

Chapter 1

Why do things have to change? No matter how well you plan – life sometimes has other ideas. My life has become a series of abandonment – relinquishment of career, rejection of love, and forfeiture of dreams.

It was never my intention to be a victim of a serial killer – twice. Once as an FBI agent and then again a few weeks ago. The Jackal had come back into my life to continue the game he had started so many years ago. I never thought I'd be divorced from Matthew. We were in love from the moment we first met. But that bond hadn't held strong when the Jackal kidnapped me and left me in a ditch – raped and gutted, causing the death of our unborn child. Then William picked up the pieces of my shattered heart. I treasured that relationship but then rejected it and walked away.

I abandoned everything – husband, FBI career, and lover to follow my family's tradition and become the chief of police of Arroyo. Never in any of my wildest dreams did I ever contemplate that I would jump in front of the Jackal's bullet meant for William or rekindle our love affair.

This morning, I stand by the window in my hospital room and watch the trees outside. It seems as if the leaves have turned from bright green to shades of orange, red, and yellow in just the last week. The wind gusted and a handful of leaves fluttered to the ground. As fall slid away, winter threatened to arrive. I don't like change, in the seasons or my life.

My dad used to tell me, "Change is good, Connie. Things that stay the same, stagnate and die."

But there have been too many changes and for a moment, I would like something to remain constant. So, is starting up with William a way to find a constant in my life? I wondered.

My affair with William Carlotti, an FBI profiler, began for all the wrong reasons. Sure, he was handsome and sexy, with sparkling green eyes and the longest lashes I had ever seen on a man. But that wasn't what attracted me to him. Matthew, my husband, had abandoned and hurt me, so I struck back by using William. He loved and wanted me, so it was easy to step into his arms. And just as easy to walk away from him when my mom got sick and I needed to go home.

Then the Jackal came to Arroyo and kidnapped William. I had convinced myself that finding him was important because he was the one who found me when I was taken. But deep down, was it more than that?

I leaned my forehead against the window, pulled in the coolness from outside, and spotted him sliding out of his shiny red Nissan 350Z convertible. His attire consisted of a pair of black slacks, crisply ironed red cotton shirt, and leather jacket with a red plaid scarf tucked under its lapels. Mr. GQ – he looked like he had stepped right off the cover of their magazine. A smile spread over my face and warmth through my body, just like it always did when I saw him. But is that love? I wondered.

He strolled across the courtyard, stopping twice to nod, smile, and speak to people. So self-assured and confident, I've never seen him hesitate about anything.

I got back into bed and waited the few minutes before he strolled into my room. He carried a stuffed Dalmatian dog, a dozen yellow and red balloons, and a bouquet of yellow daisies. The smile on his face lit up the room and my heart.

“What's all this for?” I asked.

“The balloons to make you smile, the stuffed animal to keep you company when I'm not here, and the flowers because the little old lady at the gift shop said to get them.”

“Well, she was right. I love yellow daisies.”

William added the yellow daisies to the red roses he had brought yesterday. Now the balloons and the flowers were color coordinated. They looked good together. He tied the balloons to my bed and handed me the stuffed animal. It was soft and very cuddly.

“Thanks,” I said and gave it a big hug and kiss right on its nose.

“Hey, where’s mine?”

I motioned with my finger for him to come closer. His smile broadened as he leaned toward me. When our lips met, a jolt of lightning sent my heart rate to the moon.

When he pulled away, I wasn’t sure who was more out of breath, him or me.

“When are you scheduled to be released?”

“I don’t know.” I took a deep breath to settle my pulse and breathing.

“It’s been over a year since we’ve shared the same bed, Constance. I don’t think I can wait,” he said. “Move over.”

“What?” My heart spiked with a multitude of emotions – fear of discovery, desire for the man, and apprehension of renewing an old relationship that hadn’t worked the first time.

His eyes glistened and he winked at me. Then he stuck a chair under the door handle and climbed in bed with me. The bed was too small, my chest still hurt from the surgery to remove the bullet, and someone tried to open the door twice, but it still felt wonderful.

Afterwards, William and I lay in the bed together, our legs intertwined and my head on his chest. He pushed a loose strand of hair behind my ears. “God, I love you Constance.”

