

Chapter One

It didn't snow very often in Dallas, Texas, but when it did, everything came to a halt. Vicki Connagher paused at the deserted intersection. Shivering, she drew her coat tighter with her free hand. What a stupid idea. Since the store was only three blocks away, she'd thought she could get back with a few groceries before the storm hit. In just a matter of minutes, though, the sidewalks were already coated with ice.

Just one more block, she told herself, trudging across the slushy road. Snow still fell, thick and wet, dulling the usual noises of the city. Hot cocoa was going to taste especially good tonight. She'd bundle up on the couch in her favorite quilt and stay up all night watching cheesy horror movies. *Sounds like a blast, if I wasn't alone.*

But she was miserably alone. She'd end up working downstairs all night to avoid the emptiness of her apartment. Besides, she still had to come up with one more evening gown design before the gala. Since her mood was about as cheery as the Black Plague, she was going to need all the time she could get.

Her foot slid out and she fell with a curse. Getting wetter and colder by the minute, she muttered, "Not even chocolate is worth getting out in a freak Texas blizzard."

"Are you all right?"

The male voice startled her. Her heart slammed up into her throat and she whirled around, fumbling to get her keys gripped like claws between her fingers.

Hovering a safe distance away, the man held up both his hands in a non-threatening manner. With the streetlight shining down on his face, she recognized Jesse, a street artist she'd gotten to know during her law office days at Wagner & Leeman.

Seeing him brought back all the turmoil and grief that had driven her to quit her dream job.

It'd started innocently enough. Every time she was over by the park for lunch, she'd stop by his favorite bench beneath the largest tree. Handsome despite the grime, he always managed to make her smile, and she loved his work. She'd bought several of his

charcoals and dropped a few bucks in his hat. Over the next few months, they'd talked, at first casually, but then as the stress of her job started to get to her, she found herself talking to him almost every day. She couldn't get through a day at court if she didn't take a lunch in the park. With Jesse.

Even her friends at the office had taken note of her "sponsorship" of the handsome young artist. It shamed her to remember how their jokes had embarrassed her. She'd cut back on those trips to the park, although she'd never been able to stay away for long. When she heard the horrible news that one of her clients had gunned down a policeman, she'd run to the park. Jesse had been there for her in a way that no one else had ever been in her entire life.

Jesse was the only person who'd ever seen her completely break down. Sobbing and sick with grief, she'd gone to him for comfort, and then to her great shame, she'd never gone back to see him again. She'd been too embarrassed that she'd let him in so deeply, a man she barely knew. A homeless man.

Cut to the core by her shallowness, she met his gaze and hoped he didn't hate her. "I'm fine. Nothing hurt but my pride. How are you, Jesse?"

"Good." He flashed a smile—revealing killer dimples—and helped her pick up the canned beans that had escaped her bag. "Haven't seen you around the park in a while."

Not even his ragged clothes could detract from that wholesome, down-to-earth smile and face. It'd been impossible not to like him from the start. "I quit my job and started my own business. Corporate life got to be too much for me."

He handed her the last can and then shyly pulled a small square out of his bag. "I made something for you."

When he didn't bring up that awful day in the park that had driven her to quit her job, she wanted to hug him. He didn't question or press her for answers. *No, he made me something, instead of accusing me of turning my back on him like so many other people must have.*

Blinking back tears because she hated to cry more than anything else, she held the folded paper up to the streetlight. On the front, he'd used watercolors to paint dozens of butterflies, laid on top of each other in carefully detailed layers so the entire page was covered in wings. Inside, he'd written a simple message: *Happy birthday, Vicki.*

"Sorry, I know your birthday was months ago, but I didn't know where you'd gone."

She tried to swallow the lump in her throat. "Oh, Jesse, thank you. How did you know?"

Shrugging self-consciously, he shifted the strap of his bag higher on his shoulder. "One of the last few times you stopped by, I overheard you tell your friend that you were planning a special dinner with your family for your birthday. I didn't mean to eavesdrop. Anyway, I've got a few new pieces you might like. Come over to the park when you get the chance."

