like Cade’s dad, Fred Evans had been a police officer since she could remember. His daughter Debra had belonged to the snootiest clique in school.

Officer Phillips quickly cordoned off the front of the house and then headed around back.

Laurel turned toward the dwindling crowd just as a tall woman with skinny legs and a haughty air walked up. Kathy Hodges.

Speaking of snooty. Kathy and Debra and a couple of other girls had named themselves the Cool Girls. The rest of the class called them the CeeGees. They’d made it their mission to

target certain classmates, usually the shyest ones, to humiliate and embarrass.

Laurel's confidence drained away as scenes from the most embarrassing night of her life swept through her head with the clarity of a high-definition movie.

Afterward, she'd kicked herself for not seeing through the cruel prank. But on the night of the Homecoming Dance her sophomore year, she'd really believed that senior football captain James Dupree, who was the Homecoming King, wanted her to dance the traditional first dance with him. Although she was smitten with James's younger brother Cade, there was no way she would pass up the biggest honor in a sophomore girl's year.

Remembered excitement and apprehension swirled through her as she relived that awful moment. Standing on the dance floor in a brand new gown, clutching the note from James in her hand.

Please do me the honor of dancing the first dance with me.

Her heart fluttering as James's cocky gaze swept the room, stopping to wink at her.

Then he held out his hand and smiled. And Laurel had started climbing the stairs to the stage.

Still smiling at her, James named another girl. Everyone's laughter still rang in her ears. By the next morning, it was all over school and Laurel was humiliated.

Now here she was, facing Kathy for the first time since she'd graduated and moved away with her parents. Despite her success, she suddenly felt like the plain, shy girl she'd been ten years ago.

Kathy's blond hair was sleek and newly colored, her makeup was perfect, but her eyes were bloodshot, and not even expensive makeup could hide all the tiny veins visible around her nose. A lit cigarette smoldered in her perfectly manicured hand. She looked thin and pinched and miserable.

Laurel stood straighter as Kathy walked purposefully up the steps.

"Pardon me," Kathy said, waving the hand that held the cigarette. Even with the cigarette smoke, Laurel could smell whiskey on her breath.

"Sorry, Kathy. This is a crime scene. No one's allowed inside."

Kathy's perfectly shaped brows drew down as she eyed Laurel.

"Nonsense. Misty's my friend."

Doubt it, Laurel thought.

Kathy made a shooin' gesture toward Laurel. "Check with Cade—Police Chief Dupree. Now excuse me."

Laurel's initial flutter of apprehension at facing Kathy evaporated in a flash of anger. She held her badge in front of Kathy's face.

"Sorry, Kathy. FBI. Please step back."

"Who the hell are you?" Kathy nervously flicked ash off her cigarette.

"Special Agent Laurel Gillespie." She met Kathy's hard green gaze and was rewarded by a look of frank shock.

Just as Fred Evans walked up, Kathy recovered.

"You have got to be kidding." She tried to sidestep Laurel.

“Hold it, Kathy,” Officer Evans said, taking her arm.

Kathy looked down at his hand. “You don’t want to do that, Fred.”

Laurel frowned. Were Kathy’s words slurred? She’d smelled the booze on her breath. But was she really drunk at just after eight in the evening?

“One word to Harrison and you—” Kathy pointed her cigarette at Fred, “will be facing assault charges.” That came out as ashault sharges.

“Right.” His brown eyes twinkled as he glanced at Laurel. “Your husband’s a real estate attorney. Come on, let’s take you home. All the excitement’s over. I’ll tell Harrison to get you into bed.” He gestured to Officer Phillips.

“Oh, please, Fred. Harrison hasn’t gotten me into bed in two years.”

“Shelton, walk Mrs. Adler home and make sure Harrison’s there. I’ll stay here in case the chief needs anything else.”

Phillips led Kathy away.

Laurel didn’t have any more trouble, although several more people she’d known in high school showed up. Obviously, word still spread as fast as it always had in Dusty Springs.

Within a couple of minutes, the EMTs rolled Misty out on a gurney. Fred and Phillips and a couple of guys they’d recruited kept the rubberneckers at bay as the EMTs loaded Misty into the ambulance.

Static erupted from Fred’s radio. He listened, said something,

and then walked up the steps.

“I’ve got everything under control out here, Agent Gillespie,” Fred said. “Chief Dupree wants you inside.”

“Thanks. But please call me Laurel. It’s good to see you. So you’re working with Cade now.”

He chuckled and nodded. “Yep. Worked for his dad and now for him. Kind of a tradition in Dusty Springs I guess.”

“How is Debra?”

His chuckle faded. “She’s fine. Cade’s waiting for you.”

Laurel thanked him again and went inside. The living room’s overhead light was on. It spotlighted the scrapbooks and photo albums that were torn and tossed all over the floor amidst dozens of loose photos and piles of books.

Somebody had been looking for something, and Laurel was afraid she knew what it was. The question was, had they found it?

Cade’s head turned a few degrees. “I guess you’re here for the reunion. You were in Misty’s class, right? How’d you happen to turn up just in time?”

He faced the back of the couch, looking down at the spot where Misty had lain. Laurel had her first fully lighted view of him.

Her mouth went dry and her throat fluttered, just like in high school. Most of the girls in Dusty Springs would have given their eyeteeth for a smile from his brother James, but it was Cade who’d always been able to stop her heart.

He filled up the room, just like he always had. He’d never been

as big or tall as James. And while James's sparkling personality and talent in sports made him the envy of every guy and the heartthrob of every girl in town, Laurel had always preferred Cade's quiet good looks and shy smile.

She blinked, and the image of the boy turned into the reality of the man.

He stood, legs hip-width apart. Worn, perfectly fitting jeans emphasized his buttocks and muscled thighs. His fists were propped on his hips, which pulled the cotton of his Ole Miss T-shirt tight across his back. Under his baseball cap, his brown hair was dark with sweat.

He was surveying the crime scene, which was what she should be doing.

She forced her gaze away from him and looked at the floor where Misty had lain. Her brain queued up a stop-action movie of the crime, based on Misty's position, the blood spatter and the condition of the house.

She put herself into the head of the attacker. I sneak up behind Misty and hit her while she's sitting on the couch.

No. If Misty had been sitting, she'd have slumped over onto the couch, not fallen on the floor in front of it.

Cade turned his head and pinned her with his electric-blue gaze. "My question wasn't rhetorical."

She forced herself not to look away. "I didn't think it was. What do you think about her position on the floor?"

