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THE PERFECT WITNESS

IRIS JOHANSEN

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THE PERFECT WITNESS

CHAPTER ONE

SHE WAS BLEEDING . . .

The pain in her side was almost overwhelming.

Teresa could hear the three men behind her in the forest, crashing through the underbrush.

Run.

No time to try to stop the bleeding. If she didn't get away from them, there would be another bullet, another wound.

Or death.

She had been lucky to have seen them coming up the road toward the cabin and guessed that they had been sent to kill her. She had slipped out of the cabin, but they had caught sight of her running into the woods. She had heard Mick Judaro shout to Tanton when he saw her. He's been surprised, they'd thought she'd be easy game. But she'd been waiting for them for the last three days.

Waiting for death.

No, she wouldn't let them kill her. She could feel the anger tearing through her, smothering the fear.

"Stop, Teresa. We didn't mean to hurt you. That was only supposed to be a warning shot." It was Hank Tanton calling out to her. "We were just sent to bring you back. You know me. I've watched you grow up. I was at your sixteenth birthday party last month."

She had not wanted to have that party, but Mother had insisted. She had said it would look strange if she didn't throw a party for her. And she had been aware of Tanton leaning against the wall while she blew out the candles. Smiling, joking with her father. She hadn't been able to look at him.

His memories were too dark, too ugly, swirling around, pushing into every corner of his mind. He didn't try to keep that ugliness tucked away. He was proud of it.

Like her father.

But she had learned to shut herself away from her father's memories. She wouldn't have been able to survive living with him if she hadn't.

She ran faster.

"I know you're scared," Tanton shouted. "But Rico Camano doesn't want to hurt you either. He only wants to talk to you. He was a good friend to your father. He wants to find out who murdered him. He thinks you can help."

Liar. Liar. Liar.

"But you have to obey Camano just like you did your father. After all, he's our boss now, Teresa. He's the Don. And your father would like him to be in charge now that he's gone. Camano will treat you well if you just do what he says."

Camano would kill her. She had seen it in his face at her father's

funeral. He had smiled at her and patted her shoulder, but she could still feel the coldness of him.

Then he had smiled at her mother, Gina, and she had smiled back.

And Teresa had known that she was alone.

“But if you don’t stop, we may have to take you down, Teresa,” Tanton called. “We’ll try not to hurt you again, but I can’t promise. Just give up and let us talk to you.”

Her breath was coming in gasps, and the pain was getting worse. “Blood,” she muttered. She had to do something about that blood . . .

“Yes, you do.”

She paused, startled at the words that had come out of nowhere. Her gaze flew to the path in front of her.

A man stood on the path a few yards away. Tall, dark-haired, gleaming, light blue eyes. Dressed in dark jeans and sweatshirt. She didn’t recognize him. He was a stranger. But everyone was the enemy.

Her hand tightened on the branch in her hand, then she crouched and swung the branch at him like a club.

He grabbed it and wrenched her arm until the branch dropped to the ground. “You don’t have time for this. I’m no threat to you, Teresa.”

She punched him in the stomach.

He muttered a curse and swung her around and shoved her up the path. “I told you I was no threat. Get out of here. You have only a few minutes. I’ll take care of Tanton and the others. Wait for me on the hill, and I’ll look at that wound.”

She hesitated only for a second, then took off running again. She didn’t know what was going on, but it couldn’t be worse than what she was facing now. He was a stranger, but strangers couldn’t be any more dangerous than those people with whom she’d spent her entire life.

Mother . . .

Don't think of her. It hurt too much.

Keep running.

She heard a scream behind her. Then a curse, then another sound that was like a grunt.

Had Tanton killed him?

The wet shrubs were striking her face as she ran up the hill.

Get away. He had told her to wait, but he was probably a dead man.

If he wasn't, he could be just as much a danger to her as the men who had shot her. She couldn't trust him. She couldn't trust anyone.

"Dammit, stop." The stranger's voice behind her. "You're okay now. No one's chasing you. Correction. No one but me. Stop."

She kept running.

Two minutes later, he tackled her from behind and took her down.

She rolled over, and her fist struck out and hit his mouth. Then she butted her head up and struck his chest as hard as she could.

Dizzy. Her head was spinning.

But she tried to do it again.

He muttered a curse as he straddled her and pinned her shoulders to the ground. "I'm not going to hurt you, you little tarantula."

"No, you're not," she said fiercely, and moved her head, so that she could sink her teeth into his hand on her shoulder.

He didn't move but said through clenched teeth, "Get your fangs out of me, or I'll knock you out and explain later. Do you want me to prove that I'm not one of Camano's errand boys? I will. No problem. Let's go down the hill, and I'll show you their bodies."

She stiffened and removed her teeth from his hand. "That doesn't prove you're not just as bad." She was silent, looking up at him. "Did you really kill them?"

