

Chapter One

CHRIS PUSHED THROUGH the knots of people gathered in the street to watch the aftermath of whatever tragedy had befallen the person in the house, now blocked from trespassing by crime scene tape and cops. Mostly neighbors, she figured, wearing jackets in the chill of a late October night. The neighborhoods just west of Albuquerque's Old Town were made up of family and friend networks, largely native Hispanic though newer transplants from Mexico and Central America also called this area home. Most of the houses were on the small side, built around World War II or slightly after, though some were older than that by a couple of decades. People knew each other here, whether by contact or sight, but they might not want to talk to the police because of a customary distrust of law enforcement.

Harper stood near the front door to the house, talking to one of the uniformed officers. He wore a department issue jacket and jeans and work boots. Most of the time, Chris saw him in casual man-slacks and penny loafers. Tonight he looked like a truck driver originally from a state like Ohio.

She moved her jacket aside to show her badge—clipped to her belt—to a uniformed officer standing at the tape and the woman pulled it up a bit so Chris didn't have to stoop so low to get under it.

"Hey," Detective Dale Harper said in his flat Midwestern accent. "Glad you could join us."

"Yeah, well, not like people sleep at this hour on a Sunday or anything."

The cop next to him snorted.

"What've we got?" she asked.

Harper looked at his pocket notebook, mostly out of habit. He had probably already memorized what the cop had told him. "Our DB is a Hispanic male, late twenties, early thirties. Gunshot wounds to the head, chest, and groin."

"Anybody hear anything?"

"A Mrs. Marquez, next door." Harper gestured at a nearby house with his chin. The porch light was on.

"Is she outside?"

"Not anymore. But she did say she heard something after twelve-thirty. Doesn't speak much English."

That was almost an hour ago. Chris put her hands in her jacket pockets to warm them up. "Who talked to her?"

"Lauren."

She nodded, satisfied. Lauren's Spanish was good. "Okay." She looked at the uniformed cop. "Could you find Lauren and tell her I want to talk to her?"

"Sure thing. You got this?" He glanced at Harper, as if he was in charge. A guy thing, Chris knew. Unconscious, but it irked her.

"Yes," she said, reclaiming the lead. The cop shrugged and walked away. She took a pair of latex gloves out of a baggie-full she carried in her jacket pocket, and put

the baggie back before she snapped the gloves on. Harper had his own, and he had already put his notebook and pen into his back pocket and was pulling his pair on. He handed her a pair of booties and she slipped them over her shoes while he did the same with his.

“Shall we?” he said, motioning at the door.

She stepped inside and stood for a few moments. The front door opened directly into a living room. A dark brown couch that sagged slightly in the middle stood against the opposite wall. A coffee table was upended in front of it, probably overturned by the now-dead man as he fell or was driven back from the force of the bullets that had killed him. He was sprawled on his back in front of the couch, arms spread, left knee slightly bent, right leg straight. He wore jeans, a white T-shirt now stained with blood, and black sneakers, the kind hip-hop artists sported.

“Was he found with that on him?” Chris gestured at the *Día de los Muertos* painted ainted papier mâché skeleton, about a foot long, that rested on his chest. It was female, dressed in a skirt and blouse. The figure wore a sombrero and held a guitar. Ammo belts criss-crossed her chest.

“I’ll check.” Harper left through the front door and Chris stared down at the dead man. It looked as if the figurine had been placed carefully on his chest, so it wouldn’t fall off, its body positioned so it lay vertically on the victim’s torso. A message, but to whom?

“Yeah,” Harper said from the doorway. “Body was found with that on there, just like that. What do you make of it?” he asked when he re-joined her.

“It’s a variation of *La Catrina*.”

He looked at her with his “so?” expression.

Chris pulled her smartphone out of her pocket and did a search for the famous lithograph of Catrina, created by Mexican artist José Posada around 1910. In that image, Posada depicted a skeleton that was supposed to represent a once-elegant female figure from the shoulders up. A large feathered and flowered bonnet graced her grinning skull. Harper looked at it and nodded.

“Oh, yeah. I’ve seen this. Practically every Day of the Dead festival. What’s the significance here?” He handed her phone back.

“I don’t know. Posada did a lot of these *calavera* lithographs around the time of the Mexican Revolution. They were designed to poke fun at politicians and the class system without overtly naming anyone.” She gestured at the figure on the dead man’s chest. “Since then, she’s represented as an elegant, wealthy woman, but other depictions of her have come up, like this one, in less formal dress, with different props.”

“And that all means what, exactly?”

She shrugged. “She’s become kind of a beloved folk image in Mexico. She represents death as the great equalizer. After all, she’s a skeleton, and all her wealth didn’t change the fact that being human means you’ll die eventually.”

Harper frowned and studied the body and gestured at the bulletholes in the dead man’s chest. “Well, she was right. Looks like small caliber,” he said. “I’d guess nine mil.” He glanced around. “Not seeing any casings.”

Chris looked around, as well. The killer might have taken those with him. If the killer took the casings, he probably took the gun, as well. Not an amateur, then.