"I asked you first."

“Fair enough.” She stepped closer. “Yes, I’m here for the reunion. I flew in to Memphis this afternoon and drove straight here.”

“Flew in from where?”

“D.C. I work at FBI Headquarters. I’m a criminologist with the Division of Unsolved Mysteries.”

His gaze sharpened, but all he did was nod.

“Misty invited me to stay with her. I tried to call her several times, on her cell and her home phone, but she never answered, which was odd since she’d made me promise to call. I pulled into her driveway at 8:03 p.m. Rang her bell, knocked on the door, then drew my weapon and turned the knob. It was unlocked.”

Cade turned around and crossed his arms. “You said that. Do you know how unlikely that is? Misty’s—”

“Borderline agoraphobic. I know.” She nodded. “Not to mention a tad obsessive-compulsive. Even in grade school she couldn’t stand to be inside a house alone with the doors unlocked.”

“Which means either she let someone in or they picked the lock.”

“That lock’s at least sixty years old. It could probably be opened with a credit card.”

“So you walked into a dark house that you knew shouldn’t be unlocked, not knowing whether you’d find a burglar, a murderer or a rapist?”

“Or my best friend from high school.” Laurel kept her

expression neutral, but it was an effort. “I’m a trained agent with field and crime-scene experience. I know how to enter a suspicious dwelling.”

His face darkened. “Without backup?”

Laurel shrugged. She knew he was right to question her, but she wasn’t wrong. Not totally. She let it drop. “So what do you think about her position?”

“Someone conked her from behind.”

“While she was sitting on the couch?”

“Nope. She’d have slumped over.”

Images of what must have happened played out in Laurel’s head. “Picture this.” She turned to look at the foyer door. “I come in the door. Either it’s unlocked—doubtful—or I somehow unlock it without Misty hearing me.” She stepped toward the couch and raised her hand. “I’m holding the baseball bat. Did I bring it in or pick it up here?”

Cade still had his arms crossed. He nodded toward the couch. “I’m thinking the bat was Misty’s. It was probably near the front door—for protection.”

“What did you do with it?”

“I gave it to Shelton—Officer Phillips—to check for prints.”

“Okay, I’m holding the bat. I raise my arm and swing—” She demonstrated.

“What are you doing?”

The scene in her head freeze-framed. She looked up at him. “Trying to get a picture of what happened.”

“You do realize you’re talking as if you’re the attacker?”

“Oh. A lot of the time I work alone, looking at forensic evidence from photographs or video. I talk to myself.”

His brows drew down. “So you walk in the perp’s shoes. I reckon I see the crime unfolding like a movie—it’s how my dad always did it. I guess everybody’s got their own way of doing things.” He scrutinized her. “So, Gillespie, if you’re acting out what the attacker did, you need to use your other hand. The blow was to the left side of Misty’s head.”

She felt her cheeks heat up. “You’re right. The attacker had to be left-handed.” She looked at her hands. “Wouldn’t you think at least one perp would use the wrong hand, just to throw off the police?”

Cade’s mouth turned up at the corner and Laurel’s pulse jumped at the hint of his killer smile.

He shrugged. “Plus you’ve still got Misty sitting on the couch.”

“Okay. Let’s start over.” She started to turn back toward the door.

“Hold it.” Cade stopped her with a hand on her arm. A large, blunt-fingered, warm hand.

Crime scene, she thought. Crime scene, not high school.

“Are you planning to act out the entire thing?”

“I like to when I can.”

He cocked his head to one side. “Okay, go ahead.”

She gave him a sheepish smile. “Why did Misty get up? Did she hear something and turn around? Here. You be the attacker

and I'll be Misty."

Cade sent her a look. "Might as well. We don't have much else to go on. Shelton lifted prints off the dining table, but Misty had a reunion committee meeting here a couple of days ago, so there are going to be dozens of prints."

"It was three days ago. You stand here, behind the couch." She moved to go around to the front but Cade caught her arm again.

"Aren't you going to give me the blunt object?"

"Ha ha. Don't make fun of me unless you have a better idea." He shook his head.

"Here's something else to think about. Look at the couch."

"Yeah, I know. Blood spatter across the cushions. Proves she wasn't sitting."

"Have you taken samples?"

"Got a few. Don't forget that this isn't D.C. It's Dusty Springs, Mississippi. We're not equipped to handle a lot of lab work, and I can guarantee you that the state lab won't consider a minor breaking and entering, even with injuries, top priority."

Laurel didn't comment. She knew she could use the FBI lab in D.C., but if she offered, Cade would want to know why she'd use their resources for such a relatively insignificant crime. And she wasn't ready to explain the reason she'd violated her promise to herself never to set foot in Dusty Springs again. She knew the suspicion that had drawn her back here was flimsy at best. She needed to gain Cade's confidence before she told him her theory.

"Okay," she said. "I'm sitting on the couch, watching TV. I

hear something. I get up and turn around. It would explain the blow to the left side of her head—”

Cade swung the imaginary bat. “But not her position on the floor.”

“Use your left hand.” Air stirred against her cheek as he feigned a blow to the left side of her head. “I crumple into the exact position where she was found.”

“So she had to be facing the TV.”

“But if she stood because she heard the intruder, why didn’t she turn around?”

“Her cell phone.” Cade said it at the same time as Laurel spotted it on top of the TV.

“She got up to answer her cell phone.” Her stomach sank to the floor. “It was me. I called her from the airport at that very moment.”

“Your call may have saved her life.”

Laurel frowned at him.

“If she’d been sitting on the couch, the attacker would have had a much better angle, and the blow would have struck much harder. It could have killed her.”

Laurel looked at the cell phone. “Have you got gloves?”

“Nope. You’ll have to use a tissue.”

“Misty assured me she’d be at home. She always watches Secret Lives at six. At first I thought she didn’t answer because she was engrossed in the show.” She pulled a couple of tissues from a box on the end table and used them to pick up Misty’s

phone. She accessed the incoming calls.

“I called her at 6:25 when the plane landed. Then at 6:58, and 7:20.” She looked at the muted TV. The logo in the corner of the screen identified the station that carried Secret Lives. “If she was watching the show, then she was attacked after it started but before it ended. So she was attacked between 6:00 and 6:30.”

As soon as she'd seen Misty's floor littered with photos and paper, she'd known what the attacker was after. But now she had to face her own responsibility for Misty's attack. Her mouth tasted like cotton. She couldn't delay any longer. No matter what Cade thought of her shaky theory, she had to come clean. She needed his help.

