



## **A REASON TO KILL**

### **Chapter One**

When Detective Andi Battaglia of the Burgess Beach Police Department entered the house, she carefully covered her nose and mouth with her handkerchief. Cops say once you smell the odor, you know it instantly, an observation that doesn't make the effect any easier to handle. June in Florida with the air conditioning off had turned the house into a vile-smelling sauna.

The living room was dim with the drapes closed, but light entered from windows at the back. Andi saw a kitchen on the right, and she could hear the sound of voices from the left where the bedrooms lay.

The Burgess Beach patrolman who'd been the first on the scene stood in the hallway, handkerchief to his nose. He'd reported that the body was of a man apparently in his late fifties or early sixties and the cause of death was unknown.

A man and woman stood near the patrolman ready to transport the body either to the local mortuary or to the Medical Examiner in Fort Pierce if there was to be an autopsy. Andi hadn't been called, but she'd been in the area when she heard the report on her car radio. If it was a homicide, it would be her first in her new job, and she'd notified the station that she was going to the scene. No one would argue—certainly not the other detectives who didn't want any more work than they already had.

Holding her handkerchief tightly over her nose and breathing through her

mouth, Andi entered the bedroom. She took out the camera she always carried and snapped photos around the bedroom. Then she turned her attention to the body lying on the bed. The bedclothes were snarled and had been tossed to one side. The telephone lay on the floor behind the bedside table. Vomit, urine and feces stained the sheets and the rug next to the bed. It was no wonder the house stank.

The man's eyes were open, his eyelids drooped half shut. His skin had darkened, and his abdominal cavity was swollen. One leg was angled off the bed as if he had been trying to get to the phone, but he had apparently knocked the instrument behind the table. Andi couldn't see any wounds on the body.

She thought of what she needed to take care of before she could get out of the house and back to the station. She had to be sure the body was that of the owner of the house, Maxwell Denman, and find his next of kin. Was he under the care of a doctor? Did he have any visible scars, broken bones or would she have to get dental records?

The neck of her blouse felt as though it was choking her, and she unfastened the top two buttons and pulled the fabric away. The room was terribly hot. She wiped beads of sweat from her forehead and pushed escaping strands of dark blond hair back from her forehead into the knot fastened behind her head, then stepped out into the hall.

"Any sign of anybody in the house besides the deceased?" Andi asked the patrolman still standing in the hall. His eyes focused on Andi's chest as though the question had come from there, and Andi wondered if she'd opened more than the top buttons of her blouse. With difficulty, she restrained the impulse to check.

"Nope," the patrolman said, lifting his eyes to her face. "A few dirty dishes in the kitchen. One of each: cup, plate, glass. House is dusty but neat. I can't see that anything's been disturbed."

"Phil here yet?"

"I'm here."

Phil Pierce operated the local funeral home and listened in on police radio transmissions. He tried to be the first guy at every death. If the deceased was not sent for autopsy, Phil wanted to put in a claim for the body. Now he strode into the bedroom from the hallway.

He was a cadaverously thin man, his head and shoulders slumped forward in the posture of someone who has spent his life leaning over his work. He was an M.D., but seemed to prefer spending his life with the dead.

“Can you estimate the time of death for me? Smells and looks like he’s been here a while, but it’s awfully hot.”

“Let me have a look.” Phil donned gloves and headed into the bedroom. While she waited, Andi walked out to the living room and took a few breaths of less putrid air. What a horrible way to die.

Phil came out of the bedroom, stripping off the gloves and walked to where she waited.

“Death probably sometime Wednesday morning, best guess forty-eight hours ago, give or take a couple hours. Rigor’s resolved, and the heat’s speeded everything up. Are you ready for me to take him away?”

“I’m sending him to the M.E. for autopsy. It could be a natural death, but with the vomiting and diarrhea, it might have been poison—suicide or even murder. I need somebody to ID the body. Maybe dental records. I hope he had a regular doctor and dentist.”

Phil shrugged, looking disappointed at the loss of business. “Okay, then.” He turned and headed for the front door.

Andi took a few more pictures of the body and the bedroom, then took shots of the other rooms in the house. Nothing appeared to have been disturbed.

Andi turned to the patrolman, still standing in the hallway, trying hard not to breathe. “Where’s the woman who found him?”

“Name’s Anna Rodriguez. Housekeeper. She’s out back. Didn’t want to stay inside.”

“I don’t blame her.”

She said to the attendants waiting in the hallway, “You can take him now. He’s going to the Medical Examiner in Fort Pierce.”

Burgess Beach, a small town in Martin County with limited financial resources, shared the M.E., the morgue and the crime lab in Fort Pierce with four other Florida counties. The town budget also expanded the range of Andi’s duties beyond what detectives did in Tampa where she’d been a

patrol officer for six years, so she only rarely called on a police photographer and crime scene techs.

She headed out to the backyard. A crowd of onlookers had gathered in front of the house, and the patrolman had strung tape from the citrus trees in the side yard to the house. Anna Rodriguez was seated on a lawn chair, a short, stocky woman in her fifties, her thinning dark hair sprinkled with gray and pulled back into a knot on her neck. She rose when she saw Andi approach. Her face was pale, and she looked as though she still suffered from the effects of her discovery.

Detective Battaglia introduced herself and motioned Mrs. Rodriguez to sit back down.

