

## July

“Trouble?” the voice in his ear asked.

The man scrutinized the small cemetery with an experienced eye. Flowers in varying degrees of decomposition huddled next to weathered gravestones like scented guardians. A nondescript glass vase holding a large bunch of cream-colored roses graced the base of the fresh grave. Elegant but not conspicuous. Edges of the royal blue canvas canopy sheltering the burial site snapped with a sudden gust of wind, like a crack from a pistol.

Scanning the manicured grounds, his gaze skimmed rows of carved headstones standing like sentinel chess pieces, interrupted only by the occasional wide trunk of decades-old trees and surrounded by a token chain-link fence that any curious six-year-old child could easily scale. Cars lined the streets nearby, along with several large white vans bearing television logos claiming prime spots.

He moved his head slightly in a negative gesture, murmuring, “Clear.”

Hands clasped together, he massaged his tingling palm—the remnant of an old injury poorly healed. At barely fifty, he was far too young to be troubled by arthritis—it was an old man’s disease. He mostly ignored his aching hand, with the only concession being an almost unconscious gentle kneading of the painful digits. The others assumed the habit was born of boredom. He let them think that. Better not to have a known weakness.

“Here they come,” the voice said.

A gleaming black hearse pulled through the cemetery gates, tires crunching loudly on the gravel road. As the hearse passed, the man bowed his head, made the sign of the cross, and said a quick prayer appealing to the Virgin Mary to have mercy on the deceased’s soul. From behind dark sunglasses, he located the car with tinted windows and nodded. Two men, impeccably dressed in dark suits, left the backseat. At his signal, they split up to mingle among the mourners.

Throughout the short ceremony, he maintained his vantage point beneath a maple, waiting. Watching. Searching for the perfect opportunity. Things looked quiet. Far from being reassuring, the sound of silence sharpened his concern, for that was often how it was before the enemy struck.

His gaze skimmed the few policemen patrolling the event before dismissing them as insignificant. They were book-learned, not bred protectors. Crowd control was all they were good for. He smirked as an officer argued with an aggressive reporter.

Returning to business, he made eye contact with each colleague, then sought out his target. Gianna Donnatelli stood, head bowed, with one bare hand lovingly caressing the lustrous wood coffin. A classic Italian beauty, Gianna wore her long, dark hair pulled away from her face with a large tortoiseshell clip, and she shielded her brown eyes with oversized sunglasses. No black hat. No mourning veil. Interesting, how she courageously bared her face to the world yet secreted her eyes, the window to her soul.

Though her coloring blatantly announced her Italian heritage, Gianna's petite stature and delicate features were a legacy from her maternal Irish grandmother. The combination resulted in a striking woman. Relatives and close friends, whose faces—if not names—he'd memorized, pressed close, unwittingly shielding her from danger.

Many people had turned out on this hot summer day to pay their last respects to Gianna's father. He must have been well loved and honored because mourners often attended masses and then bypassed the graveside ceremony. Not today. Cars sporting little black funeral flags surrounded the cemetery, choking local traffic as hundreds of people swarmed the corner graveyard.

He watched Gianna with an intensity born of years of dedication, diverting his attention only momentarily to scan the crowd around her or to relocate his men maintaining the perimeter. His thumb moved across the palm of his left hand with increasing force. His job would have been much easier had he been allowed closer, but the Don had been clear on that point. They were to remain inconspicuous.

The loquacious priest was winding down when Gianna broke away from the coffin. With a sob, she pressed a fist to her mouth and pushed her way through the mourners. People followed, offering sympathy, but she brushed them aside and sprinted the last several yards to the waiting limo.

A nearby police officer opened the car door for her, then headed off the nearest reporter attempting to capitalize on the emotions clearly displayed on the distraught young woman's face. Soon the other relatives joined Gianna, and the limo pulled away from the curb.

"Ready?" the voice in his ear asked.

With one last look around, he stepped away from the huge tree trunk and nodded. She was safe. For now.

## Chapter 1

*Two months earlier*

“If I had a murder to report, would you speak to me then?” Gianna folded her arms across her chest and aimed an expression of amused exasperation at the man’s chunky back.