Harper stood about three feet away from the dead man's head, looking down at him. The overhead light only offered a pale, washed-out kind of lighting reminiscent of cheap motels, so he had his flashlight out and moved its beam slowly up and down the dead man's face, then to his chest. Chris counted four bullet holes in his chest and one in his forehead, above his left eye.

"You think there's another shot in his chest but Catrina's hiding it?"

"Don't know. We'll find out when Sam gets here." He straightened. "I'd call this a hit, but he's shot in places other than the head, too. And then there's our little friend here."

"I'd think maybe drugs, but why leave that on his chest?" She shined her own flashlight across the man's face, then down his chest.

"That's generally where I'd go with a headshot like that, but the chest wounds make it a little more personal. As does the groin shot. And the prop." The beam of his flashlight tracked down to the darker stain on the front of the man's pants, and the bullet hole that had caused it.

"Tats," she remarked as she shined her light on the vic's inner right forearm. *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, and she extended from his wrist to his elbow, in simple grays and blacks, entwined with roses and vines. Gangster script and skulls on his left forearm.

"Nice work. You see any other ones that might indicate gang affiliation?"

"I like the way you think, Gucchi." He leaned a little closer and looked at the dead man's neck. He carefully pulled the collar of the man's tee down a little.

His nickname for her used to annoy her, but it had grown on her during the eight months they'd been working together. Besides, he could pronounce it better than her actual last name.

"Not seeing any in the usual places. Might be some on his back and chest. Sam'll find out. Jewelry?"

She scanned his hands. "No rings or bracelets. Necklace?"

"Nope."

She straightened and glanced around the room, looking for a phone or a wallet or something that might give them a clue about his identity.

"Might have ID in his pockets," Harper said, thinking along the same lines. He patted the vic's front pockets. "Feels like car keys on the right side, but I'm not feeling anything on the left. I'll wait for Sam to flip him."

"Okay. I'll check around, see what's here."

He grunted an affirmative and Chris moved through the living room into the kitchen. The overhead light was turned on here, as well, and the same dingy effect spilled across the faded, scuffed linoleum, which looked like it had been brand new in the early 1970s. The cabinets were faded yellow, which helped give the whole room a sickly cast. She looked through them and found a few mismatched plates and glasses, a couple of frying pans and pots, and a few eating and cooking utensils in a drawer. He didn't keep much by way of food. A bag of rice and a few cans of beans and soup were in one of the cabinets.

The refrigerator was just as bare, reminding Chris of her brothers' college days. A six-pack of Mexican beer, tortillas, a to-go container with what looked like enchiladas, a bottle of orange juice and a carton of eggs. The stove and sink were clean, however, and a dish towel hung on a hook above the latter. She checked the small utility room just off the

kitchen, where a stacked washer and dryer sat. They looked new. He'd been doing laundry, because the load in the washer was still damp. A plastic clothes basket on the floor was filled halfway with jeans and T-shirts. She checked the back door, which was locked. The killer most likely came in the front and left that way, too. Which meant the vic may have known his killer.

She left the utility room, crossed through the kitchen, and returned to the living room.

"Anything?" Harper asked.

"Go have a look. I'm thinking bachelor, and doesn't spend much time at home, though he was neat."

"He picked a bad night to be at home, then."

Chris chose not to respond. She knew Harper's flat, dark humor was his way of distancing himself from the shit they saw and dealt with, but sometimes, silence or simple yes or no answers went a hell of a lot further. Whoever the dead man was, he'd been somebody's son, maybe brother. He probably had friends somewhere who might be wondering why he didn't return their calls earlier that night.

She went to the side of the living room opposite the kitchen doorway to a short hallway. The first door on her left entered into a bathroom. Like the kitchen, it didn't contain much. The meds in the cabinet above the sink were all over-the-counter, for aches and pains and cold and flu. One toothbrush hung in the holder, and his personal hygiene items were all inexpensive, but placed neatly on the set of shelves above the commode and in a rack that hung on the shower head. She lifted the lid to the toilet tank, a place some people stashed drugs, but found nothing that wasn't supposed to be there.

A hall closet contained a few neatly folded towels and a couple sets of sheets as well as cleaning supplies. Chris checked the stacked fabrics and shined her flashlight around the shelves and corners, thinking that this was a guy whose mom had taught him how to clean, do his own laundry, and keep house. Unless he had been in the military. That was another option. She pushed the door open into the one bedroom in this house and flipped the light switch. The bulb in the fixture was a higher wattage, because it did a better job than in the other rooms.

His double bed was made, covered with a light blue comforter. Chris lifted one corner with her flashlight. No military-style sheet-tucking. Using her flashlight to hold the comforter up, she ran one hand carefully under the mattress on the three sides that weren't against the wall. She also checked under the bed, but found nothing. The shag carpet smelled musty, and she stood and brushed her jeans off.

She looked at the top of the dresser for a while. A bottle of cologne and a gold bracelet sat on it, as well as a pile of change and a pair of black sunglasses. But that wasn't what drew her eye. Another papier mâché figurine of a skeleton lay on its back next to the cologne. Skeletons like this one—a sort of generic *Día de los Muertos* painted figure—were relatively inexpensive, and easy to find this time of year, though they were more plentiful near the border. She nudged it with the butt-end of her flashlight, and its weight told her that it was probably empty, and not in use as a drug-smuggling device.