He shrugged. "It was the only way to stop them. Camano had given

them orders. He would have taken you alive, but he'd be relieved if you were dead."

"How do you know what Camano wants or doesn't want?"

"Not because I belong to his fine organization. He's as dirty a gangster as your father was before him. I don't give a damn about him." He met her eyes. "But I do give a damn about you. I want to help you."

"Bullshit. I don't know you. Get off me."

"Then let me introduce myself. My name is Andre Mandak. And I'll get off you if you promise you won't kick me in the nuts or run away. And if you'll let me take a look at that wound and stop the bleeding."

"Why would you want to do anything to help me? I don't know you."

"You've said that before. Maybe I'm just a good Samaritan."

"Bullshit."

"You've said that before, too. I know you're scared, but think. I saved your life. Why would I want to take it now?"

"I don't trust you."

"You don't trust anyone. Deal with it. I'm the only game in town."

She stared up at him, then slowly nodded. "Get off me."

He swung off her and helped her to her feet. "I'll take you to my car on the road and see if I can stop that bleeding and—"

"I'm not getting into any car," she said flatly. "And how do I know that you really did kill those men who were after me? Maybe it's a lie to trick me." She started back down the hill. "I want to see them for myself."

"Really?" He followed her. "Are you sure? Corpses aren't a pleasant sight."

"I have to know if you lied to me." Her hand was holding the wound in her side. It was wet with blood. Pain . . . She had to keep on going. "If you work for Camano, too, I don't think you'd kill his men. It wouldn't make sense. So I might be able to trust you to— No, but maybe I could—"

She stopped again. She wasn't thinking clearly. She whirled to face him. "But you took away that club I had. If you really want to help me, give me your gun or something else to protect myself if you've lied to me."

"What?" He shook his head. "I didn't expect that." He hesitated an instant. "No gun, that would be too easy to turn against me." He reached in his jacket pocket and took out a long, slender dagger. "That's not enough to prove I'm on your side?" He gave the dagger to her. "No, I guess not."

"I have to know that they're dead. Then I might be able to listen to you and decide what you want from me."

"And someone is always wanting something from you, aren't they, Teresa?" he asked quietly. "You're only sixteen. How long has it been going on?"

"None of your business," she said jerkily. Don't give in to the weakness. Put one foot in front of the other. "Where are Tanton and the others?"

"You're my business, or I wouldn't be here," he said roughly. "And part of that business is keeping you alive. Will you give this up and let me stop that bleeding?"

"Where are they?"

"Behind those trees up ahead. You're running a big risk just to see if I'm lying to you."

"I know. How else can I find out? You could be tricking me. But you could have killed me back there. I don't know why you didn't. Either way it's a risk. I can't trust anyone. But I have to find out for sure who I have to fight."

"By all means, go check them out. Considering the fact that your dirtbag father raised you as a Mafia princess, I'm sure you shouldn't be shocked at a few dead bodies."

He was angry, she realized. Were those words supposed to hurt her? It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but finding a way to get away from Camano.

She faded to the left when she reached the trees and tried to creep quietly forward in case there was someone in wait for her. Her hand tightened on the dagger. She stopped and listened.

No sound.

Her gaze searched the darkness.

She went a few steps deeper into the trees.

The first body she saw was that of Georgie Sohler. He was lying crumpled beside an oak tree. His head was twisted at an odd angle.

Shock. She stopped short, then forced herself to keep on walking.

A few yards later she saw Mick Judaro lying with eyes wide open staring at the sky.

"Seen enough?" Mandak asked, behind her.

She shook her head, moving forward.

Tantona's throat had been cut, and there was a pool of blood on the ground around him.

Dead. All dead.

"Satisfied?" Andre Mandak asked.

"Satisfied I'm safe from them." She couldn't take her eyes from the wound in Tantona's throat. "Not satisfied that I'm safe from you. You're a murderer like them. You killed them all in just a matter of minutes." She was dizzy, and it was hard to form the words. "Maybe you're . . . worse than they were."

"Or better. It depends on how you look at it." He took a step closer to her. "But I'm not going to hurt you, dammit. Now let me—"

Her knees were buckling. She was falling . . .

He caught her before she reached the ground. He took the dagger from her hand. Then he lifted her and was carrying her through the trees.

“Let me . . . down.”

“No way. I’ve wasted enough time already. I can’t be sure that Tan-tona didn’t phone a location to Camano while he was chasing you.”

“Camano already . . . knew I was at the cabin. That’s why he sent them.”

“How did he know?”

“She . . . told him.”

“Who?”

“My mother.” It hurt to say the words. “She . . . told him.”

He was silent. “You’re sure?”

“I’m . . . sure.”

“Son of a *bitch*.”

He was angry again. She didn’t think that it was with her this time . . . “What are you going to do to me?” She moistened her lips, then said fiercely, “I won’t let you kill me. I’m not going to die. Do you hear me? I’ll fight you.”