“I’d give you a form and tell you to get in line,” the officer said, turning around. “What’s it today, Ms. Donnatelli?”

“Crime Stopper’s log and pictures.” She handed him a manila envelope and pointed to a shot of a teenage boy leaning into a car, passing the driver a packet. “He’s using the house to sell drugs.”

The officer leafed through the photos, settling on a shot of a group of teenagers perched on a rusting, bronze Buick like harbor seals sunning themselves on a big rock. He grunted. “The Avengers. Nice neighbors ya got there.”

Her expression lightened. “You know them? Great. Get rid of them.”

He chuckled and dropped the photos on his desk. “It’s not that easy.” He patted the crime logs and pictures. “This helps. I’ll try to get a health inspector out there to nose around.”

A health inspector didn’t seem like very forceful recourse to oust a gang of teenage delinquents, but Gianna had read about an inspector forcing a neighbor to evict a drug-dealing tenant, and in several other instances, the city had seized property and boarded it up on an inspector’s recommendation. It was a first step.

She pointed to the pictures of the kids lounging on the abandoned car, drinking beer and passing joints. “Can you get rid of the car too? Some drunk dumped it on my friend’s lawn a month ago.”

He pursed his lips and shook his head. “Sorry, can’t help you there. If it’s not on public property, we can’t do anything about it.”

Detroit consistently topped the list of America’s most dangerous cities. In a city with more than fourteen thousand annual violent crimes, 16 percent unemployment, 36 percent poverty, and more than seventy thousand abandoned buildings to harbor dog packs, criminals, and druggies...one more abandoned car was hardly going to make the top of the priority list. But still, Gianna had to try.

“It’s been there for weeks. The kids hang out in it smoking and drinking.”

“If it’s not on public property—”

“You can’t touch it,” Gianna finished for him. She raised an eyebrow. “But if it were on public property?”

“We’d have it towed.”

“O—kay,” she drawled, handing him the rest of the file. “How long before you can do something?”

He took a deep breath and winced. “It may be a week or more. I’ll try to get someone out sooner.”

“The police have come out several times in the past couple of weeks for gunshots fired.”

The understaffed, overworked police were busy dealing with murders, gang wars, shootings, stabbings, robberies, and drug overdoses, so Gianna and her neighbors decided to take control of their small section of purgatory by instituting a neighborhood watch. It was a start.

A frown of doubt creased his forehead. “We’ll get to it as soon as possible.”

“I know.” Which meant within the month—if they were lucky. She swallowed her impatience and pressed on. “It’s just that my elderly friend and her grandson live next door.”

He looked torn. He liked her and wanted to help—she knew he did. It was just that dealing with doped-up kids with guns was about the most hated job in the precinct. She’d heard that the night shift actually drew straws before responding to calls in the neighborhood. Gianna hardened her resolve. They needed help, and if she wasn’t a loud, persistent, squeaky wheel, her neighborhood would never get any grease.

“Maybe one of the units could swing by once in a while until this thing is cleared up,” he offered reluctantly.

Gianna rewarded him with a bright smile. “Thank you.”

He shook his head. “I’m not promising anything.”

“Thanks anyway,” she said, knowing her confidence would either inspire him or frighten him; either way she’d probably get quicker results.

He scribbled a note, then raised one eyebrow. “Heard you’re fixin’ up that old school on Dickerson.”

She smiled proudly. “Yup. We’ll be ready to move in pretty soon.”

“Computer business?”

“Kind of.”

“Bringing in lots of expensive equipment?”

The inquiry coming from anybody else would have made her nervous, but Gianna had worked with the Detroit police on permits, the clinic, the neighborhood watch; she trusted this officer. “Some.”

“That’s a dicey area.” He frowned and stroked his chin thoughtfully. “You got bars for the windows? Gated parking lot? Surveillance cameras?”

She shook her head.

His frown deepened, reminding her of a snarling Rottweiler. Big, black, and thick-necked, ready to defend his territory. “Better think twice ’bout that. You need a good security system and a night watchman too.”