“So you think my phone call kept her from being hurt even worse. I suppose that's some comfort, considering—” She stopped. This was as hard as she'd known it would be.

His intense blue eyes held hers, lasering holes in her confidence. “Considering what?”

She didn't know if he was reacting to the guilt that must be written all over her face or the sudden tension that tightened like springs through her entire body, but his demeanor changed.

He uncrossed his arms and casually flexed his fingers near the pocket of his sweats. At the same time he shifted his weight to the balls of his feet. He was poised and ready for anything. The transformation was an awesome and frightening sight.

“Do you see what's all over the floor? Photos. Scrapbooks. Journals.” She gestured toward the hardwood floor. “I know why

Misty was attacked.”

Cade didn’t speak, nor did he move his hand.

“All this—” this time she included the bloodstain on the floor and the couch in her sweeping gesture “—is my fault.”

Chapter Two

Cade Dupree didn't know what it was about Laurel Gillespie, but he was having a devil of a time taking his eyes off her. If it hadn't been for one glaring incident back in high school, he wouldn't even have remembered her. She'd been a year behind him and two years behind his brother. His memory of her was of braces and glasses and wildly curly red hair.

The reason he remembered that much was because of the part his brother James had played in embarrassing her in front of the whole school.

She'd changed. Now her dark red hair was pulled back into a loose braid, but it still wasn't totally tamed. Wisps and waves floated around her face. Unobscured by braces and glasses, her delicate features were lovely.

Yep. She'd changed a lot.

"Cade, I want to get to the hospital and check on Misty. She's going to be scared to death when she realizes where she is."

Cade took off his baseball cap, folded the brim and stuck it into his back pocket. "Five seconds ago I'd have said go ahead, but you just inserted yourself into the middle of this. You want to explain why this is your fault?" He leaned against the door facing and crossed his arms.

To his surprise, her face turned pink.

"I got an invitation to our ten-year high school reunion, but I

hated high school. I never intended to come back to town. But Misty begged me to come. I told her I'd think about it."

Cade blew out an impatient breath.

"This is relevant, Chief Dupree. I was going to wait a day or two and call her back with an excuse. In the meantime, I pulled out snapshots from high school—mostly of graduation night. I wanted to review faces and names." She turned back toward him and reached into her jacket pocket.

Instinctively, he tensed. It was a ridiculous reaction, totally at odds with her words and body language.

"I found something."

He flexed his fingers as she pulled out a small stack of snapshots. She held them out.

He took them and shuffled through them. "Yeah? What?"

"Something that would never happen in a million years."

He frowned at her but she just leveled a gaze at him. He stepped over to a small desk and turned on a lamp. He scrutinized the photos under the bright light. They were mostly snapshots of Laurel and Misty.

The two girls wore white dresses and held their caps and gowns. Both were grinning from ear to ear. Cade studied the awkward high-school Laurel. She wore a dress that hung on her like a sack. Her delicate bone structure and pretty features were not quite obscured by those ugly glasses and braces.

If he or any other guy had bothered to really look at her, they'd have seen what he saw now. Little skinny carrottop Laurel had

been destined to be a knockout.

“Put the photos side by side.”

“You could just tell me, you know.” He laid them out like a game of solitaire, then leaned over to study them more closely.

“Back then, I didn’t notice anything odd in the photos, but looking at them now, with seven years of experience in criminology under my belt, what I see doesn’t add up.”

“Who are these people?” He pointed. “I recognize Misty and you. Nice braces.”

She sniffed.

“Who’s that standing behind you two?”

She stepped closer and Cade got a whiff of the scent of gardenias floating around her.

“That’s Wendell Vance.”

“Vance? Where do I know that name?”

“He died that night.”

A vague memory surfaced. “He hanged himself.”

Her nod stirred the air near his cheek. He picked up one of the photos and looked at it more closely under the light.

“Notice anything odd?”

“No. I barely remember him.”

“Look at his face.”

“Okay. His face is red. Embarrassed?”

“You don’t remember what happened that night? What the CeeGees did?”

He shook his head. He’d been at Ole Miss when Laurel’s class

graduated. “The CeeGees?”

“The Cool Girls. You know, Debra Evans, Kathy Hodges, Mary Sue Nelson and Sheryl Posey. Their mission in life was to prey on shy girls and geeky boys.”

The girls who’d played the prank on her.

“They taped a sign to his back during graduation that said Wendell Vance has a pencil in his pants.”

“Ouch.” He suppressed a grin—almost.

“It’s not funny.” Her hazel eyes sparked.

“Yeah. It is.”

She propped her fists on her hips. “They humiliated him in front of his parents, his teachers, his classmates.”

He nodded. “I remember Dad talking about it. He thought that was the reason Wendell killed himself.”

“So did everybody. But look here.” Laurel tapped the snapshot with a trimmed manicured nail.

He squinted. “A girl’s hand on his shoulder. So?”

“Not just any girl’s hand. That’s—”

“Cade!”

Laurel jumped. Cade looked toward the door. Oh, damn. It was Debra, Fred Evans’s daughter.

“Dad told me something happened to Misty. What is it? Can I do anything to help?” Her eyes darted around the room and came to rest on the blood in front of the couch.

“Oh, my God!” She turned white as a sheet, then scurried into the room, a plump hand covering her mouth. “I think I may throw

up.”

Laurel eyed her. Interesting that she had rushed toward the bloodstain as she threatened to throw up. But then Debra had always been a bit of a drama queen. Based on how she was acting, Laurel would wager that the former CeeGee knew exactly what she would find in Misty’s living room. The only thing that wasn’t fake was her pallor.

In two long strides, Cade reached Debra’s side. “Deb, your dad’s a police officer. You know better than to cross crime-scene tape.”

“But—why would anyone hurt Misty? Was it a burglary?” She turned and spotted Laurel. “Who—?”

Laurel saw the blank look on Debra’s face. She’d expected it—she looked a lot different without braces and thick glasses. Still, it sent that ridiculous knee-jerk reaction through her—disappointment that someone who’d known her didn’t recognize her. She thought she’d left those high-school insecurities far behind.

“I’m Laurel Gillespie, Debra.”

“Laurel? Oh, Laurel Gillespie. So you’re not married yet? I guess you’re here for the reunion?”

Laurel nodded.

Debra turned to Cade. “Why does she get to be here?”

Cade stepped closer. “Because she’s an FBI special agent.”