"I will." She stared down at the card, thinking about how many weeks he'd carried it in his bag, protecting it from getting torn or dirty, hoping to see her. He'd made her a card, when some of her best friends hadn't remembered her birthday at all. She'd lost more than her career. "Thank you, Jesse. This really means a lot to me."

He tipped his battered, lopsided straw hat, gave her another gorgeous smile that seemed so out of place on a homeless man's face, and turned to head down the street. Alone. His skinny shoulders hunched against the cold.

Vicki had built in her mind all sorts of reasons of why he was on the streets, but she'd never had the courage to ask him. He only had on a jean jacket, no gloves, and the knapsack tossed over his shoulder, exactly how she'd seen him countless times. Everything he owned in the world must be in that bag.

"Jesse?"

Immediately, he turned around and came back toward her, his eyes wide and hopeful. It was too dark to make out the remarkable turquoise shade of his eyes, but she remembered. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Do you have someplace to go?"

"Oh, sure." He nodded, but she didn't like the way he ducked his head. "Don't worry about me. Come over to the park when you get the chance. I miss seeing you."

She took the last few steps toward her building, her mind screaming all the reasons it would be stupid to ask him inside. She was alone. He was a man, bigger and stronger than her even if she had a few years on him. She had a damned good security system on both the shop and her apartment upstairs, but if he chose to overpower her, she wouldn't have a chance to call for help.

She didn't really know him at all. A few lunches in the park, a couple of hours of casual talking, and one time she'd needed a non-judgmental friend. He was homeless, for God's sake, and had probably seen more crime and violence than she'd even

dreamed of despite working all those years as a defense attorney. But there was something undeniable in his eyes, a deep, soul-piercing light that she couldn't forget. Without saying a word, he managed to reach inside her and tug, hard, amplifying her guilt and worry.

It wasn't her fault that he was homeless, but it would be her fault if he froze to death tonight. *I refuse to turn my back on him ever again.*

Putting on her best formidable, cast-iron face that had intimidated many a shady character into providing better testimony, she turned and faced him squarely. "If you promise to behave yourself, you can come home with me tonight."

His eyes flared with horror and he recoiled a step, which instantly made her feel better about asking him. His mouth opened, but it took him several times before he could say anything. "Oh, no, ma'am. That wouldn't be right. I just wanted to make sure you were okay – it didn't even occur to me that you might... No, please, I couldn't."

"I couldn't sleep a wink if you were freezing out here all night." She opened the door to the shop and flipped on the light. He hovered behind her, staring at the warmth and shelter longingly. "I'm making a huge batch of chili and cornbread."

His shoulders shook, but he didn't move closer.

"What I really wanted was hot cocoa. That's why I went out tonight before the weather got too horrible. Not cocoa from a mix or powder – I want the real thing. I'm going to make some first."

"With real milk?" His voice sounded hoarse. He took a step closer, but kept his shoulders down, hunched, as though he were trying to make himself smaller and less threatening. "And marshmallows?"

"Real milk, real chocolate," she promised. "But I don't have marshmallows. I think they're disgusting. Come on in, Jesse. I'm not the world's greatest cook, but I can make a mean pot of beans."

He hung his head, one hand gripping the strap of his bag so hard his knuckles were white. "I've been in trouble before, ma'am, but I haven't been arrested in more than five years, and I've been clean since. Call one of your old contacts in the police department and check up on me."

She was surprised at his willingness to share his unsavory past – and a little disconcerted that he knew so much about her. "I can do that. I should also warn you that my very mean and much bigger, older brother could be here in minutes."

Leading the way through the long tables stacked with fabrics and trim, she flipped on another light. *Now I know why my security guy insisted I have a separate system for my upstairs apartment.* “I set up this place so that my seamstress could sleep over when we’re on a time crunch. There’s a bed, clean linen and a full-sized bathroom.”

Jesse risked a quick glance at the room but otherwise kept his head down, his shoulders so tight that he was as short as her, when he was actually several inches taller. Lightly, she touched his arm. He flinched, but at least his head came up. She was struck again by the intensity of his eyes, so clear and honest despite the harshness of his life.