“I’ll mention it to my partners.” She knew he meant well, but he was being overprotective. Gianna and her partners had been a part of the community for a couple of years now. They belonged. She didn’t want to undo all the good they had accomplished or risk destroying the community’s trust by building walls around their new offices. They’d be fine.

Gianna thought about how the abandoned Buick was an oasis for the neighborhood delinquents. Bars on the first floor windows, something decorative and tasteful, might be a good idea.

“Good luck. You’ll need it,” he muttered, forcing his lips to smile at her cheery wave. The happy optimists were always the ones to get hurt. Their naive natures guaranteed it. Street predators effortlessly gobbled them up like the pills they peddled, making his job that much harder. And like addicts, there always seemed to be one more do-gooder ready to step in and take the place of the fallen one. Mostly, the officer wished the damn idealists would stay safe in the suburbs, far out of his jurisdiction.

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Unlocking her car, Gianna slid into the driver’s seat, then headed for I-94 and her father’s house. As she passed the community center where she volunteered Tuesday afternoons, a dozen or so kids played basketball in the fenced area outside the red brick building. Boys of all ages played on both teams, but the teens clearly dominated the court. A couple of young girls threw stones and skipped across a bright chalk hopscotch board to the side of the court, while other children pumped their sturdy legs, propelling themselves higher and higher in the air on the ancient steel swing set in the corner of the yard.

As a gang prevention program, neighborhood adults volunteered to supervise this safe place so that kids whose parents worked could stay there after school instead of being home alone or hanging with a gang.

Recognizing a few of the teens she tutored in math, Gianna executed a quick U-turn and pulled up to the curb. She rolled the car window down, smiled, and beckoned to Martin.

“Hey, Gianna. Wazzup?” The kids gathered round to lean against the twelve-foot chain link fence.

“I need a little help. Grab Nick and Jamal. Sign out. I’ll have you guys back in twenty.” Before it grew dark and the streets became even more precarious.

“Sure thing.” The boys jogged through the center and piled into her Mustang. Gianna pulled her seat forward to give them more legroom, but the two in the back were still folded in tightly. “Where we goin’?”

Gianna smiled and pulled away from the curb. “To get rid of some garbage.”

“Wh-a-t?” Jamal groaned.

Martin watched her warily. “You ain’ gonna get us in trouble, are you?”

Gianna pulled up outside Martin’s grandma’s house. Getting out of the car, she flashed him a grin. “Not if we don’t get caught.”

A quick look up and down the street assured her that no kids lurked behind the house or on the street corner. Her timing was perfect. Although the neighborhood appeared one light step away from a ghost town, Gianna felt the neighbors’ watchful stares. Most of them knew her, but they wouldn’t chance leaving the safety of their homes this late in the afternoon to chat or help.

Those with their children safely home would retreat to the security of the back of the house. Away from the street and oft-times flying bullets, they tried to live a normal life— cooking dinner, helping with homework, and watching TV. In the dark of the night, they did their best to blend into the decaying surroundings, like chameleons using camouflage to protect themselves from predators.

Gianna hopped over the shards of broken green glass sprinkling the sidewalk and hurried over to the rusting bronze Buick. She kicked discarded beer bottles and a brown paper bag out of her way. “Okay, guys, let’s get this rust bucket on the street.”

“What?”

“Come on. I’ll steer and push. Martin, you and Jamal push from behind. Nick, you take the other side.”

After much straining, shoving, and cursing, they managed to wrestle the car into the street so that it partially obstructed the road. Hands on hips and chests heaving, the boys surveyed their handiwork. “Now what?”

Struggling to drag air into her complaining lungs, Gianna held up an index finger, reached into her hip pocket, and swiped open her iPhone. As she tapped in the numbers, she took a deep breath in an attempt to ease her panting so that she didn't sound like she'd just pushed a four-thousand-pound car into the street.

"Yes. I'd like to report a car on Lenox between Vernor and Charlevoix that's blocking traffic." Gianna turned to look at the car. "It's not completely blocking the road, but nearly."

"How long's it been there?" The dispatcher's voice was loud enough for the boys to hear. She raised her eyebrows and shrugged at the snickering boys. "I don't know for sure. A while. Could you send someone out to take care of it? Thank you," she finished sweetly as she turned to the boys and tapped the phone off. "Lesson one in circumventing stupid rules."