Debra’s face drained of color again. “FBI? Cade, oh, my God. Did you call in the FBI?”

Cade put his hand on the small of Debra's back and guided her toward the door. She smiled up at him and put her arm around his waist.

Laurel clamped her jaw. This wasn't high school. So why was she letting these small-town divas get to her?

Just as Cade guided Debra into the foyer, she glanced back at Laurel. For a microsecond her eyes narrowed and dropped to the photographs in Laurel's hand. Then she looked her straight in the eye. Laurel saw something in her gaze—something she couldn't put her finger on.

She was sure of one thing, though. Debra wasn't as shocked and faint as she pretended to be.

Cade came back in, shaking his head. "There are still a few folks outside, watching the house like vultures. This is the biggest crime Dusty Springs has seen since old man Rabb shot his son-in-law in the butt."

He walked over to her. "You were telling me why this is all your fault."

"We were talking about what the CeeGees did to Wendell on graduation night."

"You think this is all about a silly high-school clique from ten years ago? What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that they didn't care who they hurt. They ridiculed Wendell Vance on the most important night of his life. When he walked across that stage to accept the Science Medal—the school's most prestigious award, nobody applauded.

Everybody laughed. It was horrible.” She felt tears prick her eyes. “Then the next morning—”

“It was discovered that he’d hanged himself down by the creek using the old rope swing. What does that have to do with this?”

“It’s in the photo. The hand on Wendell’s shoulder. Look really close.”

He held the photos directly under the lamp. “Okay. I see the hand. Could we stop playing twenty questions?”

“That hand belongs to one of the CeeGees.”

“How do you know?”

“See the ring. Kathy had them made special for herself and the other girls.”

“I still don’t get it. So she’s making a big deal over Wendell. So what?”

She spread her hands. “If a CeeGee was flirting with a guy like Wendell, then it had to be because they weren’t through with him. They were planning something else that night.”

“You really resent them, don’t you?”

“This is not about me. It’s about what happened to Wendell.”

“What? What happened to Wendell? Besides the fact that he was obviously a troubled kid. I don’t get your point. You said what you saw in the photo didn’t add up.”

Laurel blew out a frustrated breath. “That’s right. I can’t shake the feeling that this photo is telling us something important. Think about it. Wendell got the Science Medal. It carried a ten-thousand-dollar scholarship with it. I remember wishing I could

win it, but by the beginning of our senior year it was obvious that it was a two-man race—Wendell Vance and Ralph Langston.”

“Ten grand. I didn’t realize that.”

She nodded. “Wendell had been accepted at Vanderbilt. With all that ahead of him, why would he kill himself?”

“Maybe he couldn’t take the humiliation of what they did to him.”

“That’s not enough.”

“Kids kill themselves because they get turned down for a date. It’s sad but true.”

Laurel heard the doubt in his voice. Her frustration grew. She knew her theory was shaky.

Shaky? It was barely more than a niggle of intuition fed by a couple of odd occurrences. Cade was about two seconds away from dismissing her as a conspiracy theorist.

“The more I looked at this photo, the more sure I was that this went beyond a kid hanging himself because somebody pulled a prank on him. I had to come back here and at least see if I could unearth anything about his death.”

Cade pushed his fingers through his hair, and then rubbed the back of his neck. “Wow. As theories go, yours is pretty thin.”

“I know. That’s why I called and asked Misty to pull out her photos. But I screwed up. I should have made sure she was alone before I started talking.” She spread her hands. “She was in the middle of a Reunion Planning Committee meeting. Everybody in the room overheard her talking about Wendell and the graduation

night photos. I tried to stop the conversation once I realized she had company, but it was too late.”

Cade looked at his watch. “I don’t get what you’re driving at.”

“You know who’s on the Reunion Planning Committee?”

“Sure. Ann Noble from the Mayor’s office, Ralph Langston, Kathy Adler, Debra Honeycutt and—” he paused for an instant “—and Mary Sue Nelson.”

“Right. Three of the CeeGees. It was one of them who attacked Misty.”

“How do you figure?”

Laurel looked at Cade’s solemn face. Would he believe her? He had to. Without his help she didn’t have a prayer of uncovering the truth.

“Those three snapshots are the only ones I had that caught Wendell in them. And none of them show the CeeGee’s face. I was hoping Misty had a shot that revealed more.”

Cade’s gaze sharpened. “You’re thinking Misty’s attacker was after her photos.”

Laurel steeled herself against Cade’s possible ridicule. “Yes. I think the owner of that hand was planning a bigger humiliation for Wendell than a rude sign on his back.” She tapped the photo with her fingernail. “A CeeGee would never go near a geek like Wendell. I’m afraid Wendell didn’t commit suicide. I think when we find out whose hand that is, we’ll find Wendell’s murderer.”

LAUREL’S WORDS stunned Cade. He was still chewing on

her theory that Wendell Vance might have been murdered when they got to Three Springs Hospital. He understood what Laurel was getting at, but it was a damn big stretch to go from a flirtation captured by a photo to homicide.

Misty Waller was in an emergency room cubicle. Her pretty, round face was almost as pale as the bandage on her head. The skin around her closed eyes was a faint purple. She was going to end up with a couple of shiners.

"I'm so sorry," Laurel said, squeezing Misty's hand. "This is my fault."

Cade leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. Laurel had asked him to let her talk to Misty first. He didn't like it, but he couldn't think of a good reason to say no. Misty might tell her more than she'd tell him.

"Don't be silly. You couldn't know someone would break into my—" Misty's voice cracked and she lifted a trembling hand to touch the bandage on her head. She turned her pale blue eyes toward Cade. "I can't stay here, Cade. Make them let me go home. My cat—my house—"

Cade caught Laurel's eye. Misty's voice was too high. She was on the verge of hysteria.

"We'll get you home just as soon as the doctors tell us we can," Laurel said, patting Misty's arm. "But right now, I need to know what happened. Everything you can remember."

Misty closed her eyes and licked her lips. "I don't remember anything. Can you call the doctor now? I have to get home."

“He’ll be here in a few minutes,” Laurel said gently. “Did the nurse give you something?”

Without opening her eyes, Misty nodded. “She said it would calm me down but it’s not working.”

Laurel met Cade’s gaze. “It will. Just give it time. You had a shock. What you were doing this afternoon?”

“While I waited to hear from you, I finished transcribing a stack of depositions for the law firm I work for. Then I turned up the sound on the TV and watched the latest episode of Secret Lives.”