“I know you will. You’re ready to fight the whole damn world.” He was looking straight ahead. “But you don’t listen. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m your best hope to stay alive.”

“Why?” she whispered. “If you help me, Camano will kill you.”

He didn’t answer.

And she didn’t care. She was getting dizzy again. It might be okay to hope that he didn’t want to hurt her or kill her and just let go . . .

“You were wrong about me,” she whispered. “I’ve only saw one man who had been murdered before tonight. But he was shot in the head. Hideous . . .”

“Your father did it?”

Jokman's skull exploding and blood and brains blowing in all directions.

Guilt. Terrible guilt.

Scream. She had screamed . . .

"No, I did it. It was me . . ."

Darkness.

GLITTERING STARS. TALL TREES. Wisps of smoke.

A crackling fire only a few feet away.

And Andre Mandak was kneeling beside her, his gaze focused intently on the bandage he was applying to the wound in her side. He looked up as he felt her stiffen. "Back with me? I was beginning to worry. You lost quite a bit of blood. The wound isn't all that bad, just a flesh wound. But you probably suffered shock."

"Where are we?"

"After I stopped the blood, I drove twenty or thirty miles down the road and set up camp to finish the job." He was buttoning up her shirt. "You need blood, but it's not urgent. I'll get you to someone I trust to check my first aid within the next twelve hours or so." He smiled. "But I don't anticipate any complaints. I'm pretty damn good."

She shook her head. "You're crazy. I'm not going to take that chance. I don't know or trust you. Why should I trust your friend?"

"No reason. Except that from now on I'm going to run the show."

"Bullshit."

"That's the way it has to be," he said as he moved a few yards away from her. "Unless you particularly want Camano to kill you or get his hands on you. Neither would be pleasant. I understand that he has certain ambitions in which he thinks you might be a help or hindrance."

"I can run. I can hide. I don't need you."

“The hell you don’t. If I help you, you’ll survive. If I don’t, you may last six months.” He smiled and coaxed, “Come on, Teresa. Use me. People have been using you for most of your life. It’s your turn now.”

She stared at him. He had suddenly turned from brutal frankness to a charisma that was almost mesmerizing. She had only been vaguely aware of him as a man since he had appeared in her life tonight. He had only been a threat and a puzzle and the faint stirring of hope.

Close-cut dark hair, blue eyes beneath slashing dark brows, high cheekbones, and a beautifully shaped sensual mouth. How old? Late twenties? Early thirties? He was dressed in dark jeans and sweatshirt that revealed he was lean but muscular and very strong in spite of his slimmness. He had carried her with no problem at all. “Who are you? Not your name, Mandak. Who are you to me?”

“Who am I?” He thought about it. “Your savior? Your teacher? Anything else will have to be worked out between us.”

“Savior?”

“I killed three men for you tonight. Doesn’t that qualify?”

“How did you even know I was in those woods tonight?”

“I’ve been waiting . . . and watching. I knew it was going to happen soon.”

“What? How?”

“Because it wasn’t reasonable that they’d let you go peacefully. It would have been too dangerous for Camano.” He paused. “I didn’t know that your mother was involved.”

“I don’t want to talk about her,” she said shakily. “She didn’t mean for anyone to hurt me. She loves me.”

“Very well. But I had to know if she’s a threat.”

“Why? Why do you have to know anything? Who the hell are you? How do I know that you won’t try to sell me to Camano? I don’t *know* you.”

“But I know you. I’ve been watching you for a long time.” He held up his hand as she opened her lips to speak. “I’ll tell you as much as I can. I’ve been keeping an eye on your father and his relationship with you for the last few years after it came to my attention.”

She stiffened. “What came to your attention?”

He only stared at her.

“What?” she said through clenched teeth. “You’re bluffing. You don’t know anything about me. You couldn’t.”

“I know your father discovered what he thought was a treasure trove in you and exploited it for at least two years. I know Camano probably killed him and is wavering between trying to use you the way your father did or killing you to be sure you don’t reveal that he was the one who ordered the kill.” He paused. “Tell me, do you know for certain that it was Camano?”

“How could I?” she asked cautiously. “Even the police weren’t sure that he killed my father.” Her lips twisted. “Not that they cared. They were just glad to get rid of one more gangster. When Camano became Don, they just refocused their attention and forgot about my father.” She had a sudden thought. “Or maybe they didn’t. Are you with the police? Is that how you know so much about me?”

He shook his head. “God, no. But it’s refreshing of you to jump to that connection. At least, you’re not still thinking I’m going to sell you to Camano.”

“I’m not sure that you’re not. You know too much about me.” She defiantly met his eyes. “Or do you? Just what do you know, Mandak?”