“I heard that someplace,” I said with a laugh, but didn’t repeat it back to him.

He kissed me on top of my head, “It’s okay, Constance. You love me; it will just take some time to get you to say it when you’re not being threatened by a serial killer.”

“But...,” I started.

He put his finger over my lips. “No, stop thinking so much. Let’s just take it one day at a time.”

When I left the hospital several days later, William moved into my house.

“I can do my profiling from anywhere,” he told me.

It was wonderful to wake up with him in my bed, and enjoy the skyrockets that came every time he touched me. The holidays were especially nice. On Halloween I sat at my house and handed out candy rather than being on duty to deal with the teenagers who threw eggs at passing cars and rang doorbells and ran. My second-in-command, Sergeant Bob Linden called me almost every day for advice or to ask when I would be back to work. If the doctor would have let me, I’d have gone right away. I hated listening to Bob whine.

On Thanksgiving, William cooked a traditional turkey dinner for my mom, granddad, and me. My mom loves William and tells him so at every opportunity. Personally, I think she loves his cooking more since, according to her, the chefs at her senior complex couldn’t cook their way out of a paper bag. She went home with enough leftovers to feed her and several of her friends for an entire week.

After six weeks, I finally went back to work as the police chief of Arroyo. It wasn’t really a very demanding job, so I had plenty of time to play house with William. Christmas was a repeat of Thanksgiving, except William cooked crab cioppino. His sauce contained large quantities of scallops, lobster, and huge shrimp. Now my granddad loves him too.

In late January he went to New York for a few days to help the FBI’s Behavioral Unit profile a serial killer. When he came home, we resumed our daily routine.

I would get up in the morning and exercise. This was quite new for me because William was a fabulous cook. Eating three real meals a day was starting to put a considerable amount of

weight on me. Of course, he had to totally restock my kitchen when he first moved in. I only owned two frying pans and a small sauce pan while William used at least ten pans to make any meal.

William comes from money and made his own first million at eighteen years old. His net worth is probably larger than the national debt, so when he asked if he could upgrade my old country kitchen to a modern facility, I had let him. He had all brand new appliances brought in and installed an island with eight gas burners and a fan that raised and lowered. But I drew the line at stainless steel cabinets; they just wouldn't go with the quaint and aging house.

Each morning, after exercising, he would make me breakfast before I went off to the station. He worked on his cases at home, then brought lunch to the station. He always made plenty, so the station was a very popular place at lunchtime. Normally everyone flocked to the Get Away Diner for lunch. But the owner and chef, Ron, had turned out to be the serial killer known as the Jackal. William had shot and killed him after I took the bullet meant for William. The diner had been closed ever since so there wasn't a decent place to eat in the town, except William's lunch.

The entire town, especially my officers, loved William, so why couldn't I say the words? Each time I tried, the words got stuck in my throat and just wouldn't come out. Something held me back, but I had no clue what it might be. Maybe I didn't love him? Could that be the real issue?

I would normally work until five, close up my office, and go home. William would be on the porch with my calico cat, Cheezy, in his lap. She wasn't much of a people cat, but she loved William too. Then after a scrumptious dinner, I would help him on a few of his cases, and we'd go to bed early. Eventually I even got to sleep. The perfect life!

But today, the porch is empty again. The barren trees in the lot across the street from my house are covered in little green buds. It won't be long before they explode into beautiful pink blossoms. A clear sign that spring approaches. William has been in Dallas for the last two weeks. They've got a killer who butchered three people and he went to help with the investigation. He calls every night, but it isn't the same. Cheezy jumped up on my lap to knead her claws into my thigh.

"You miss him too, don't you?" I stroked the cat's fur and she raised her head to push on my hand.

"Even you love William, don't you girl?" I asked and she purred as if to answer my question.

Then she turned her head and stared at me as if to say, "Of course and why don't you?"

I took a deep breath, let it out slowly and wished I knew the answer to that question. The clock on the mantle of my fireplace gonged ten times. Usually William called before this hour. Has that changed too? Are things slipping away? I wondered.

Just then my phone rang. I smiled. But the caller ID was for my lead officer, Sergeant Bob Linden, not William.

"It's kind of late to call, Bob," I told him.

