

DARK ALLEY

by Evan Marshall

Chapter One

Anna Winthrop, a section supervisor at the New York City Department of Sanitation's Manhattan Central District 13 garage, was in her office reviewing the number and types of violations summonses issued the previous month, when Kelly Moore, a member of her crew, suddenly appeared in her office doorway. She was breathless, her vivid blue eyes flashing. "Anna, you'd better get out here. Garry and Ernesto are fighting." And she was gone.

As Anna stepped into the cinder-block corridor where all of the garage's offices were located, she saw the two men struggling on the concrete floor in front of a parked collection truck. Garry, grimacing, had Ernesto Balcazar in a chokehold. A few sanitation workers who had not yet started on their routes watched from a safe distance.

Anna marched straight toward the two men and grabbed Garry by the back of his shirt collar. "Let him go."

Garry looked up at her in surprise but didn't let go.

"You're both one minute from losing your jobs," Anna said, and at this Garry loosened his hold on Ernesto, who gasped and scrambled free.

"You're crazy, man!" Ernesto spat, breathing hard, his short, solidly built body poised for more fighting.

But Garry just stood silently, staring down at the floor.

"Now what was this about?" Anna demanded, running her fingers back through her shoulder-length ash-blond hair. Neither man responded. "You two ought to be ashamed of yourselves. You're acting like children. Now get going on your routes. You're late."

Ernesto scowled and headed for the truck where his collection partner, quiet gray-haired Pablo Rodriguez, stood waiting.

Garry turned to Anna, his gray eyes intense, the expression on his handsome face saying he wanted to tell her something. But whatever it was, he thought better of it, shaking his head as he walked toward his own partner, Terrence King.

When Anna turned to go back to her office, Kelly was still standing there. "Don't be too hard on Garry, Anna," she pleaded.

It was no secret that Kelly and Garry were dating. Two and a half years ago, before Garry enlisted in the army and was deployed to Iraq, Kelly had had a crush on him. By the time he returned she had decided life was too short and quickly made her move, letting him know in no uncertain terms that she was attracted to him.

But while Garry was gone, Ernesto had started flirting with Kelly. He'd never stopped.

"Garry's just being protective of me," Kelly said, following Anna back to her office.

At her door, Anna turned. "He can be protective without trying to kill Ernesto. What's going on with Garry, anyway? Lately he's been so . . . dark."

Kelly gave a troubled nod. "You noticed it, too, huh? I don't know. Something's bothering him but he won't say what. He says maybe someday he can tell me, but not

now.”

Brianna Devlin, Kelly’s collection partner, appeared at the end of the corridor, her hands on her ample hips. “You comin’?”

“Mm,” Kelly said, her expression thoughtful, and followed Brianna toward their truck.

Anna returned to her desk. She knew she should write up Garry and Ernesto, but she wouldn’t. Fortunately, neither Hal Redmond nor Gerry Licari, the garage’s other two section supervisors, had witnessed the fight. It wasn’t that Anna had a soft spot for Ernesto, who was rarely anything but sour and unfriendly. But poor Garry had done not one but two tours of duty in Iraq, a total of thirty months. Wouldn’t anyone be troubled after that? Yes, she would definitely cut him some slack.

She had finished with her review of the previous month’s summonses and was starting on some tonnage reports when her phone rang. It was her older brother, Will.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said, “how’s the trash biz?”

She smiled. “Oh, you know. I’m always dealing with a lot of garbage.”

“Yeah, me too!” he said with a laugh. Will was an investment banker. “You OK?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. How about Lisa and Nina?”

“Fine. Nina’s decided she’s the kindergarten teacher.”

“A woman after my own heart. So what’s up?”

“Have you talked to Mom and Dad lately?” he asked, sounding uncomfortable.

“Not for about a week, actually. I should give them a call.”

“You’re going to have make two calls.”

“Come again?”

“They’ve had a tremendous fight, the biggest yet. I called last night and Mom answered. She said Dad had done something unforgivable but wouldn’t say any more.”

“What could he have done?”

“No idea. Will you come out there with me on Sunday?”

“Do you really think that’s a good idea?”

“I do. Mom needs some help. I could hear it in her voice. Maybe we can make peace.”

Anna and her boyfriend, midtown patrol officer Santos Reyes, had planned to go to a crafts fair in Greenwich Village on Sunday. “Would it be OK if Santos came along? If he wants to, of course.”

“Sure . . . though I don’t know that he’ll want to. It’s liable to get pretty ugly.”

“That’s OK. He’s a cop. It can’t be worse than what he’s seen.”

“I suppose not,” Will said, not sounding too sure. “I’d pick you up, but I’ve got a meeting with a client that morning, not far from Mom and Dad’s. Can I meet you at the house? Say, ten o’clock?”

“Sure. See you then.”

She returned to her tonnage reports. A few minutes later her phone rang. “Anna, it’s Allen.” Allen Schiff was the district supervisor. “Can you come out to the entrance area, please?”

She found Allen at the front gate with a sturdily built young man who looked around thirty. He had light brown hair in a buzz cut and startlingly blue eyes that he turned searchingly on Anna.