Cade stepped closer. “You turned up the sound? When did you turn it back down?”

Misty frowned up at him. “I didn’t. At least I don’t think I did.”

If Misty hadn’t turned the sound down, that explained why she didn’t hear the attacker. But why was the sound off when Laurel got there? He made a brief note to double-check the prints on the TV.

“So watching Secret Lives is the last thing you remember? What about your high-school pictures? Did you find them?” Laurel asked.

“Yes.” Misty smiled wanly. “I was looking at them this morning. I can’t believe what we looked like. Oh, jiminy, Laurel. We were so skinny.”

Laurel laughed softly. “And we were always dieting. And then running out at midnight for ice cream.”

Misty nodded and winced.

Enough reminiscing. Cade stepped forward, but Laurel held up a hand.

He clenched his jaw. Did she think he was going to sit back and let her run this case? She might be an FBI agent, but she couldn't do anything unless he officially asked for the Bureau's help.

His granddad had been chief of police in Dusty Springs before his dad. And although everyone had expected Cade's brother James to take over the job, now it was his. He was the law in town and he knew how to handle a crime. He didn't need a big-city FBI agent to do his job for him.

The two women laughed. One laugh was high and tinkly, like broken glass. The other, Laurel's, was low, throaty, sexy. A thrill of pure lust streaked through him, surprising him.

Down boy. This wasn't the time or the place. He shifted his weight and tried to keep his expression neutral. Even if it had been a long time since he'd been so strongly and immediately attracted to a woman.

He concentrated on Misty. At least Laurel had managed to calm her down.

That was her intent, he realized suddenly. Still—two minutes. No more. Then he was going to step in and ask the important questions.

"Did you find any pictures from graduation night?" Laurel asked.

"I found some in one of the photo boxes. I haven't had a chance

to look at them, though.”

“Where’s the box?”

“I put it back.”

Laurel smiled. “That’s right. You always put everything back. I never did. Misty, remember when I called the other day and you told me you were in a meeting?”

Cade’s irritation fizzled and his opinion of her skills raised a notch. She’d gone from caring friend to FBI agent inside of a minute, and he’d barely noticed the transition. He was certain Misty hadn’t.

“Sure.” Misty’s drooping eyes opened. “A Reunion Committee Meeting at my house.”

“Who all was there?” Cade broke in. He knew who was on the committee, but not who had attended that meeting.

Misty squinted at him. “Kathy of course. And her minions.” She cut her eyes over to Laurel, who laughed softly.

“Debra and Mary Sue. And Sheryl,” Laurel supplied.

“Not Sheryl. I haven’t seen her in years.”

“Who else?” Cade asked.

She closed her eyes again. “Ann Noble. And Ralph Langston. He’s funding the whole shebang.”

The curtain around the emergency room cubicle fluttered and a nurse stuck her head in. “Ms. Waller, Dr. Cook wants a CT scan of your head, just to be sure you’re okay.” She stepped over to the gurney and patted one of the pillows. “And he wants you to stay overnight, so we can watch you.”

Misty's calm evaporated and her eyes grew wide and panicky. "No, I can't stay here. Please. Where's the doctor—"

"I'll stay with you," Laurel said. "Don't worry."

"The technician will be here in a few minutes to take you to the lab," the nurse said, then left.

"Oh, Laurel, thank you. But I'm more worried about Harriet. She'll be so scared in that house alone."

"Harriet?"

"Harriet Potter. My kitten. She was Harry until I realized she was a girl."

"Don't worry," Laurel said. "I'll take care of her." As she leaned over and kissed Misty on the forehead, Cade's gaze zeroed in on her curvy backside. Her jacket rode up and he saw the tip of the leather paddle holster at the small of her back.

Something went haywire inside him at the sight of her weapon. He suddenly had to hold his breath and avert his gaze. He shifted his stance to try and hide an embarrassing truth. The sight of Laurel's Glock holstered at the small of her back was a huge turn-on. Which surprised the hell out of him. He'd never thought of a woman with a gun as sexy before. In fact, he'd always thought those women-in-black-kicking-butt TV shows were a little silly. Maybe he'd have to give them another chance.

Laurel patted Misty's hair and straightened. Misty gave her a tiny smile and her eyes grew damp at the corners. "Thank you. It's so good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too."

Cade felt like a fifth wheel. He wasn't much for tearful reunions or sappy reminiscences. He was a lot more comfortable behind his badge.

He cleared his throat. "We'd better go, Agent Gillespie." Laurel's head snapped up and her hazel eyes sparked.

She got his message.

"I'll be back first thing in the morning," she said to Misty. "I'm sure by then they'll be ready to let you go home."

She stood just as Mary Sue Nelson breezed in, carrying a funeral-size vase of flowers.

"Misty, darling! What in the world happened? Did you fall down the steps or something?"

"Hi, Mary Sue. Somebody attacked me," Misty said groggily.

Mary Sue looked at her quizzically before she turned toward Cade.

"Hello, Cade. What are you doing here? Was she really attacked? Who could have done that?" She giggled.

Cade had to make himself relax his jaw. "Hi, Mary Sue." He could see it now. The scene at Misty's house was nothing. By the time Misty was admitted there would be a constant stream of concerned neighbors parading in and out of her hospital room. It was the small-town way.

"I tell you what," he said. "They're coming to get Misty for a CT scan in a couple of minutes. Why don't we all get out of here and let her rest for a while?"

"Cade Dupree, you may be police chief, but my mom babysat

you when you were in diapers. So watch who you're giving orders to." Mary Sue batted her eyelashes at him and laid her fingers on his arm.

Laurel met his gaze, her eyes sparkling dangerously.

Uh oh.

"Here, Mary Sue," Laurel said. "Let me put that glorious bouquet over here. Where in the world did you get that at this time of night? Now you can have both hands free to talk to Cade." She took the vase from Mary Sue's hands. "There. I could hardly see you behind all the flowers."

"Do I know you?"

"I'm Laurel Gillespie."

Mary Sue didn't even acknowledge her. She turned back to Cade. "Who do you think attacked Misty? Was it a gang?"

The nurse returned with an aide who unlocked the gurney's wheels and began to maneuver it toward the door.

"You should all go home now. Once they've done her CT scan, they'll put her in a room overnight." She eyed each one of them in turn. "Visiting hours start at 9:00 a.m."

Mary Sue wagged her fingers at Misty, then turned to Cade. "My husband's out of town. I'm not sure it's safe for me to be home alone."