“Are you sure?” His voice shook. “I didn’t mean—”

“I’m sure.” She smiled, gently squeezing his arm. He was so thin, just bones and tight, wiry muscle lay over the top. “Look around on the shelves in the closet—I think I stuck some of my brother’s old clothes in there. Take a shower and come upstairs when you’re done. I’ll have the cocoa ready in no time.”

“My full name is Jesse Dean Inglemarre and I’m twenty-five. Check me out. If you’re not comfortable, tell me to leave. I swear on a stack of Bibles that I’ll leave immediately, no questions asked. I won’t ever bother you again.”

He was several years older than she’d guessed, although still several years younger than her. She smiled to put him at ease. It felt right, so very, very right, to help him. “You’re not bothering me.”

Solemnly, he stared into her eyes, searching her face, even though he didn’t ask, *Why me? Why are you doing this?*

How could she explain it? Sometimes after a particularly bad trial, the only bright spot in her day had been walking through the park to see what new drawing he might be working on. Once he’d smiled at her, she’d found the courage to trudge back to work. On this cold, lonely night he was a welcome surprise. “There’s something about you, Jesse.”

Oh, there’s something about me all right, Jesse thought sadly, waiting until she shut the door before looking about the room. Simple, spartan, and the most glorious thing he’d seen in years, until he found a stack of clean clothes on the shelf. Even musty from storage, they smelled like heaven. Then he saw the shampoo and soap in the bathroom, and he found himself crying beneath the steaming hot water.

God, so incredible. People didn't know what a luxury it could be simply to be clean. To have a spare set of clean clothes. To be in a safe enough place to risk taking off his filthy clothes and washing completely. Bliss. Pure bliss.

It all came from the most gorgeous, unforgettable woman he'd ever met. He had no pride left, or surely he'd be ashamed that he'd come to her like this and she'd taken him in like an abandoned puppy. He'd depended on seeing her every day, but then she'd quit coming to the park. She'd given him one taste of heaven and then disappeared off the face of the earth.

He hadn't even known her full name or where she worked. One of the women he'd seen her with occasionally had dropped the fact that Vicki had left the firm to start her own business down by Oak Lawn. So he'd started hanging out in this neighborhood, hoping to find her.

Never in a million years had he thought she'd let him inside her home. All he'd wanted to do was see her again, find her place, and maybe stop by once a week or so, just to talk. Just to see her smile at his latest work.

I know where to find her now. He scrubbed his hair a second time. *I can't stay long. She's sheltering me from the cold, that's all.*

She has no idea that I'm hopelessly in love with her.

Vicki dialed the number and laid the phone down on the counter in speaker mode. Chopping chocolate, she counted the rings. Mentally, she rearranged her questions in the most logical order that would lead to the best possible outcome with the least amount of suspicion.

"Reyes."

By the sharp bark of Elias's voice, she knew he was already frustrated. Hell, he was always frustrated. Working on a narcotics task force overwhelmed by the Mexican drug cartels tended to frustrate even the most patient of men. A lot could be said about Elias Reyes, but he wasn't exactly patient.

She decided to be professional and not friendly. He hadn't been by in months, and she couldn't remember the last time they'd had sex. Okay, that was a lie; she'd never forget a moment with Elias, even though they'd fought constantly about their jobs. Then his partner had been killed by one of her old clients in a drug bust gone bad. He

still hadn't forgiven her, and she'd found herself sobbing in the arms of a homeless man in the park instead of her lover's.

Now that she'd started her own business, she was still too busy, and he certainly hadn't bothered to come by. "I need you to run a name through your database."

"Vik," he drawled out his nickname for her in that low, sexy voice that always made her want to throw her head back and moan deep in her throat. "I thought you quit defending assholes I put away."

"I did." She refused to allow her tone to sharpen defensively. "I need a background run on somebody and you're the only person in the Dallas PD who'll still take my calls."