“This is Ron Carson,” Allen told her. “He’s looking for Garry.”

“I’m Garry’s supervisor. He’s out on his route now. I don’t expect him back for a

while.”

“When?”

“Probably around one. Do you want to come back then?”

Uneasily Ron looked up and down the street. “Maybe. Can you do me a favor? Tell him Ronny C was looking for him, ask him to call me?” He took a matchbook from his pocket and jotted down a phone number.

“Sure, no problem,” Anna said to Ron, who turned and walked away. She and Allen both watched him until he turned the corner and was out of sight.

“My guess is they knew each other in the army,” Allen said. “You see that haircut? The way he walked?”

Anna nodded thoughtfully. “Why do you think he was acting so spooky?”

“Who knows?” Allen turned to reenter the garage. “These poor kids, it’s a wonder they can function at all after what they’ve been through.”

Inside, Kelly was waiting to speak to Anna. “Who was that?”

“Ron Carson. He’s looking for Garry.”

“Did he say why?”

Anna shrugged, shook her head, and returned to her office. After half an hour she had finished her tonnage reports and was turning her attention to a possible revision of cleaning and collection routes when her phone rang again.

“Anna, it’s Terrence.”

“What’s up?”

“Can you come over to New Amsterdam Mews?”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“I’d rather tell you when you get here.”

She sighed. If he wasted her time he’d be sorry. In the corridor she passed Hal Redmond and told him she’d be right back. Then she got into her white department car and left the garage through the chain-link gate onto West Forty-Third Street. She drove four blocks west, north on Twelfth Avenue, and right onto West Forty-Eighth Street. There was Terrence and Garry’s truck, parked halfway down the block on the right. She pulled up behind it. Terrence was standing on the sidewalk waiting for her.

“So what’s going on?” she said, getting out.

At fifty-four, Terrence was the oldest worker on Anna’s crew and also the most senior. He’d seen a lot, yet he always maintained a deadpan, inscrutable expression. Now, for the first time in Anna’s memory, he looked worried.

He came up to her, one gloved hand gripping the other. “It’s the weirdest thing. Come on, I’ll show you.”

She followed him across the street to the entrance of New Amsterdam Mews, a narrow brick courtyard that ran perpendicular to the street. On the right stood a row of stables converted long ago into quaint, one-story apartments; on the left, the blank side of a nine-story apartment building. Terrence walked to the end of the shady courtyard, stopping at the end of the apartment building and pointing to something.

Anna looked. On the patchy grass behind the building sat four full garbage bags.

“What?” she said, losing patience. “Terrence, what is it?”

“Garry came back here, Anna. I figure these are the first bags he grabbed.”

Against the back of the building was a large heap of more full garbage bags.

Something on the ground caught Anna’s eye. She bent to pick it up. It was the face of a little girl, carefully cut from a photograph. She turned it over. On the back

someone had written HLBC. Absently she put it in her pocket. “All right,” she said to Terrence, playing along. “So where is he?”

He shrugged. “He’s gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

He threw out his hands in a helpless shrug. “Gone! He got off the truck, ran in here . . . and never came out.”

She glared at him. “Oh, for Pete’s sake. That’s what you called me over here to tell me? Of course he came out. He’s having a smoke around the corner, or he had to use the bathroom and popped into a Dunkin’ Donuts, or maybe his grandmother called him and he had to help her with something.” Garry lived with his grandmother.

“Well, if he went for a smoke or had to use the bathroom, wouldn’t he be back by now? This was twenty minutes ago. And I never saw him leave. I called his cell phone. He doesn’t answer.”

“Then it’s got to be his grandmother. Hold on.” She brought out her cell and called Kelly. “Have you got a number for Garry’s grandmother?”

“Why?” Kelly asked. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Anna said impatiently, “I just want her number. Do you have it or not?”

“Yes, sure. Hold on.” She gave it to Anna. “Her name is Evelyn.”

“Thanks,” Anna said, and dialed Evelyn Thomason.

“Hello?” came a weak, high-pitched voice.

“Mrs. Thomason, this is Anna Winthrop. I’m Garry’s supervisor at the garage. Is he there, please?”

“Here?” Evelyn sounded bewildered. “Garry’s at work with you. Why would he be here?”

“He . . . seems to have . . . left. We thought maybe you needed him.”

“No . . . I’m fine.”

“Were you aware that he had any appointments today?” It was far-fetched, Anna knew, but possible.

“Appointments? No. Like I said, he’s working.”

“All right, Mrs. Thomason. Thank you.”

“When you find him, ask him to call me, will you?” Evelyn said.

“Of course. Thanks again, ma’am.”

Terrence was staring at her. “So now what do we do?”

“There’s nothing we can do. But I’ll tell you this. When he decides to reappear he’s going to have some major explaining to do. He’s on thin ice already today.”

That was it, she thought—the fight with Ernesto. Garry’s disappearance had to be related to that. After she had told Terrence to continue on his own—an order met with a dark glower—she got back in the car and called Ernesto.