She studied it for another few moments, and wondered what its relationship might be to the one on his chest, then she went through the drawers of the well-worn dresser. Underwear, socks, tees, a couple pairs of jeans. He had preferred to ball his socks and just toss them in the drawer, but he folded his underwear, all bikini style. Finished there, she

pushed the sliding door of the closet open. More jeans, hanging on hangers. A few more pairs of sneakers and a couple pairs of cowboy boots. He had a few button-downs shirts, and had favored black and white. His belts hung on a nail, but she didn't see any ties. A light leather jacket hung on a hook and a heavier black coat that looked like a working man's hung on another hook next to it.

"Sam's here," said Harper from the doorway.

"Okay. Will you back-check this room?"

"Yep. I already did the bathroom and the closet."

"Cool. Thanks."

She passed him and went back to the living room, where Sam Padilla, head of the Albuquerque crime lab was directing a couple of techs to take photos from different angles. Hewore an APD baseball cap, but locks of his reddish hair stuck out from underneath. Sam always looked like he'd just gotten out of bed, and his sleepy, bemused expression had fooled many a criminal defense attorney in the court room.

"Hey," he said by way of greeting. "Anything I need to know about in the rest of the house? ME'll be here in a bit."

Two techs were taking photos of the man on the floor and the rest of the room.

Chris shrugged. "No evidence of drugs, either product or cash stash. Guy was pretty neat. No evidence that a woman lived here or another man, for that matter."

"Love or money," Sam said. "Maybe love," he said half to himself as he shot a few photos from different angles of the body. He set the camera down and carefully picked up the figurine from the victim's chest. "Kinda personal, leaving a calling card," he said as he sealed the evidence bag.

There were no other bullet holes under the figure, Chris noticed. "He might have an ID on him somewhere. And I think there's a phone underneath him. You can just see the corner of it, under his left hip."

Sam's flashlight beam worked its way down the dead man's chest to his crotch. "That's kind of personal, too." He looked up at her. "Does this feel like a hate crime?"

"Not anti-gay. Somebody clearly hated him, but I don't think it's because of that."

"Could you move that light closer?" Sam asked the other tech. They'd brought in a couple of portable lights and set them up near the body.

"Thanks," he said when the tech adjusted it. "We do have a phone. Good catch." He carefully extracted an iPhone from underneath the body. It may have been on the coffee table when the vic fell on it. The tech who had moved the light took it and placed it in a padded bag that Chris recognized as a Faraday, to shield electronic devices from wi-fi signals.

"You'd be surprised what we can get off these pups," he said. "If people really knew what their phones store, they'd probably freak."

"That's why I'm a flip-phone guy," Harper said. He looked at Chris. "Nothing that jumped out at me in there except the other Day of the Dead thing on the dresser."

Sam glanced first at him, then Chris.

"That one was a basic decorative papier mâché *calavera*, about a foot tall," she said.

"Huh. So I guess one of the questions you guys sort out is whether *La Catrina* was already in the house or whether the shooter brought her. What about drugs?" Sam asked.

“Nothing in the figure on the dresser, from what I could tell.” She glanced at Harper for confirmation and he nodded.

“We’ll bag that one, too, and have a look at it,” Sam said. He carefully ran his gloved fingers over the dead man’s front pockets. “Feels like one of those thin wallets,” he said as he pointed at the left side. He carefully reached into the pocket and slowly pulled it out.

“Let’s see,” he said as he opened it. “Two credit cards. And here’s a driver’s license. Victor Ramirez. Matches the cards. Don’t make that official until we run it and make sure it’s not fake and we match it definitively to John Doe, here.” He closed the wallet and handed it to a tech, who bagged it.

“Let’s have a look around outside,” Harper said. “Back door’s locked, so I’m thinking Mr. Ramirez here knew the perp.” He pronounced it ram-EAR-ez, with a Midwestern drawl. The man was hopeless with Spanish.

“That’s what I thought, too. Keep us posted,” she said to Sam as she stood.

“Don’t I always?” He carefully lowered the dead man back into his original position on the floor.

She kept her gloves on and followed Harper out the front door. Several people still stood on the other side of the crime tape, wrapped in jackets and robes, arms clutched around themselves in the chilly October air. A few were talking to each other, but most simply stood and watched, expressions wary. She saw a couple of reporters she recognized from local news venues, here for the gory details in the morning shows. Like vultures, she thought with a tinge of disgust. A woman standing with the news crews caught her attention.

“Guess who’s here,” she said to Harper as they walked around the side of the house.

“Let’s see,” he responded without looking. “Our fave APD-hating bloggers.”

“Bingo.”

“Who’d they send?”

“Baca.”

“And she’s probably watching us like a freakin’ hawk,” he said.

“Yep.”

“I’m sure we’ll read all about it tomorrow. Can’t wait,” he added with a grunt.

Chris threw a last quick glance at the crowd then followed Harper and his flashlight into the back yard.