

ANN AGUIRRE

HELL
FIRE

A CORINE SOLOMON NOVEL



A ROC BOOK

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Last Call

Teaser chapter

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Praise for *Blue Diablo*

“Ann Aguirre proves herself yet again in this gritty, steamy, and altogether wonderful urban fantasy. Outstanding and delicious. I can’t wait to see what she comes up with next.”

—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Patricia Briggs

“An authentic Southwestern-flavored feast, filled with magic, revenge, and romance, spiced with memorable characters and page-turning action. ¡*Muy caliente!*”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Rachel Caine

“Corine has a great narrative voice—snappy and full of interesting observations on everything around her. . . . [*Blue Diablo* is] fast-paced and entertaining.”

—Charles de Lint, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*

“The fast and furious pace combined with interesting characters, powerful antagonists, and the promise of romance make for a strong first entry in the series.”

—Monsters and Critics

“Ms. Aguirre plunges readers into a fast-paced tale where her human characters are enhanced by their extraordinary gifts. *Blue Diablo* delivers a strong start to the series with a well-defined heroine, intriguing paranormal elements, and an emotion-filled romance.”

—Darque Reviews

“Rising star Aguirre moves from outer space to the Southwest in this new first-person series. With murder, magic, and romance, this is an enticingly dangerous journey. Don’t miss out!”

—*Romantic Times*

“The first Corine Solomon urban detective fantasy is a great tale filled with magic, paranormal powers, demons, and spirits bound to the necro. The heat between the lead couple is palpable. . . . This is an enthralling romantic urban fantasy.”

—*Midwest Book Review*

Also by Ann Aguirre

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Blue Diablo

SIRANTHA JAX NOVELS

Grimspace

Wanderlust

Doubleblind

ANN AGUIRRE

HELL FIRE

A CORINE SOLOMON NOVEL



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ROC

Published by New American Library, a division of
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,
Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2,
Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)
Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,
New Delh - 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632,
New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
First published by Roc, an imprint of New American Library,
a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.
First printing, April 2010

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 REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA
eISBN : 978-1-101-18681-7

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For my children.
If I've done anything worthwhile in my life, it's you.
Each day, you make me so, so proud.
Love you guys.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Laura Bradford is the best of all possible agents. What other agent would clear her schedule when I take the bus in from Tijuana and spend the day chauffeuring me around to sign stock? That was one of the best days I can remember because she is not only my agent, but also wonderful company. She boosts me when I need it, and she always has a master plan.

I also need to cheer for Mysterious Galaxy in San Diego because they make me feel like a hometown author and show such support for my books. Big thanks to Patrick at MG for telling everybody I'm destined to be a star and that he expects to see my work in hardcover one day. Words like that from a bookseller put a writer on cloud nine!

In fact, I celebrate all booksellers who recommend my work—and here's a shout to Sara of Fresh Fiction, who made my visit to Texas so memorable. I also owe her a margarita for telling readers that if they like Patricia Briggs, they'll enjoy my books.

I've mentioned Ivette before, and I don't know what I'd do without her. She makes my life easier in countless ways, freeing me up to write, which is what I love.

Others offer motivation and support when I need it. So thanks to Lauren Dane, Jeri Smith-Ready, Larissa Ione, Victoria Dahl, Carrie Lofty, and Lorelie Brown. It all helps. You're there when I need you, and I'm lucky to have such an amazing group of smart, funny, talented friends.

And hats off to Carolyn Jewel and Meredith Duran for writing books that inspire me and make me say, "Now, that's how it's done."

Thanks to Andres, who understands me after all these years, and to my kids, who are very good about letting me work.

Though Kilmer is set in Georgia, it's a fictional town, so obviously you won't find it if you drive south. I hope it feels real to you; as always, I grounded my what-if fantasy in our world, using Darien and Savannah to flavor my creation. Thanks to everyone who answered my questions about living in the South. You made it possible to enrich this book beyond what I could have managed on my own.

Finally, I must thank my readers, who are the cleverest, warmest, wittiest, and best-looking people ever to buy books. Please keep those e-mails coming; they never fail to make me smile. You can get in touch with me at ann.aguirre@gmail.com.

Home Again

I'm still a redhead.

Before we left Texas, I touched up the roots, and then I had some tawny apricot highlights put in. I guess that meant I intended to keep this color for a while. Symbolic—I'd made a commitment, at least to my hair.

Too bad I couldn't do the same with Chance. I didn't trust him entirely, and what was more, he didn't trust me, either. He secretly thought I'd leave, which I had done; die, which I'd *nearly* done; or break his heart. I just hoped I wouldn't combine the three.

Until we resolved the conflict between us—such as his luck, which might kill me, and the former lover he wouldn't talk about—I couldn't be more than a friend to him. He knew it too. I think he'd known as much even when he pressed the point back in Laredo.