“You want it all? I know that you’re the only child of Antonio Casali and his wife, Gina. Casali was pretty much a scumbag and involved in murder, vice, and longshore racketeering. He was so dirty he managed to climb up to head the New Jersey Mafia. Three weeks ago, he was gunned down in the streets in Trenton.” He paused. “You went to the funeral, but

then you disappeared from view. I assumed that it was your mother's doing to get you away from Camano, who had just taken power. Is that right?"

She nodded jerkily. "I thought that it was going to be okay. I prayed that she wouldn't do it."

"Do what? Betray you?"

She didn't answer.

He was studying her face. "Too late," he said softly. "You've already slipped and told me too much. You're her daughter. Why would she do that to you, Teresa?"

"Why should I tell you?" she asked bitterly. "You believe you know it all. But all that stuff you rattled off doesn't mean anything. Guesswork. Or you could have read it in the newspaper."

"Then should I go a step farther? Your parents were far too busy to take care of you. Your father was a mob boss who had ambitions to take over the entire Northeast territory. Your mother liked being married to Casali and acting the queen bee. She had no time to be a mother. You were sent away to boarding school from the time you were six. You didn't seem to mind. You did extraordinarily well at school. You're exceptionally bright, and very early on, the teachers found that you had a special talent. You have a photographic memory."

She stiffened. She didn't like where this was going. "No big deal. It's not common, but photographic memory isn't really that special."

"Special enough. The school principal advised your parents, and they were curious enough to bring you home and show you off for amusement value. Your mother particularly liked to be the center of attention. The glow didn't last long, and they sent you back to school about six months later." He grimaced. "I'd bet you were relieved. You liked your books and your teachers and had no desire to be a star."

But those months had held their own magic, she wanted to tell him. For the first time, she had felt important to her mother. Her father was always cold and had never paid any attention to her. But her mother had been a beautiful butterfly who fluttered and smiled, and occasionally lingered in Teresa's world for brief instants. "Are you nuts? I was no star. I told you, a photographic memory isn't all that rare."

"But you were relieved to go back to school?"

"Maybe."

"But it didn't last long, did it? Two years later, the school expelled you and sent you home. They couldn't deal with you." He paused. "Would you like to tell me why?"

Her hands clenched into fists. She couldn't breathe. He *knew*.

"Shall I tell you?" he asked softly. "It wasn't the photographic memory. They could have handled that in a student. But that talent had changed, metamorphosed, in those two years. The teachers and students were regarding you as a freak. They felt insecure and afraid of you."

Nightmare time. Loneliness. Oh, the aching loneliness. It was all rushing back to her.

"They were idiots. I didn't want to hurt anyone."

"I'm sure you didn't," he said gently. "But even the teachers weren't prepared for what you were able to do."

"I didn't want to do it. I'd just look at them, and it was there before me."

"What?"

She didn't answer.

"What, Teresa?"

"Why are you asking me? I don't know who told you. But you *know*, damn you."

"Tell me."

“The memories,” she said unevenly. “I could read their memories. Whenever they remembered anything, it was clear as glass to me.”

“You couldn’t read minds but you could read past thoughts, past actions, memories. Intimidating.”

“I didn’t want to do it. I didn’t know what was happening to me. At first I thought I was actually reading their minds. But it was blank for me unless they were remembering something. But one was as bad as the other. No one would believe me. They thought I was lying.” She moistened her lips. “But it was worse when they did begin to believe me.”

“They kicked you out and sent you back to your parents.”

“I was glad to go. I didn’t think it could get any worse.”

“But it did.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “My father . . . was interested. It wasn’t like before when I was just a curiosity. He thought that I might be . . . He wanted to see if he could use me.”

“Your mother?”

“She said I should do whatever my father said. She said this time we had to keep it a big secret just between the two of them and me. She made me go to this fancy Dr. Kramer on Fifth Avenue. He was a psychiatrist. He told my mother and father that he didn’t believe in what the school was telling him, but he’d investigate and let them know.” She said hoarsely, “I hated it. He kept asking me questions. Over and over. He wanted to know how I knew when I was making contact with someone’s memory. I told him that it was like being sucked into a dark tunnel, and I was suddenly just there. He told me to stop making up stories. He’d use big words like ‘hippocampus’ and ‘frontal cortex’. He’d tape wires and stuff on my head. He’d bring in strangers and try to trick me into saying the wrong things about what they were remembering. It went on and on . . .”

“But then he found out you weren’t making up the stories.”

“Yes, all those tests showed that my brain appeared to make contact with the amygdala segment of the brain of anyone with whom I came in close contact. Those are the cells that harbor memory. He told mother that there was evidence of stimulation in both brains. He said that my sensation of being pulled into a tunnel was my mind focusing, making adjustments.”

“That tunnel signal interests me,” Mandak said. “It may indicate you’re struggling for control.”

“Control? Are you crazy? I have no control. I just have to accept. My mother was excited. But she told me that I wasn’t to go back to see Dr. Kramer. He wanted to write an article for some medical journal, and that was making my father angry. He didn’t want anyone to know about what I could do.”