"I know, Chief, but we've got a situation down at the high school."

"Call Trent. He was just taken off nights and promoted to School Resource Officer. Have him deal with the graffiti on the gym's wall."

"It's not that, Chief. There's a body."

My heart skipped a few beats with surprise. A body at the high school was certainly out of the ordinary for Arroyo. Normally, Arroyo was a small quiet town, but with Ron as the Jackal

last fall, we have surpassed our share of murder and excitement for the next decade or two. But then I thought the janitor probably had a heart attack, so I should be home by eleven.

I gave a short laugh and said, "I'm on my way."

I got into my town-issued white Ford Explorer and drove toward the high school. The night was warm and clear, another indication spring was arriving. Sergeant Bob Linden is my lead officer and partner when we go out on a call. He had been my dad's partner before my dad was killed two years ago. I thought he should have been made chief, but he didn't want the job because he didn't like to deal with the personal problems that sometimes come with the office. Being chief is part employee relations, part family counselor, part minister, and occasionally even part cop.

Ten minutes later, I pulled up in the drop off zone of the high school. Bob's squad car was parked in front, along with Principal Adam Reynold's red sedan, Jay Prescott's little black Porsche, and Doc Stoler's white 4x4 truck. It must be Friday night poker and Adam's turn to host. His wife, Carol, insisted that the boys play somewhere else, so they usually ended up at the high school.

I parked my car next to Bob's and walked toward the only building lit up with lights – the gym. The double doors were slightly ajar, so I opened them and walked in. The four men stood in the center of the basketball court, huddled in a circle talking. None of them looked my way as I headed across the gym floor.

Jay Prescott, our local mystery writer, was clad in his standard attire – black from head to toe. Doc Slotter's six foot five inch frame towered over the group, wearing a white lab coat over khaki pants and blue polo shirt. A few inches shorter than the Doc, Adam, in striped pants and a yellow golf shirt, looked as if he were ready to tee off, which was quite a feat since the nearest

golf course was in Parsonville. Bob stood in the middle, his portly stature and beer belly barely contained in a blue T-shirt embossed with his girlfriend's business logo – Shirley's Salon.

As I got closer, I cleared my throat. All four men jerked their heads around in unison. Doc and Jay looked as they always did, steady and composed, but Adam was a shade of green I hadn't seen since the local bar decided to make green beer for St. Patrick's Day.

Bob walked up to me, his face drawn and tight. "It's bad, Chief."

I nodded and glanced toward the body. "Who called it in?"

"Earl."

"The night custodian?"

"Yes." Bob stepped aside and walked with me toward the body. "We were playing poker in the coaches' office since the staff lounge is having the carpet replaced over spring break. Earl knocked on the door and we all walked out to see the body."

"So where is Earl now?" I glanced toward the coaches' office, which was also lit.

"He was so upset, I sent him home."

I sighed deeply. Would I ever teach Bob police procedures? I wondered. "Next time, keep the first on the scene – on the scene, okay?"

"Oh." He frowned. "Okay. He was just so distraught and I knew we'd be able to find him when we wanted to talk to him."

I stepped between Doc and Jay. A man lay in the middle of center court. I put his age at around thirty-six, a few years older than me. He was tall with well-defined muscles that stretched the limit of his black T-shirt. He wore blue jeans and lace-up Nike tennis shoes with no socks. His hands were set on his chest and his legs were crossed at the ankles. He had two visible bullet wounds, one in his forehead and the other a few inches above his hands on his chest. There was a

pile of puke next to the body, probably from the green faced and sweating Adam, but otherwise the gym's floor sparkled with polish.

"The bullet in the head was the kill shot," Doc pointed. "Not much blood associated with the chest wound so his heart had probably stopped when he was shot there."

"Not much blood at all, if you ask me," Jay said. "The crime scenes in my books are a lot bloodier than this."

"That's because he wasn't killed here," I said, then turned to Bob. "Did you call Chief Billings?"

He shook his head and pointed to the floor, "For what? Earl keeps this floor so clean you could eat off of it."

I flipped open my phone and dialed Simon's cell phone. "Because that's what you do when you find a body, Bob."

He answered on the second ring, his voice strained and gruff, "This had better be good, Connie. We just got back from Linda's art exhibit in Portland an hour ago."