"I'm sure you'll be fine. If you're worried, you could go across the street to your mother's," Cade replied.

He felt Laurel's eyes boring into his back and he knew he was in for it. Sure enough, as soon as Mary Sue left, Laurel placed

her hand on his arm.

“Why Mister Dupree,” she drawled. “Are you certain it’s safe for me out there alone?”

He should have been irritated, should have shrugged off her hand as soon as she touched him. But her fingers on his forearm felt so different from Mary Sue’s. Mary Sue’s touch had been clingy, needy. Laurel’s was firm and enticing.

He cleared his throat and pulled his arm away. “Knock it off, Special Agent Gillespie.”

“I got your point the first time,” she whispered. “This isn’t old home-week. I’m a professional, Chief Dupree. I know we’re investigating a crime.”

“We?” No way. She was a witness, but that was all. He held the curtain for her to exit the cubicle ahead of him and didn’t say anything more until they reached the parking lot.

Laurel turned to him as they approached his pickup. “Tell me about Ralph Langston. How is he funding the whole reunion?”

“He moved back here about a year ago,” Cade said. “He bought all that land down by the creek, and broke ground for a state-of-the-art convention complex.”

“So Ralph made it big?”

“Yes, he owns the fifth largest web-hosting company on the Internet. And he developed Webelot, the Web page building software.”

“Wow.”

“He’s hosting the reunion at the Visitor Center, and he’s

footing the bill.”

“Visitor Center?”

“Right. On the rise above the creek bank, where the old high school burned.”

She looked at him, her expression thoughtful. “I want to go down there.”

“What for? You’ll see it tomorrow night. That’s where the party’s going to be.”

“Not the Visitor Center. The creek bank. Where Wendell died.”

He opened the passenger door of his pickup, but as she started to get in, he stopped her with a touch on her elbow. “This is not your case. It’s mine. You’re on vacation. Remember?”

Laurel stiffened and lifted her chin until her nose was only a few inches from his. “I found Misty. I know what her attacker was looking for. I just gave you a roomful of suspects. Of course it’s my case, too.”

“You’re a witness. Nothing more.”

“You could request the help of the FBI.”

“I don’t think so. All we have here is a home invasion and assault. Nothing the FBI deals with.”

She closed the distance between them by an inch. “What we have here is an unsolved mystery. I work in the Unsolved Mysteries Division of the FBI.”

“There is absolutely no evidence that Wendell Vance’s death was anything more than a suicide.”

“Yes, there is—somewhere. Whoever attacked Misty was after her pictures. That’s obvious. They were trying to destroy evidence. But I intend to find it first.” Her chin went a bit higher, and he could feel her warm breath on his lips.

His whole body went on red alert. Danger!

Gardenias. Warm, sweet breath. A cute little nose and now that he was close enough to see them—freckles.

His thighs tightened. Heat spread through his groin and radiated outward. In a few seconds he was going to have a huge hard-on. What the hell kind of Police Chief got hot and bothered by a witness?

A sarcastic voice in his head answered him. A horny one.

“Nope. I’m involved,” Laurel continued. “You said it yourself, Dupree. I inserted myself into this case.”

“Yeah,” he heard the strain in his voice. “You sure did.” He took a step backward, out of harm’s way—for the moment. He knew she was right. He was going to have to work with her. But this crazy physical attraction had to stop.

It must be because he hadn’t had sex in such a long time. Man, he didn’t even want to think about how long it had been.

His body chose that instant to remind him just how deprived it was feeling. He took another step backward and pretended he couldn’t still smell gardenias or see her freckles.

When she sat, her skirt rode up to her thighs. Despite his irrational anger, his mouth went dry and his libido spiraled out of control. He slammed the door with a vengeance it didn’t deserve

and stalked around to the driver's side.

When he got in, Laurel grabbed his arm. "Cade, I just remembered something."

He wished she'd quit touching him, and while she was at it, quit wafting that gardenia perfume his way. Everything about her was playing havoc with his good sense. He looked down at her hand then up at her. "Yeah?"

"Ralph Langston got the ten-thousand-dollar scholarship after Wendell died."

Chapter Three

Later that evening, when Cade came out of the shower, his phone was ringing. A glance at the caller ID told him it was his dad. He picked up the handset.

“Dad, I was going to call you in the morning. What are you doing up at this hour?”

“I wanted to check on you. Gotta keep up with the only son I’ve got left.”

Cade rubbed his chest. The pain was old and familiar, but still sharp. Only son I have left. That’s how his dad always referred to him. As if he was nothing but James’s leftovers.

His brother, James Dupree Senior’s first-born, had died five years before. The same week his dad had suffered a stroke that had left him with a mild speech impediment. Every time Cade talked to him, he was reminded of both.

“We had a breaking-and-entering at Misty Waller’s house.”

“I heard. Misty okay?”

“She’s got a knot on her head, but she’s fine.” Cade paused, glancing at the clock. “Dad, feel like talking for a minute?”

“It’s why I called.”

“What do you remember about Wendell Vance’s death?” Cade paced as he talked.

“Vance? Oh. Kid that hanged himself on his graduation night?”

“Right.” His dad might have trouble speaking, but there was nothing wrong with his brain.

“Ever’thin’s in the file, I reckon.”

“Did you ever think it was murder?”

“Murder? Maybe for a minute. Remember what I tol’ you? Always consider every possibility. But the boy was taking pills for depression. It’s all in the file.”

“What did you think about Ralph Langston?”

“Who?”

“He was in the same class. Apparently he got a ten-thousand-dollar scholarship that would have gone to Wendell.”

“Don’ remember that. I musta talked to him. Everybody was all shook up. I gotta say though, the boy did a good job of killin’ himself—”

“Good job? What do you mean?” Cade pushed his fingers through his damp hair, raining cool drops of water onto his shoulders and back.

“He tied that rope that hangs from the Swinging Oak ’round his neck. Broke his hyoid bone and crushed his larynx. Quickest way. Beats choking slow.”

“Hyoid bone.” Cade thought back to his forensics training from Quantico. “That doesn’t usually happen in a hanging, does it?”

“Nah. Only thing I could figure was maybe that disk an’ chain got caught in the rope.”

“Disk? Oh—the Science Medal. He was still wearing it when

he hanged himself?" The metal disk could have gotten caught between the rope and Wendell's throat, crushing the bone.

"That was strange, too," his dad continued. "Never did find that medal. Just a coupla links of chain. If I didn' know better, I'd say somebody took it."