“Exit Dr. Kramer. What happened to him?”

“I don’t know. My mother said that he was going to Europe to study for some degree.”

“How convenient.”

Though she had accepted what her mother said at the time, that’s what Teresa had thought in the years that followed. People who displeased her father often just went away never to be seen again. “I was glad at the time. I hated going to his office.”

“But you hated more what happened when your father and mother believed his report.”

“Yes,” she said jerkily.

“And what did your father make you do?”

She didn’t answer for a moment. She didn’t know why she had already told him as much as she had. Secrets . . . Her mother had told her that she mustn’t tell anyone, that it was a secret. But she was alone now,

and this man might have saved her life. And just telling someone about those years made her feel less vulnerable.

“They’d sit me down in the library with my father and whoever he chose to bring home with him,” she said haltingly. “Sometimes it was one of his men, sometimes a politician, sometimes it was someone from another mob. He’d ignore me, but he’d laugh and joke with them. I guess that they thought it was a little weird to have me there, but maybe they felt safer and more at ease having a kid in the room. After they’d left, I had to tell my father what memories had surfaced in their minds during the visit.” She closed her eyes. “So ugly. Mean and cruel and ugly. Memories are never anything like what’s on the surface. They’re almost always selfish, and the reasons why anyone does something are usually based on what they remember as being good or pleasant for them in the past. But often what those men thought pleasant was cruel and bloody and—” Her eyes opened, and she stopped as those memories began to come alive for her again. “Sometimes I wanted to throw up. I begged my father not to make me do it. He wouldn’t listen. My mother said that it was my duty and that I mustn’t say anything that might upset him.”

“Did it continue until he was killed?”

“No.” She drew a shaky breath. “Until about six months ago. I knew what my father was by that time. At first, I was numb and scared and just did what he told me to do. Then I began to wonder what effect my telling my father about those memories was having on those people he had me read. One night Ned Jokman came to see my father. He had worked with him for years. His memories were . . . bad. Death. Cheating. Bribes . . . After I gave my father the report, he seemed angry. He stormed out of the house. I followed him. He went to the guesthouse, where Jokman was staying. My father’s men dragged Jokman out into

the woods and made him kneel.” She shuddered. “My father shot him in the head.”

Blood and bits of skull and brains flying everywhere.

“I screamed. I kept on screaming. My father hit me and hit me again. I deserved it. It was my fault.” She swallowed. “My fault. My fault.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Don’t tell me that,” she said fiercely. “I told my father what Jokman remembered doing, and he dragged him out into the woods and killed him. It wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t told him. It wouldn’t have happened if I’d shut away those memories and blocked them.”

His eyes narrowed on her face. “Can you do that?”

She was silent. “Sometimes.”

“Not often.”

“But I can pretend,” she said quickly. “I can make people think I’m not able to do it any longer.”

“Is that how you kept your father from forcing you to tap into anyone’s memories after he killed Jokman?”

She was silent.

“It would be the only way to do it,” he said. “He wouldn’t give up such a prize advantage, and he obviously didn’t give a damn about you. Did he make it rough on you?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

The regular beatings with the belt. The ropes. Isolation, verbal and physical abuse.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s over.”

“Your mother didn’t interfere?”

He didn’t understand about Gina. Nothing bad ever touched her.

Beautiful butterflies never interfered in anything ugly. But she had come to Teresa after every punishment and held her in her arms and dried her tears.

“I know, baby,” Gina had whispered as she held her close and stroked her hair. “I grew up with beatings, too. You just have to do whatever you have to do to survive. Give him what he wants, if you can. Just remember that I’m always here for you.”

“Teresa?”

She didn’t answer.

“You fooled him?”

“I had to make him believe me,” she said jerkily. “I couldn’t do what he wanted any longer. It helped that I couldn’t stop crying for days after it happened. He thought maybe I was going crazy.”

“Yes, I can see how that would help convince the son of a bitch,” Mandak said harshly. “A raving maniac wouldn’t be of much use to him.” He was silent. “Did you try to get away from him?”

“Once. He caught me and locked me up. Then, two weeks later, he was killed, and I thought that I’d be free.”

“But you weren’t free. It’s difficult keeping a secret as valuable and intriguing as your father was trying to do. Just the fact that you, a child, were present at certain crucial meetings was unusual. There had to be leaks. Camano knew about you and wanted to take over the action.” He paused. “Or to get rid of you before you could read some of his own memories that might prove fatal for him.”

“No!” she said sharply. “That wouldn’t happen. I’m never going to do that again.”

“But you can’t help yourself, can you? You wouldn’t do it intentionally, but if you leave yourself open, don’t the memories come flooding?”

Her eyes widened in shock. “How do you know that?”

“Don’t they?”