He let out a low grunt of agreement. "What's the name?"

"Jesse Dean Inglemarre."

"What exactly are you looking for?"

She heard him typing. He must be at work and already looking up the data for her. Who was she kidding – Elias was always at work. "Any warrants, recent arrests, known gang affiliation. Standard stuff."

"Got a soc?"

"Nope, but I know he's twenty-five years old."

A few moments went by. She didn't hear any voices. Usually his office was loud and rowdy at any hour. The war on drugs never slept.

"Looks like your boy last got in trouble five years ago, but nothing recent. No known address. How do you know him?"

"He's a street artist." She tried to keep her tone casual and strictly to the truth. Elias could sniff out a lie quicker than a bloodhound. "I used to see him when I worked at Wagner & Leeman. Thanks, Elias. I hope you're not out in this snow tonight."

"Not so fast, Vik."

Mentally, she groaned. He always was too damned smart for his own good, which meant he was a fine cop who always suspected the worst in people. Unfortunately, he was almost always right.

"Why the sudden interest in a homeless street artist in the middle of a snow storm? Surely you're not thinking about letting this punk into your home."

"Thanks," she said firmly. "I'll talk to you later."

“Fuck.” In her mind, she could see him at his desk, jumping to his feet and raking his hand through his hair. “You did. You invited this asshole into your home. Are you insane? He’s a druggie. A scumbag. You know they can never come clean. Give them a ten and they’ll buy a hit instead of food.”

“He’s not like that.” She used her softest voice, trying to calm him down before he decided to get on his white horse and charge over here like a knight in shining armor. “He just needs a little help.”

“Jesus, Vik, does he have any weapons? Did he bring drugs into your house?”

“No!” *Although I didn’t think to check.* “I can handle this, Reyes.” Deliberately, she emphasized his cop name, the cold and formal relationship they’d used at their jobs even when they shared a bed once in a while. “I don’t want you to interfere.”

“You should have thought of that before you invited a homeless junkie to spend the night!”

“I have my phone right here and you’re on speed dial. I promise I’ll call you if I get even a hint of a weird vibe from him, but he’s barely more than a kid, Elias. He’s not going to hurt me.”

“You’re damned right he’s not.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“He’s not a kid, Vik, even if he looks helpless and innocent to you. He hasn’t been a kid in a long time. One of his raps was for prostitution when he was barely sixteen. Yeah, he must be a real pretty boy, huh? I’m surprised he came on to you. Seems like a rich queer is more up his alley.”

The thought of Jesse’s brilliant eyes scrunched up with pain or staring up at a jerk forcing him to give a blowjob made her knees quiver hard enough that she had to sit on a barstool. She’d known he must have had a hard life, but the reality made her stomach heave. “He didn’t come on to me.”

“Maybe he’ll come on to me, then.”

“He’s not like that.” Her voice quivered, betraying her. She clenched her jaws a moment, concentrating on retrieving that calm, cool exterior she’d learned as a defense attorney. “I saw him in the snow and cold—he was helping me because I fell on the ice!—and I couldn’t leave him out there.”

“If you used to see him over at the park near Wagner & Leeman, then why the hell was he way out by your place? He was staking you out, Vik. He knew exactly what he

was doing when he just happened to walk by. I bet he seemed real shocked to find you, didn't he? They're damned good actors when they need to be."

Torn between outrage and concern, she tried to remember if she'd ever told Jesse where she lived. Would he really come dozens of blocks in the cold to give her a birthday card? Surely, he couldn't have pretended that much surprise when she asked him to come inside. She was a good judge of character. She'd seen more than her share of bad guys willing to sell their mamas if it would get them out of prison.

"Jesse's not like that. He's not one of the bad guys, Elias. I can see it in his eyes. He needs someone to give him a break."

Wheels screeched on the street below so loudly that she jumped up and ran to the window. Elias jumped out of his truck and stormed up to the door of her building. "I'll give him a break. I'll break his fucking arm if he even lays a finger on you."

She glared down at him, whether he could actually see her or not. "I told you I could handle this!"