Cade stopped pacing. "Could it have fallen into the creek?"

"I wondered about that. But the pieces of chain I found were about six feet or so to the left of the body."

Cade wiped his face with the towel. "Left. Not in front, not behind."

"That's right. Odd."

"What did you do with it?"

"It's in the evidence room with the case file. We looked for that medal for days. Your brother helped. That was the week he told me he was droppin' out of college and joinin' the service." Emotion choked his dad's voice.

Cade's chest squeezed tighter. He rubbed it again, his palm spreading the few drops of water that clung. He hadn't remembered James helping Dad with the investigation of Wendell Vance's death. Was there anything his brother hadn't done before him?

Cade sighed. "It's been a long day, Dad. I'd better let you get to bed. I'll see you in a day or two, okay?"

"Sure. Cade?"

"Yeah?"

"You thinkin' the Vance boy was murdered? Why now?"

“This weekend’s the ten year reunion of his high school class. People are talking.”

“This have anythin’ to do with Misty’s attack?”

“Maybe. I’m checking into it.”

“Take care, son.”

“I will. Good night, Dad.”

Cade hung up and flopped down onto his unmade bed. He stared at the ceiling and thought about what his dad had said.

He was impressed with his dad’s memory of the case and the thoroughness of his investigation.

He punched a pillow and doubled it up under his head. Tomorrow he’d pull out Wendell Vance’s old case files and go over them. He’d meant to ask his dad if he’d dusted the links of chain for prints, but he’d find the answer to that in the file.

He could already hear Laurel when she found out Wendell’s cause of death. A broken hyoid usually indicated foul play. Her criminologist brain would go straight to murder. He wondered if he could hold her back for two days, until the reunion was over.

There was no way he’d let her whip the town into a frenzy by spouting her theories of murder. Hell, they were based on nothing—just a few odd photos.

She would disagree of course. He could see her now, with those wisps of red hair framing her angry face and her multicolored eyes flashing.

He’d learned one thing about her tonight. Laurel Gillespie didn’t like to be wrong.

His thoughts drifted to his first view of her behind in that tight gray skirt. What a surprise she was. He'd barely remembered her from high school. And only because of his brother's involvement in the prank the—what had she called them—the CeeGees had played on her. James, arrogant and assured, had thought it was hilarious.

A pang of compassion for Laurel and the CeeGees's other victims pricked his conscience. He hadn't been involved, but could he have stopped James if he'd tried? He doubted it.

At least Laurel hadn't let their cruel jokes wreck her life. She was in the FBI—and not just a field agent. She worked for an elite division stationed in D.C.

He punched his pillow again, then stuffed it back under his neck. He'd dreamed of being an FBI agent once, before James had died.

Even in death, his brother had bested him. All his life, Cade had worshiped James. He'd wanted to be just like him.

James should have been the one to take over the job of police chief in Dusty Springs. But instead, he'd joined the Air Force. Then, within five years, he was gone. And as his dad had just said, Cade was the only son he had left.

So when his dad had his stroke, Cade had come home to Dusty Springs. Now here he was five years later, Chief of Police just like his dad and granddad, and still angry at his brother for dying.

Cade knew the job he was doing was honorable and important, but he'd never intended to stay in Dusty Springs, where he'd

always be in the shadow of his brother. After he'd returned, it had gotten even worse. It was hard enough to live up to a shining star like James. But it was impossible when the star was a hero who'd given his life for his country.

He uttered a short laugh. Just went to show how different real life was from high school. He'd been determined to outdo James. And he'd come close. In the high school yearbook, guys like him were Most Likely to Succeed or Most Popular or Mr. Dusty Springs High School—all those accolades that were so important back then.

Laurel, on the other hand, would be found in a group photo of the choir, or as a member of the Home Economics Club.

Strange how things turned out.

An odd sensation cramped his chest. Was he jealous of her success in the Bureau? Or even more so because she'd managed to leave Dusty Springs behind?

Nah. He just needed some sleep. Turning over, he pulled the sheet over him. In the morning, he'd dig out Wendell Vance's old file. It couldn't hurt to see if Laurel's theory held any merit.

LAUREL WAS CAUGHT in traffic on the beltway. Car horns blared all around her. She was late already and now more cars were honking.

She jerked awake and met a slanted green gaze. Her heart slammed into her throat. "Eek! Cat."

The feline hissed and jumped over her and off the bed. Her

brain instantly processed her surroundings. Cat. Canopied bed. Misty's house.

"Ssss yourself, Harriet. You scared me!"

Undaunted, Harriet leapt onto the foot of the bed and curled up on top of the covers.

The car horn still blared. It wasn't just in her dream. It sounded like it was right outside the house. Her rental car?

She sighed, glancing at the clock. It was 3:00 a.m. Of course it was her car.

She got up and slid her feet into thong sandals. By habit, she grabbed her weapon and her car keys on her way out.

As soon as she opened the front door, she saw the rental car's emergency lights blinking. She ran out, unlocked the car door, jumped into the driver's seat and deactivated the alarm. Once it was quiet, she sat there for a moment, looking up and down the street.

The night was moonless, and the streetlights gave off very little illumination.

Nothing. Not even a fluttering curtain. After the excitement earlier, she couldn't believe no one had stuck their head out to see what the noise was. Still, car alarms went off all the time, probably even in Dusty Springs.

But something must have triggered it. Had someone tried to break into her car?

After a few seconds, she got out and inspected the vehicle. There were no scrapes or dents. No sign of force on the windows

or doors. Maybe a kid had tried the door to see if it was unlocked.

With a last look around the deserted street, she walked back up the steps to the house. She opened the door cautiously, watching to be sure she didn't let the cat out.

Just as she closed the door behind her, a blast of cold stinging spray hit her in the face. Surprise and burning pain streaked through her like lightning.

After a split second's shock, she ducked and rolled but it was too late. She'd been maced. Her face burned like fire. Her eyes wouldn't open. The pain was agonizing.

Then a blanket was thrown over her head and a shoe kicked her in the ribs. She curled into a fetal position. It was all she could do. She was blinded by the Mace.

Her attacker kicked her again, this time in the kidney. She grunted. Then the front door opened and slammed.

Laurel fought the suffocating blanket. She finally got it off her. Pulling herself up to her hands and knees she felt for her weapon. It was gone. She crawled blindly toward the bathroom, feeling around the hardwood floor. The gun must have slid farther than she'd thought.