“Yeah, Anna.”

“Ernesto, have you seen Garry?”

“Garry? *Me?*”

“Yes. Have you seen him or not?”

“No, not since I left the garage. Why?”

“Never mind.”

When she got back to the garage, Kelly was waiting for her. “Anna, what’s going on? Why did you want to talk to Garry’s grandmother?”

“I thought she might know where he is.”

Kelly gave a baffled frown. “*Where he is?* He’s on his route, that’s where he is.”

“No, he’s not. Terrence says he went into New Amsterdam Mews to collect the trash bags and never came out. The bags are lying there on the ground, as if he just vanished.”

Kelly’s expression made it clear she thought this was ridiculous. “Of course he didn’t vanish. Obviously he had to go somewhere.”

“OK. Where?”

“I don’t know—maybe he needed to go to the bathroom, or went to buy something to eat, or . . . I don’t know, maybe he wasn’t feeling well.”

“Then why didn’t Terrence see him come out of the mews, why didn’t he tell Terrence where he was going, and why doesn’t he answer his cell?”

Kelly tried the number herself. After a while she switched off her phone. “I’m sure there’s a perfectly reasonable explanation.”

“I hope so. You were just telling me he hasn’t been himself lately.”

Kelly laughed. “I said he hasn’t been himself, not that he’s Houdini.”

But Anna didn’t laugh with her. “Has Garry ever mentioned a friend named Ron Carson? Ronny C? Maybe from Iraq?”

Kelly shook her head. “Why?”

“He came looking for Garry this morning, wanted to talk to him. I told him Garry would be back from his route around one.”

“What did he want?”

“He didn’t say. He just asked me to tell Garry he was here and to call him.”

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By the end of Anna’s shift at two o’clock, Garry had still not reappeared, nor had he called. As Anna passed through the garage’s entrance area, Kelly emerged from the door leading upstairs to the break room, locker rooms, and showers. Their gazes met. Anna smiled. Kelly smiled back, but there was worry in her eyes.

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As Anna finished telling Santos about Garry’s disappearance, Santos took a sip of wine, then set down his glass. “You tried the hospitals?”

She looked at him. “I never thought of that. Of course! He’s hurt himself. He’s in the hospital and can’t communicate with us. You’re so smart.”

The waiter brought their pasta. They were in a little Italian café they liked on Ninth Avenue, around the corner from Anna’s apartment.

“Where did you say he and Terrence were again?”

“West Forty-Eighth Street, between Eleventh and Twelfth avenues.”

He thought for a moment. “Let see . . . the closest hospital is St. Luke’s Roosevelt. Why don’t you see if he’s there.”

She did. He wasn’t. “Now what?” she said, closing her phone.

“Just give it time,” he said, and his handsome face broke into a smile. “Don’t be such a mother hen.”

“He’s on my crew. It’s my job to make sure he’s all right.”

He nodded in concession. “How’s he been lately? You know, his mood.”

“Bad. Something has definitely been bothering him. And this morning he and Ernesto got into a wrestling match.”

“Over Kelly?” He knew about Ernesto’s flirting.

She nodded.

He shrugged, shook his head. "What it needs is time, Anna. It will all sort itself out. People don't just . . . vanish."

After dinner he walked her to her apartment building on West Forty-Third Street between Ninth and Tenth avenues. At the steps, they kissed. A *tsking* noise came from the direction of the building. When they looked up, Iris Dovner, Anna's difficult downstairs neighbor, stood in the open doorway, scowling. She wore a voluminous yellow muumuu. Her fluffy white hair was tied up in a matching yellow kerchief. "You should know better," she said to Santos, taking in his uniform. Then she turned and went back inside.

They burst out laughing.

"If she only knew you were staying over," Anna said as they entered the foyer and started up the long stairway to the second floor.

"You think she doesn't know?" Santos said, and in response came the sound of Mrs. Dovner's apartment door slamming.

They were still laughing as Anna closed the apartment door and put her arms around his neck, drawing him down to kiss her. But midway through the kiss he drew back. "Hello? Anna, are you in there? I think I lost you."

Her face was worried. "I'm sorry, I just can't stop thinking about Garry."

"Let me try St. Luke's again," he said, "see if there's been any sign of him. While I do that, you can try his grandmother again."

Evelyn Thomason told Anna that Garry had never come home. Anna promised to call her with any news. When Santos hung up the phone, he was shaking his head. "Nothing yet. I'll try again later."

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"Santos. Santos, wake up." Anna trailed a fingernail lightly across his smooth, muscular chest.

His eyes popped open. "What is it," he said with a slow smile. "You feeling frisky?"

"No," she replied, and his smile turned into a frown of disappointment. "You said you would make some calls again in the morning. About Garry. It's six o'clock."

"Oh, yeah, right." He sat up, rubbing his eyes, then reached for his cell phone on the night table.

While he was calling, she went into the kitchen and made coffee. When she carried it into the bedroom ten minutes later, he was putting down the phone receiver with a grave expression.

"What is it?"

"The body of a young man has been found." He met her gaze. "In New Amsterdam Mews."