

One

Winchester, Tennessee

Monday, March 9, 7:35 a.m.

Rowan DuPont parked on the southeast side of the downtown square. The county courthouse sat smack in the middle of Winchester with streets forming a grid around it. Shops, including a vintage movie theater, revitalized over the past few years by local artisans lined the sidewalks. Something Rowan loved most about her hometown were the beautiful old trees that still stood above all else. So often the trees were the first things to go when towns received a face-lift. Not in Winchester. The entire square had been refreshed and the majestic old trees still stood.

This morning the promise of spring was impossible to miss. Blooms and leaves sprouted from every bare limb. This was her favorite time of year. A new beginning. Anything could happen.

Rowan sighed. Funny how being back in Winchester had come to mean so much to her these past several months. As a teenager she couldn't wait to get away from home. Growing up in a funeral home had made her different from the other kids. She was the daughter of the undertaker, a curiosity. At twelve tragedy had struck and she'd lost her twin sister and her mother within months of each other. The painful events had driven her to the very edge. By the time she finished high school, she was beyond ready for a change of scenery. Despite having spent more than twenty years living in the big city hiding from the memories of home and a dozen of those two decades working with Nashville's Metro Police Department—in Homicide, no less—she had been forced to see that there was no running away. No hiding from the secrets of her past.

There were too many secrets, too many lies, to be ignored.

Yet, despite all that had happened the first eighteen years of her life, she was immensely glad to be back home.

If only the most painful part of her time in Nashville—serial killer Julian Addington—hadn't followed her home and wreaked havoc those first months after her return.

Rowan took a breath and emerged from her SUV. The morning air was brisk and fresh. More glimpses of spring's impending arrival showed in pots overflowing with tulips, daffodils and crocuses. Those same early bloomers dotted the landscape beds all around the square. It was a new year and she was very grateful to have the previous year behind her.

She might not be able to change the past, but she could forge a different future and she intended to do exactly that.

Closing the door, she smiled as she thought of the way Billy had winked at her as he'd left this morning. He'd settled that cowboy hat onto his handsome head, flashed that sexy smile

and winked, leaving her heart fluttering. Four months ago he'd moved into the funeral home with her. The one-hundred-fifty-year-old three-story house didn't feel nearly so lonely now. She and Billy had been friends most of their lives and, in truth, she had been attracted to him since she was thirteen or fourteen. But she'd never expected a romantic relationship to evolve. Billy Brannigan was a hometown hero. The chief of police and probably the most eligible bachelor in all of Franklin County. He could have his pick of any of the single women around town. Rowan hadn't expected to be his choice.

She had always been too work-oriented to bother with long-term relationships. Too busy for dating on a regular basis.

Billy had made her want long-term. He made her believe anything was possible, even moving beyond her tragic past.

The whole town was speculating on when the wedding invitations would go out. Rowan hadn't even considered the possibility. This place where she and Billy were was comfortable. It felt good. Particularly since fate had given them a break the past four months. No trouble beyond the regular, everyday sort. No calls or notes from Julian. No unexplained bodies turning up. And no serial killers had appeared looking for Rowan.

Life was strangely calm and oddly normal.

She would never say as much to Billy, but it was just a little terrifying. The worry that any day, any moment, the next bad thing would happen stalked her every waking moment. Somehow she managed to keep that worry on the back burner. But it was there, waiting for an opportunity to seep into her present.

"Not today," she said aloud.

Today was important. She and Burt Johnston, the county coroner, had breakfast on Monday mornings. She locked her vehicle and started for the sidewalk. The Corner Diner was a lunch staple in Winchester. Had been since the end of the Great Depression. Attorneys and judges who had court often frequented the place for lunch. Most anyone who was someone in the area could be found at the diner. More deals and gossip happened here than in the mayor's office.

But breakfast with the coroner wasn't the only event that made this day so important.

Today she intended to offer her assistant, Charlotte Kinsley, a promotion and a part-ownership in the funeral home. Since there were no more DuPonts—Rowan had no children and couldn't say if that would ever happen—she needed to bring someone into the family business. Someone younger who could carry on the DuPont legacy.

Rowan paused outside the diner. The iron bench that sat beneath the plate glass window was empty. Surprise furrowed her brow. Burt usually waited there for her. She surveyed the cars lining the sidewalks as far as the eye could see. No sign of Burt's. He was never late but there was always a first time. After all, he wasn't exactly a young man anymore.