"Let me in, Vik, or I'm going to owe you a new door."

Elias heard her shouting at him as she ran down the stairs, but he didn't stop. He threw open the door to the rear living quarters, grabbed the invader, and slammed him face-first against the wall with a satisfying crunch.

The kid didn't put up a fight. *Man*, Elias reminded himself. Not a kid, no matter how scrawny and slender he was, not at twenty-five years of age.

Vicki screamed, a high, shrill wail like nothing he'd ever heard from her. "Jesse!"

Her terrified voice pierced through Elias's rage. As a kid huddled in a narrow bed with his younger brothers and sisters while his crazy father beat the shit out of his mother, he'd sworn to never make a woman scream like that. He slapped cuffs on the man and forced himself to ease off. He had to be the cop in this, not the enraged, jealous, overprotective – and almost always absent – lover.

The junkie stayed against the wall, legs automatically spread. He knew the drill all too well.

"You don't smell like a bum, so I guess you've already taken advantage of your hostess's hot water. Do you have anything stashed in these nice clean pockets?"

"No, sir."

Damn it, he even sounded like a kid, his voice breathless and shaking with fear. Elias twisted his lips into a furious snarl. The punk was afraid of being caught. Afraid of being thrown in jail instead of enjoying a nice cushy night under Vicki's roof, stealing everything not locked down while she slept.

She stepped between them, her face white and her mouth tight with strain. "I gave him those pants. How dare you come in here and throw him around like this? He's hurt! Look at him, Elias, he's bleeding!"

Crying, she cradled the jerk's face in her hands and wiped the blood from his split lip with a tissue snatched from the bedside table. "Jesse, I'm so sorry. I didn't know he'd come over like this. I didn't know he'd hurt you."

"It's okay. He's protecting you. I've had much worse done to me."

The nicer he acted—pretended to be!—the worse Elias felt, which pissed him off even more. He grabbed the ratty duffel bag lying at the foot of the bed and dumped it out, using an ink pen to separate items so he didn't get poked by a dirty needle. "Any weapons? Drugs? Paraphernalia?"

"No, sir. Just my straight-edge razor. I have used it as protection a few times, but no knives or guns. I haven't touched drugs in five years. I'll take a drug test right this minute if you order it."

Elias flipped open a small wooden case, but all it contained was tiny whittled down pencils and precious little nubs of chalk, so used up that a normal person—with money—would have thrown them out and replaced them long ago. Feeling more and more like a heel, he methodically emptied the pockets of everything. Wadded up small bills littered the bed. A five in each denim pocket, a twenty in the threadbare shirt, several more bills tucked into the rolled socks, but certainly no nice wad of cash that a dealer would carry. Spreading the bills out across the meager belongings would make it more difficult to steal his precious savings.

"I have a hundred dollar bill in each boot hidden beneath the insole." Jesse leaned against the wall as though the entire building would crumble around them without his weight propping it up. The pants sagged low on his slim hips, and he didn't have on a shirt. Bones moved beneath his skin in sharp, painful relief. The kid was half-starved and malnourished. In despair, he hung his head, his streaked golden-brown hair falling down to hide his face. "Took me a year to save that much because the punks on the street keep stealing it. They know I don't have a weapon."

Elias knew the answer, but he wanted to see how many lies the kid might weave. "How do you know Vicki?"

"She used to come to Highland Park where I hang out. When she quit coming, I asked one of her friends what had happened. I missed her, and I wanted to make sure she was okay. She was always nice to me, but I never thought she'd help me like this."

"Get these cuffs off him," Vicki said in a deceptively pleasant voice that sent shards of ice skittering down his spine. This was the defense attorney, not a woman who'd called him to check out a friend. "He answered your questions satisfactorily and you have nothing to charge him with. He's not trespassing and he's not a danger to me or himself."

When he hesitated, she narrowed those glittering dark eyes on him and lowered her chin, preparing for the charge. "I might not work for Leeman any longer, but I'll have him crawling in every orifice you've got unless you release Jesse immediately."