When they were seated, she asked, "What time did you arrive?"

"Nine o'clock. I take the bus that stops in Burgess Beach, and then I walk." She patted her mouth with the tissue she held in her hand.

"Did you notice anything unusual when you came into the house this morning?"

"Only that the drapes are not open. Most times, Mr. Denman is up and the drapes are open. I find the key under the mat by the back door. He tells me before where it is. In case." She looked at Andi anxiously, as though she might think Mrs. Rodriguez had broken in. "He is mostly here, but sometimes he is away."

"Do you know where he goes?"

"No."

"Okay. Anything else you can tell us?"

"I notice the smell, but I don't think....."

"No, you wouldn't. Did you touch anything?"

"Not in the house. I touch the front door. When I see the bed, I run out."

"Okay, Mrs. Rodriguez. You can go. Please leave your address and telephone number with the patrolman at the door. We'll be in touch if we need anything else."

Andi Battaglia rose to her feet and fanned her face with the clipboard she

carried. Hot already, and only early June. She'd worn a uniform in Tampa as a patrol officer, and she'd welcomed the promotion to detective in Burgess Beach that enabled her to wear plain clothes. Still, she'd been more comfortable in Tampa, uniform and all. Then, considering, she realized that was nonsense. It was just as hot in Tampa. Everything in Tampa, though, had seemed not so confining, better somehow. Oh, stop it, she thought. She'd been comfortable in Tampa because she'd grown up there, not because it was better than Burgess Beach. And because of Jim. Don't think about Jim. She was here now. She just needed more time to make friends, get comfortable with the place.

Andi picked up her purse, feeling the weight of her Beretta inside it, as she waited for the body to be taken away and the house opened up. When she saw the stretcher with the body bag go out, she reentered the house, then followed it out the front door. There was a group of neighbors and curious onlookers milling about on the lawn and sidewalk.

"There's nothing to see here. You should all go home."

A stooped and shrunken woman of indeterminate age asked, "Is Mr. Denman dead?"

"I can't tell you anything at this time. The police will be around to talk to the neighbors if we need any information. Now, please, everyone, go on home."

The crowd stood for a moment, then with a collective sigh, they turned and headed for their homes, speculating among themselves about what had happened.

When Andi reentered the house, the young patrolman stood by the front door.

"Let's turn up the air conditioning. He was probably trying to save money," Andi said.

"Okay. Shall I stay?"

"No. You can go on back to the station. I'll be leaving as soon as I find the name of his doctor."

His eyes again rested on her chest, not looking at her face as she spoke to him.

"There's medication in the medicine cabinet," he said.

“Doctor’s name on it?”

“Yes. Jonathan Hitchings.”

“Okay. Let me see it. Then bag it. I’ll take it back with me. What’s your name?”

“John Papadatos.”

“Where you from?”

At her question, he raised his eyes to her face. “Tarpon Springs.”

“How long have you been in Burgess Beach?”

“About six months.”

She decided it was time to say something.

“Patrolman Papadatos, let me give you a bit of advice. When you speak to women, especially your superiors, address them face to face. Don’t stare at their body parts. The behavior you exhibited just now and earlier, staring at my chest, would offend most women and certainly offends me. Before you have a sexual harassment charge brought against you, be sure you behave with your female superiors and co-workers as you would with the men you work with. Is that clear?”

The patrolman looked scared as he stared at her. “Yes, Ma’am,” he said. “I’m very sorry, Ma’am.”

“Okay. Just remember that.” Would he? Probably not, just like the other patrolmen she’d worked with—and cautioned. Just like their bosses.

“I’ll get the medication from the bathroom cabinet.” He turned and headed back into the house. Cute tush, she thought, then stopped herself. If you want equality, my girl, you can’t make exceptions for yourself.

When the patrolman returned with the bottle, she noted the label. “Take one to two capsules twice a day for pain.” The date was current, the doctor listed as Jonathan Hitchings. Andi put the container in an evidence envelope.

“Did you turn up the air conditioning? Open some windows, too. I’m going to see what I can find in his papers as far as next of kin is concerned. You can go on back to the station.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Andi looked at Papadatos sharply, but he kept his eyes on her face. After the windows were opened and the air turned up, the patrolman left, and Andi took another walk through the house. In the bedroom, breathing through her mouth, she donned plastic gloves and went through the clothes Denman had discarded when he’d gone to bed. His wallet and keys lay on top of the dresser along with a pack that could be clasped around the waist. The wallet held a couple of credit cards, about \$60 in cash, and Denman’s driver’s license which showed his date of birth to be September 3, 1945, his height 6'2", his eyes green, hair gray. Opening the pack, Andi found tissues and a bottle of medications. She looked at the bottle. Same medication as had been in the medicine cabinet, but the date was five months ago. The medication in the bathroom had been recently prepared, the date within the last week. She wondered why Denman wasn’t using the previous month’s supply rather than a bottle that was five months old. She bagged the medication to take back to the station.

The kitchen offered no additional information, nor did the room at the back of the house. A door to the garage opened off the kitchen. When Andi tried it, she was surprised to find it locked. She’d noticed that Denman’s car was parked in the driveway.

She tried the keys she’d found on the dresser until she found one that opened the door to the garage. A row of fluorescent lights burned on one wall. When she turned on the overhead light, she drew in her breath in surprise.

“What the hell?”