"I've got a dead body and need your CSI unit."

He let out a deep breath. "I'll get everyone out of bed. You keep this up and you'll have to get your own unit pretty soon."

"Twice in six months and nothing in the five years before that doesn't warrant my own crime scene unit, Simon. I don't think Mayor Benson or the town council will go for that, especially after all the money I spent on the last case."

Simon laughed, "Yeah, well, forensics always costs money. And Dr. Cain was one very expensive forensic anthropologist."

"Yeah, well, hindsight is twenty-twenty. How long before your team will be here?"

“Sixty to ninety minutes to gather the troops, get the equipment into the truck and drive to Arroyo. Where’s the body?”

“In the high school gym.”

“On the new floor?” Simon’s voice elevated a bit. Parsonville might be bigger than Arroyo but they had one high school, also. Resurfacing a gym floor was expensive.

“Yes.”

“I’ll tell my guys to be careful with the chemicals or you’ll have to re-do the floor.”

“Thanks, Simon.” I put the phone back into its case on my utility belt. “Does anyone recognize this guy?”

All four men shook their heads.

“How does a total stranger get killed in my town and nobody even noticed him?” I asked.

“Well, if you’re right and he wasn’t killed here, then maybe somebody just dumped the body here,” Jay suggested, then wrote something in a notebook.

I put my hand over his. “Let’s keep this out of your book, at least until we find out who killed this guy. And the thought that somebody carried this guy’s dead body through town and nobody noticed doesn’t make me feel any better either.”

Jay put his notebook in the back pocket of his black jeans. “Can I go home?”

“Yes.” Then I turned to Doc and Adam. “Doc, as our coroner, you’ve got to stay. You can have the body after the techs take their pictures.”

Doc nodded.

Adam smiled expectantly, until I continued, “Adam you’ve got to stay too. You’re the principal and I want you to lock up after Simon’s unit is done.”

Adam swallowed and wiped the sweat from his forehead. “Do I have to stay in here?”

“No, you can go to your office and wait. I’ll come and get you when you need to lock up.”

He reached over and squeezed my arm. “Thanks, Chief.” Then tripped twice on his quick dash out the door.

Jay saluted me and walked toward the coaches’ office to collect his winnings and leave.

I turned to Doc, “Can you stay with the body? I want to go and talk to Earl.”

“Sure.” He shrugged. “I have some magazines in my car I can read while I wait and I’ve got my new iPad. It’s so cool. I can pull up any magazine, patient file, or the latest book I’m reading at the push of a button.”

“Always prepared, aren’t you?”

“Of course. I was a Boy Scout, remember? We’re always prepared.”

Doc, Bob, and I walked out of the gym. We waited while Doc got his magazines, iPad, and a camping chair out of the back of his car. He really was prepared.

He must have seen me stare at the chair because he said, “Soccer chair. You never know when you have to watch a game and I hate to sit on the grass.”

I smiled and Bob and I got into my SUV. Earl’s trailer was parked on a plot of land just a mile from the back of the high school and between the elementary and junior high schools. It was convenient to have the school district’s only custodian just five minutes from each of the schools. A few minutes later we pulled up the gravel driveway of Earl’s place.

“The lights are all out, Chief. He’s probably in bed.”

“Perhaps, but I want to know exactly what he saw or didn’t see tonight. It’s fresh in his mind now. Tomorrow, he’ll add or subtract to his story in response to what he thinks I want to hear.”

We got out of the car and walked toward the old single-wide trailer parked in the middle of a small plot of land. The weeds were almost a foot tall, so we walked up the gravel walkway to the trailer. Earl's old rusty pickup truck wasn't parked in the driveway.

I glanced at Bob.

"Earl has a garage in the back where he keeps his truck. He says the kids always sneak onto his property and spray paint the latest class slogan on his truck. It has something to do with pep rallies and points given to each class."

We walked toward the porch. Both steps were broken in several places and held together with silver duct tape. They creaked and shook as I put my weight on them.

"Watch your footing," I told Bob. "These steps don't look very stable."

Bob nodded and followed me.

That was when I noticed the door.

Arroyo's a safe town, but nobody sleeps with their door open