Gianna toyed with the idea of popping in and checking on Mrs. C, but she really didn't have time and she'd promised to have the boys back in twenty minutes. "Come on, guys, let's get out of here before the Avengers find out we got their toy towed."

Outside the community center, she turned to them. "If anybody asks, you helped me pick up some garbage." She reached into her purse and handed each boy a ten-dollar bill before watching them safely reenter the center.

Not bad for a day's work. Now all Gianna had to do was pop over to Dad's house and put in some time on her day job. She rolled through a fast food drive-through, intending to eat dinner while sitting in the evening traffic. With dinner out of the way, Gianna would have more time to come up with a brilliant way to optimize her code.

She raced up the Moross exit and headed toward Lake St. Clair, passing under frequent streetlights that began to glow softly. People walked their fat labradors and happy golden retrievers and waved to neighbors fussing with lawn sprinklers and colorful annuals. The occasional jogger plodded along with sweat pouring off his body with each agonizing step.

Gianna waved to old Mr. Horton, her father's neighbor across the street, who hurried to bag the last of his clippings in the waning light. A meticulous gardener, Mr. Horton religiously tended his yard and advised his neighbors on theirs—whether they solicited his expertise or not.

Turning in the circular brick driveway, Gianna parked in front of the sprawling Tudor. She collected the newspaper from the front porch, pushed the heavy wooden door open, then leaned it closed. She groped along the wall for the security panel, tearing her eyes away from the headlines long enough to punch in the appropriate numbers.

The fresh scent of lemon polish drew her attention to the gleaming wood floor and the glow beneath the study door. Mrs. Cunningham, her father's housekeeper, must be on the computer again. Ever since she got her that new cookbook program, Gianna had a hard time prying her away from it.

She smiled at the rapid clicking. Mrs. C must be entering her own recipes. Good for her, but Gianna had code to optimize. Grabbing the mail, she sifted through the envelopes while pushing the study door open.

"Mrs. C, your husband's going to be so..." Her words drifted away at the sight of a stranger hunched over her keyboard. He was on her computer.

The man glanced up at her soft gasp. The monitor's grayish glow spotlighted the scowl on his face and cast a large eerie shadow on the wall behind him. He stood still. Expressionless. Silent. Waiting.

Gianna whirled toward the door, but he reached it at the same time.

She backed away from him. *Why isn't he running? What's he want?*

He stood blocking the doorway, staring at her as if trying to anticipate her next move.

Heart pounding, she scanned the room looking for some kind of weapon—anything. She pounced on the phone on Pa's desk.

The man lunged across the desk and snagged her arm in an unbreakable grip. He squeezed and shook her wrist until the phone flew from her hand. He dragged her around the desk. Papers and pens scattered. Gianna pulled back and clawed his imprisoning hand, but he easily held on.

Spying Pa's medical-alert alarm on the Persian carpet, she bucked, wiggled, and struggled until she'd managed to stomp on it several times.

"Stop," he snarled. He clamped a hard hand over her mouth, stifling her screams. Grabbing her around the waist, he hauled her against him. She twisted and kicked, but he outweighed her by a good fifty pounds.

"Sto-p!" Tightening his grip, he enfolded her until her back pressed flush against his chest and her buttocks flattened against his thighs. His warm spearmint breath stirred the hair at her temple.

Gianna thrashed her head from side to side. When she couldn't dislodge his hand, she sank her teeth deeply into his flesh.

"Yawp!" He ripped his hand away. "Bitch."

Shifting, he tightened his grip around her chest until she couldn't draw in a breath. Physically outmatched, Gianna had just enraged her attacker and no cavalry was coming to save her.

She let her body go limp, a dead weight in his arms. His hold loosened as he shifted to get a better hold on her. She exploded into action. Twisting, she bit his imprisoning arm, then kneed him in the groin.

"Unhh."

His groan of agony was satisfying, but instead of releasing her and crumpling to the ground, the man thrust her away from him with shocking force. Stumbling over his legs, Gianna fell headfirst into the sculpted marble fireplace.

Darkness closed in around her.