She sank down onto the bench, dug her cell phone from her bag and sent him a text. She was the one who generally kept him waiting and he never once complained. She certainly wasn't

going to do so. His car was a little on the vintage side as well. Maybe he had car trouble this morning. Worry gnawed at her. A dead battery or a flat tire. Surely he would have called her.

“Morning, Rowan.”

She glanced up, smiling automatically. Lance Kirby, one of the attorneys who was not fortunate enough to have an office on the square. The ones who had been around a lifetime held on to that highly sought-after real estate. The others, like Kirby, waited patiently for someone to retire or to die. Meanwhile they showed up for coffee in this highly visible location bright and early every morning.

“Good morning, Lance.”

Kirby was a couple of years older than her. He’d lived in Winchester his entire life other than the years he spent at college and law school. He was divorced and had three kids. He’d asked Rowan out to dinner on several occasions. She hoped he didn’t ask again this morning. Coming up with an excuse to turn him down was becoming tedious. Surely he was aware that she and Billy were a couple now.

The idea startled her a little. This was the first time in her life that she was half of a couple in the truest sense of the word.

“If you’re waiting for Burt, he’s parked around back. Every spot around the square was taken before seven this morning.” Kirby reached for the door. “People have come early hoping for a chance to get into the Winters trial. Everyone wants to hear the story on that family.”

Rowan had been reading about the trial for weeks in the Winchester Gazette. “That explains why I had to circle around for a while before I found a spot.” She’d forgotten about the small parking area in the back alley behind the diner. “Thanks for telling me. I was worried he’d stood me up.”

Kirby laughed. “I don’t think any man still breathing would stand you up, Rowan.”

She glanced at her cell phone as if it had vibrated. “Oops. I have to take this.”

The instant she set the phone to her ear, Kirby went on inside the diner, the bell over the door jingling to announce his entrance.

Thank goodness.

For appearances’ sake she kept the phone to her ear a half a minute, then put it away. To pass the time she counted the yellow daffodils brimming in the rock planter built around the tree at the edge of the sidewalk. Those lovely yellow flowers were coming up all around the funeral home, too. Her mother had loved gardening. Early-spring blooms were already bursting all over the yard. Maybe her mother had hoped to chase away some of the gloom associated with living in a funeral home.

Since her father’s death, Rowan had hired a gardener. Somehow her father had managed to keep her mother’s extensive gardens alive and thriving for all those years. Rowan did not have a green thumb at all. She had killed every plant she’d ever tried to nurture. She was not going to be the one who dropped the ball on the family garden.

She glanced up then down the sidewalk. Still no sign of Burt. With a sigh, she pushed to her feet. Maybe he was on the phone, which would explain why he hadn’t answered her text.

Rather than keep waiting, she cut through the narrow side alley to the small rear parking lot. With his taillights facing the back of the diner, Burt's white sedan was nosed up to the bank that faced North Jefferson Street.

Rowan quickened her pace and walked up to the driver's side of his car. Burt sat behind the steering wheel, staring out the windshield.

For a moment Rowan waited for him to glance over and see her but he didn't move. Whether it was the lax expression on his face or some deep-rooted instinct, she abruptly understood that he was dead.

She tugged at the door handle. Thankfully it opened. Her heart pounding, she bent down. No matter that her brain was telling her he was already gone, she asked, "Burt, you okay?"

Her fingers went instantly to his carotid artery.

Nothing.

Rowan snatched her cell from her bag and called 911. She requested an ambulance and the chief of police, then she laid the phone on the ground and reached into the car and pulled Burt from his seat. She grunted with the effort of stretching him out on the pavement. On her knees next to him, she pressed her ear to his chest. No heartbeat. She held her cheek close to his lips. No breath.

Rowan started CPR.

The voice from the speaker of her cell phone confirmed that the ambulance was en route. She informed the dispatcher that she'd started CPR.

Rowan continued the compressions, her eyes burning with emotion. Burt was her friend. She had been gone from Winchester for a very long time and he had made her feel as if she'd never left. She did not want him to die. Other than Billy, he was the person she felt closest to. The voice of logic reminded her that Burt was just two months shy of his eightieth birthday.

She ignored the voice and focused on the chest compressions. "Come on, Burt. Don't you die on me."

Facial color was still good. Skin was still warm. He couldn't have been in this condition for long. Hope attempted to make an appearance. But it was short-lived. Even a few minutes could be too many.

Damn it!

The approaching sirens drove home the realization that this was all too real.