Panic was suddenly racing through her. Why was she even talking to him? Why had the answers to his questions tumbled out helter-skelter? Perhaps because he had already seemed to know so much already. But those facts could have been learned by diligent research.

But not the way the memories worked. That was what was scaring her to death. There wasn’t any way he could know how that worked. No one could know how people’s memories flowed gently to her at times and at others came and went like wind and thunder. Or how impossible it was to stop them when they wanted to be heard.

“I’ve frightened you.” His gaze was searching her face. “You’re such a tough kid, I keep forgetting that I’m supposed to deal gently with you. It’s not my *modus operandi*.”

“You didn’t frighten me.” Then she said hoarsely, “Yes, you did. You know too much. Things you shouldn’t know. But it’s nothing I can’t get over. I just have to find out if it’s going to hurt me.”

“It might. But not right away. You’ll have a chance to recover and develop good defenses. That’s all I can promise you.”

“Are you being honest with me?”

He smiled faintly. “Yes. Can’t you tell? Why don’t you see what kind of horrendous memories I’m storing away? It might help.”

“I told you that I won’t do that again. It’s not what—” But she could feel the familiar darkness of the tunnel pulling her, his memories flowing toward her, overwhelming her.

And she could feel herself reaching out, searching . . .

Nothing.

Blank.

Reflecting like a mirrored golden wall.

She was stunned.

“You’ve never run across a block?”

“You can do that?”

“Yes, and so can you if you let me help you. Accept it. Isn’t it really a relief not to be able to read me?”

Relief? It was weird and terrifying. There was nothing comforting about this blankness. It was like looking at the edge of a machete that could turn and cut in a heartbeat. “Who are you? You said you weren’t the police.”

“And I’m not. That doesn’t mean that I can’t offer you a certain amount of protection.” He opened a bottle of water and handed it to her. “And that I may eventually be able to give you a gift that you’ll find priceless.”

“What gift?” she asked warily.

“You have a talent that’s wild and erratic. I can teach you to block and control. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?” he asked softly. “I can give that to you, Teresa.”

“I don’t want to control it. I want to get rid of it.”

He shook his head. “That’s not one of the options.”

“Then just let me go, and I’ll work it out for myself.” She took a drink of water, then asked, “Why can’t I read your memories?”

“Control and blocking. Which makes me stronger than you. You’ve been surrounded by people who have made you a victim. Aren’t you tempted to make sure it doesn’t happen again?”

“All I want is to get away from here and stay alive.”

“That’s part of the package.”

“It is?” She was trying to think, trying to work it out. “You know what’s happening in my head. Or at least some of it. Is it because you’re a freak like me?”

“You’re not a freak. You’re very special.” He shook his head. “People

call me special, too, but I don't possess your gift. You're not unique, but your ability is very rare. I don't share it."

"Be grateful," she said bitterly.

"Oh, I am. I have enough on my plate without that. But it's not as if I couldn't deal with it. It's a tricky path, and you've just been dealing with the wrong guides." He smiled. "For instance, I'm a guide without equal."

"You think well of yourself."

He nodded. "Confidence is a valuable weapon."

"But even if you aren't like me, that doesn't mean you're not a freak. Special is only a pretty word for it. People use you, and when they're through with you, they push you away because you're different."

"Then you learn to wear a mask and push back when it becomes necessary."

"Like you pushed back tonight? You killed those men."

"It was necessary. If they'd caught you, they would probably have killed you. Wouldn't you have fought back?" He stared her in the eye. "Didn't you intend to kill if you had to do it?"

"That's different."

He chuckled. "It's always different in the first person."

"But you had no reason to do it. You had no quarrel with them. You could have walked away."

"No, I couldn't have walked away." He paused. "And I had a very good reason."

"What?"

"I had to pay in advance for services rendered."

"What services?"

"Future services."

"What future—" She stopped as he shook his head. "Services. That means you want to use me, too."

“I won’t deny it,” he said quietly. “But you’ll find I always pay for what I want. But you’re not ready for me to offer you a deal yet. We’ll discuss it later.”

He was being annoyingly deceptive. She changed the subject. “How do you know what goes on in my head? Are you some kind of slimy egotist like Dr. Kramer?”

He shook his head again.

“Stop *doing* that.” She wanted to hit him. She was brimming with frustration. “I want to know who you are and what you have to do with me.”

“I’m sure you do, but that’s not an option, either. You’ll find out in time, but you need that time. You’re only sixteen, Teresa.”

“You say you want to help me, but that’s not true, is it? You’re like everyone else. You said you wanted to use me.”

“Yes, I do.” He reached out and gently tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “In the end, we all use each other. I’ll take what I want from you. But I’m giving you a chance to grow and strengthen and fight me. I consider that very generous. Don’t you?”