Finally, her fingers encountered cold ceramic tile. Her eyes leaked tears, even though she had them squeezed tightly shut. She crawled to the bathtub and felt for the cold water faucet.

Taking a deep breath, she splashed her face. The water made everything burn twice as badly, but it eventually washed away the sticky pepper spray.

Laurel leaned over the tub and kept sluicing her face and eyes. After what seemed like hours, the pain lessened to a manageable level.

She sat on the floor, her chest heaving with huge sobs. But there was no time to indulge herself. She had to find her Glock. If whoever had attacked her had taken it—alarm squeezed her chest like a giant fist.

She pulled herself up using a towel rack. She was wobbly, and her eyes still burned. She felt her way out of the bathroom, alert to any sound. She'd thought she'd heard the front door slam, but she'd been in such pain she couldn't be sure.

The intruder might still be inside the house.

She took a deep breath and coughed. Did she smell smoke, or was the Mace affecting her sense of smell? Forcing her eyes open, she saw a red, flickering glow coming from the den.

Fire! She lunged for the door. She rounded the frame and met the flames engulfing the dining room tabletop. They licked at the drapes.

"No!" Laurel cried. Misty's pictures! She had to stop it. But before she could move, the drapes caught. In an instant the ancient fabric was swallowed up by flames and a tongue of fire licked out toward a damask-covered easy chair.

Helpless against the fast-growing inferno, she backed away from the rising heat. She had to call the fire department.

But her cell phone was back in the bedroom in her jacket pocket. She never had her damn phone when she needed it. She

turned and headed for the door and ran into a hard body. Her instincts took over and she doubled her fists. She swung as hard as she could.

“No!” she yelled. “No!”

“LAUREL, IT’S ME, Cade.” Cade dodged Laurel’s fists and pinned her arms. He whirled and thrust her toward the front door, his brain registering relief that she seemed unhurt.

“Stay on the porch,” he shouted, tossing her his phone. “Press 8. Fire department.”

Then he ran up the hall to the kitchen. Where did Misty keep her fire extinguisher? He glanced quickly around the old-fashioned kitchen. Nothing. He opened the cabinets under the sink. There—in the back.

Grabbing it, praying it worked, he headed for the den.

Half the room was engulfed in flames, and the heat was nearly unbearable. He sprayed, but the little fire extinguisher wasn’t up to such a big job.

Just as he had emptied the canister, he heard the sirens. The advancing flames forced him out of the room.

Laurel stood on the porch holding his cell phone in one hand and Misty’s cat in the other. The cat was squirming and yowling.

“You can let her down. She’ll be okay,” Cade said.

Laurel let go and Harriet took off into the darkness.

“What about you? Are you hurt?”

She shook her head jerkily and he put his arm around her

waist and led her down the steps into the yard.

“What happened?” he started, but the arrival of the fire truck interrupted him.

He pulled her out of the way as the town’s volunteer firemen rushed inside with the fire hose. The roar of pressurized water drowned out the roar of the fire. Within a few minutes, the fire was out.

But as Cade knew from experience, the excitement was far from over. He enlisted his patrolman Fred Evans, who’d shown up with his hair sticking straight out in back, to maintain crowd control and told him to call Officer Shelton Phillips.

If possible, there were more people milling around than a few hours earlier when Misty was hurt. He answered the same questions at least two dozen times.

No, no one was hurt.

Yes, it was odd that Misty was attacked and her house burned on the same night.

No, he didn’t have any leads.

No, he didn’t need any help pulling sodden furniture or charred items out of the house.

Yes, it would help if everyone would just go on home to bed.

Finally, Fred and a couple of other men managed to disperse the crowd and Cade went to speak with Kit Haydel, the fire chief.

“That could have been a bad one,” Kit said, pulling off his gloves. “I wish people would get rid of all the fire hazards in these old houses.” He wiped his forehead with his forearm. “Bad

wiring, rotting fabric and dried-out wood all over the place.”

“But bad wiring didn’t cause this fire.”

Kit shook his head. “There was a stack of papers and photo albums in the middle of the dining room table. Preliminary investigation indicates that the fire started there. And it wasn’t an accident.”

Cade nodded. “I figured that. How do you know?”

“It’s an amateur setup. The smell of lighter fluid is all over the place.”

“I didn’t smell anything but smoke.”

Kit grinned. “You work enough fires, you eventually learn the different smells. Lighter fluid’s different than electrical or gasoline or a cigarette.”

One of the firemen hollered at Kit, who waved at him.

“How’d you get here so fast?” he asked Cade.

“I heard the car alarm, and since we’d already had one situation tonight, I thought I’d better check it out.”

“Car alarm?”

Cade frowned. “Didn’t you hear it? Your house is about as close to Misty’s as mine is.”

“I was asleep.”

Cade had been, too—he’d thought. But when the faint sound of the car alarm had reached his ears, he’d immediately thought of Laurel.

“Need me for anything else tonight, Cade?”

“God, I hope not. We’ve had plenty of excitement for one

day.” He nodded toward the house. “Can I get inside? Check for damage and evidence?”

“Yeah. I think we got all the hot spots.”

“Great. Thanks. You’ll get me a copy of your report, right?”

Kit sent him a mock salute as he climbed onto the fire truck.

Cade looked around. Thank goodness the rubberneckers had dispersed. Over by their cars, Fred and Shelton stood talking with a couple of neighbors. Every so often, one of them would gesture or point toward the house.

He didn’t see anyone else. A tremor of alarm streaked through him. He stalked over to Fred. “Where’d Laurel go?”

Fred frowned and glanced at Shelton, who shook his head. “Haven’t seen her since the firemen got here.”

“She must have gone back inside. Thanks, guys.” Cade sprinted toward the house.

“Hey, you want some help?” Fred called.

“Nope. Y’all head on home.”

He took the front steps two at a time and burst through the front door. The smell of wet, charred wood and fabric permeated the house.

He heard a cough coming from the den.

Laurel was standing just inside the door, facing the sodden mess that had been her friend’s living room. Her arms were folded and her fingers were white-knuckled.

“You shouldn’t be in here.”

She shrugged without turning around. “Where else should I

be? Look what they did. Misty will be devastated.”

He took her arm and turned her around. “You need to—God, Laurel. What happened to you?”

Her face was red and her eyes were nearly swollen shut. He grabbed her other arm and squinted at her in the pale light shining in from the street lamps. “Were you burned? Why didn’t you tell me?”

She shook her head. “No. The fire was after.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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