She didn’t know what she thought. His hand was exquisitely gentle against her temple, and his light eyes were mesmerizing. She was tired and frightened and desperate, and she had to ignore the physical appeal of Mandak. It had nothing to do with who he really was. Her father had been sleek and handsome, too, but inside he was ugly or he’d never have had those chilling, callous memories. And she couldn’t know what memories Mandak was hiding, and that was scary in itself. “It’s all double-talk. How do you expect me to make sense of you?” She went on in a rush, “That doesn’t mean I’m going to let you fool me. What . . . How would you keep Camano away from me?”

“Have you disappear. Create a new identity. You’ve heard of the Witness Protection Program? Something similar to that.”

“It wouldn’t work. They’d find me. My father had the police in his pocket. Camano took over and kept the bribes going.”

“We wouldn’t deal with local authorities. I have someone high up in the U.S. Marshals Service who would make sure that all information was strictly confidential. Josh Dantlow would handle the details of your resettlement himself, and any communication would only be through him . . . or me.”

She gazed at him skeptically.

“You doubt it would work? Dantlow would answer to me. There’s no question that he would betray me.”

“You killed three men tonight. If he’s government, are you saying that he’d turn a blind eye to murder?”

“I’m saying that I have him under control.” He shrugged. “And that he’d probably regard that scum as unimportant in the scheme of things. They all had records a mile long. I did the police a favor in removing them.”

“Your opinion.”

“And yours. You weren’t crying when you saw those bodies. You were shocked. You were a little sick. But all you could think about was that men who were trying to kill you had been taken out. They were the enemy.” He paused. “Like your father, like Rico Camano.”

He was right, she thought wearily. Why was she arguing when she might have been dead except for his lethal intervention? He had been there when she needed him most. She could never trust him. She could never trust anyone. But by that single act of violence, he had formed a chain it would be hard for her to break. “But you’re like Camano. You’re like my father. You said yourself that you were going to use me.” She glared at him. “How? I won’t do it if there’s any way I can get out of it. Would you beat me? Would you kill me if I learn too much?”

“A beautiful young girl like you? What a waste that would be.”

“You didn’t answer me.”

“No, but I’ve told you that I’m giving you your chance to save yourself.” He added, “And I’ll promise to make sure that you’ll be safe until you’re ready for me. That will probably be at least a few years.” He smiled. “After all, it would be to my advantage to keep Camano at bay and you alive. As you pointed out, you’re no good to me if I can’t use you.”

“Promises? I can’t trust your word. I don’t know anything about you.”

“You’ll have the opportunity to learn more. Once I have you settled, I’ll be visiting you frequently.”

“No! I want you to leave me alone.”

He didn’t answer.

No, of course, he wouldn’t. He had told her he was in control of the situation, and he was manipulating her into a position where he’d remain in control. “What . . . would you do with me?”

“Find you a safe place, surround you with safe people, let you grow and learn.”

“It sounds too . . . good,” she said doubtfully. “Where do you fit in?”

“Oh, I’m a very important part of the picture. I guard your body, and I give you gifts that only I can provide.” He smiled. “Because I can teach you how to block those memories assaulting you and push them away to some extent. It’s one of my more freakish talents. In some cases, I can also create a complete barrier and make you unable to read some of the people surrounding you so that you can have a few normal relationships.”

Her eyes widened. “You could do that?”

He nodded. “My pleasure. I thought you’d like that.”

Like? It would seem like a miracle to her. To reach out and touch and not have the poison of being thought strange or having everyone

afraid of her. “It’s been . . . a long time. Not since everything went wrong when I was a kid.”

And he had probed and studied her and decided that this was an offer she couldn’t refuse. The idea that he was right and that she desperately wanted what he said he could give her made her suddenly angry. “You’re probably lying.”

“I’m not lying,” he said. “I promise you.”

“How do I know that? You’re setting all of this up and expecting me to go along with it. You can go to hell,” she said defiantly. “I’ll do what I please.”

He smiled faintly. “And you’ll be pleased to go along with the plan at least in the beginning. The Witness Protection Program is eminently respectable and will give you the opportunity to take it on the lam if you begin to feel threatened. I’ll have Dantlow give you impeccable references to verify his identity. On the other hand, it may be the only sure way to save your life. True?”

So true that it was filling her with desperation and panic. She had no money and no friends. She wasn’t afraid to go out on her own, but she knew that the odds would be against her. And she would *not* let Camano kill her.

“It . . . might be true,” she said reluctantly.

He nodded. “Then you agree.”

She was silent, considering if she had any other choices. “Temporarily. Don’t expect it to last.”

He chuckled. “God, you’re stubborn. And what a firecracker. Stubborn and full of anger and fire.” His smile faded. “But who could blame you? Defense mechanisms all the way.”

“You’re talking like one of those doctors again. Are you sure that you’re—”

“Very sure.” He was putting out the campfire. “And now that we’re on the same page, let’s get the hell out of here. I had to take the time to bind that wound and come to terms with you. But I want to be over the Kentucky border by dawn.”

“What’s in Kentucky?”

“An airport at Louisville and a meeting with Josh Dantlow.”

She stiffened. “You made an appointment with him before you talked to me?”

“Yes, and save the complaints. Time was important. You’ll have a lot more to be pissed off about before this is over.” He reached down and half pulled, half lifted her to her feet. “Can you walk?”

“Yes.” Her knees were shaking. She took a tentative step forward. “Give me a minute.”

“Screw it. Time’s still important.” He lifted her in his arms and headed for his car, parked by the road. “There’s one other thing that I have to tell you.” He was looking straight ahead. “Dantlow will ask you if you want to include any other family members in the Witness Protection Program. He’ll ask about your mother. I didn’t tell him that she wouldn’t be acceptable.” He smiled crookedly. “I didn’t know myself. But you’ll have to do it now.”

Pain. Sadness. Not acceptable? Who would ever believe that beautiful Gina wouldn’t be welcomed anywhere . . .

“Teresa?” He was looking down at her. “It has to be done. If it’s true that she betrayed you to Camano. Are you certain?”

She didn’t answer.

“Teresa.”

“I’m certain.” She cleared her throat. “I didn’t want to believe it, but no one else knew I was here. I know she didn’t want to do it. He probably lied to her. My mother knows she has to do what Camano wants

her to do. She was always saying that we were both weak and had to obey if we were going to survive.” She could feel the tears sting her eyes. “And I knew it was coming. At my father’s funeral I could see it . . .”

“See what?”

“My mother. Camano. They were smiling at each other. She was remembering how much she liked being the queen that my father had made her. The fancy resorts, the designer clothes, the respect and fear she could sense in all the people around her when she was with my father. It was her whole life, and I could see that I wasn’t important in comparison. It was only the power and the glamour she’d had as his wife. Now Camano has the power.” She closed her eyes. “And I knew that she’d reach out and take Camano if she could get him. It would be her way to survive. I prayed she wouldn’t.” She whispered, “How I prayed . . .”

“She’s his mistress now?”

“I guess so. Anyone would want her. She’s so beautiful. I always thought she was like a wonderful butterfly.”

“And evidently with a soul that was not at all beautiful. And certainly not wonderful to you.”

“She never hurt me. Not like my father. She’d smile whenever she saw me. She even brought me presents sometimes.” She opened her eyes. “She dazzled me. She dazzled everyone. So beautiful . . .”

“You’ll be more beautiful in a few years. All her glamour and with character, too.”

She shook her head. “You’re crazy.”

“And you have a softness toward your mother that could be fatal.” He had reached the car and was putting her down on the passenger side. “You can’t have any contact with her.”

“I know. I’m not stupid, Mandak. Camano might force her to tell him where I am.” She reached out to steady herself as he opened the car

door. "I knew when Tanton and the others came for me that I couldn't trust her to save me. I have to look out for myself."

"Right. And you may see a beautiful butterfly, but I'm seeing a prime bitch." He settled her in the seat and fastened her seat belt. "Good ride to her, Allie."

She frowned, puzzled. "Allie?"

He reached out and touched her hair. "Such pretty dark curls. It shines in the moonlight. It's a shame we'll have to tint it, but it's too eye-catching."

"Allie?" she repeated.

He nodded. "Get used to it. No more Teresa Casali. She's gone forever. You're Allie Girard."

Before she could answer, he'd slammed the car door and was running around to the driver's seat.

Gone forever. No more Teresa Casali.

The words repeated over and over in her mind as he started the car and drove onto the road.

Loneliness . . . and relief.

"I was wondering how you'd take it." Mandak's gaze was on her face. "First shock and then . . .?"

"I can start over. No one will know I'm . . . weird. Fresh start. I can make my life what I choose." She grimaced. "If I can keep from getting killed."

"Not quite a fresh start. I'll still be in the picture."

"For the time being."

He smiled. "And I can see you're already plotting on how to rid yourself of me."

"It's possible." She lifted her chin and stared at him challengingly. "If I don't find a reason to use you as you say you're going to use me."

He chuckled. “I look forward to watching you make the attempt, Allie.”

“Allie,” she repeated, trying to get used to the sound of it. “What was the last name?”

“Girard.”

She leaned back in the seat, her gaze on the darkness beyond the windshield. She could rid her life of that darkness. She could turn her back on all the ugliness. She could pretend to—no, she could teach herself to not let herself see what she should not see. If she was strong enough, determined enough, she’d be able to do it. She might even take Mandak up on his offer to help her conquer that helplessness that had made those years a nightmare. Why not? He’d made no secret that she was only a means to some complex, shadowy end to him. He had said use him, and she should have no compunction about doing it. Not if it meant that life could be different for her.

Teresa Casali was gone, never to return. Only this new, strange person was left to reach out and take hold and shape the world to suit herself.

A person named Allie Girard . . .