The Mustang purred along, emphasizing Chance's silence. He wasn't happy about this trip to Kilmer, Georgia, but he'd promised, and I wanted answers. He owed me.

When he'd shown up at my pawnshop in Mexico City, asking for my help after our breakup eighteen months before, I agreed because he swore to turn his luck toward helping me find out what happened the night my mother died. This point was nonnegotiable. I needed to understand why it happened, and who was responsible. I wanted justice for her death. Now that I'd fulfilled my end of the bargain in Laredo, he was keeping his promise.

We passed the woods that encircled the town. Sometimes, when I was a kid, it had seemed to me that someone simply burnt a patch out of the forbidding forest, and there, Kilmer had been built. Over long years, the trees grew back in around it, overhanging the rutted road.

With the windows open, I smelled dank vegetation heavy in the air, and pallid sunlight filtering through the canopy overhead threw a sickly green glow over the car as Chance drove. McIntosh County didn't get snow or earthquakes, and the median temperature was sixty-six degrees. It was also deeply historical, containing forty-two markers. I knew all about local history: how old Fort King George was built nearby in 1721; how the Highlanders voted against slavery in 1739, not that it did them any good in the long run; and how the War of Jenkins' Ear motivated early settlers to attack Spanish forts. There were still ruins on Sapelo Island.

Just a piece up the road, there lived the only known band of Shouters, a Gullah music group. I'd seen them perform the ring shout once at Mount Calvary Baptist Church. I couldn't remember which foster parent had taken me; there had been so

many, and most of them had thought I could benefit from religion in some form or another. On paper, this seemed the perfect place to live, steeped in cultural heritage and tradition.

On paper.

In Kilmer, the rules of the Deep South lasted long after laws and social expectations changed in the wider world. White men did as they pleased, and everyone else kept their mouths shut. I couldn't rightly say I'd missed it.

"This place has a weird feel," Chance said, breaking the silence at last.

"You're getting it too?" I'd always thought it was the trees, but we'd passed beyond them. Now only scrubby grass lay between us and the weathered buildings of town. Overhead, the sky glowed blue and white; it was a pretty, partly sunny day that should've warmed me a lot more than it did.

"Yeah." Before he could say more, a dark shape darted in front of the cherry red Mustang. Chance slammed on the brakes, and only the seat belt kept my head from kissing the dash. The car fishtailed to a stop.

Butch whined and popped his head out of my handbag. He was a blond Chihuahua we'd picked up along the way; I'd resigned myself to keeping him, but I hoped we hadn't scared the shit out of him. I had important stuff in my purse.

I soothed him with an absent touch on his head, my heart still going like a jackhammer.

"What the—"

Chance motioned me to silence as he got out of the car. Hands shaking, I needed two tries to do the same. I checked the back, staring into the dead air beneath the tunnel of trees. Black skid marks smeared the pavement behind us.

He knelt and peered under the Mustang. Despite my better judgment, I joined him. Butch hopped down and backed up three steps, yapping ferociously. A low animal growl answered him.

Near the tires, a big black dog lay dying—a Doberman. We hadn't hit him, but all the blood oozing out of his ragged wounds told me he wasn't long for this world. He'd come from the tall grass that lined the road, or maybe from the trees beyond the field. A hard shudder rocked through me, and the air turned as cold as a northern winter night.

"Something got at him," Chance said finally. "Are there bears here? Wolves?"

I had no idea. I wasn't a wildlife expert in any location, and I hadn't been back to Kilmer in nine years. Things changed; habitats evolved. But times must be tough if wild animals had been forced to resort to hunting dogs.

I couldn't seem to look away from the shadow-dark flesh. The animal gave one final whine, as if he understood we couldn't help, and then he died. I saw the moment his eyes went liquid still, living tissue reverting to dead meat. There was a blood trail we could follow, but I didn't think that was a good idea. *Sizable claws created those wounds; nothing we need to mess with just before nightfall.*

I glanced down at the Chihuahua as he sniffed around next to my feet. "What do you think? Do you smell anything you recognize?"

He yapped twice. *Hm, so it probably wasn't a regular wild animal.* I shivered, wanting nothing more than to get off this road.

We'd acquired Butch after his prior owner was killed, and we were astonished to

learn he could communicate on a basic level. There was something special about him for sure, but I had lacked the opportunity to investigate what his other talents might be. This certainly wasn't the time.

Never one to miss an opportunity, Butch scampered into the weeds and did his business. I exhaled a long, unsteady breath, and then pulled myself to my feet using the Mustang's hood. If I believed in omens, we were off to a hell of a start.

Chance went to the trunk and wrapped his hands in rags used to wipe off the oil dipstick. Before we left Laredo, Chuch—our mechanic friend—had taught him how and threatened to beat him if he didn't look after this car properly. So far Chance was doing fine.

Wordlessly, he reached under the chassis and towed the carcass to the side of the road. Without a shovel, that was really all we could do, but I appreciated the kindness. Otherwise, that poor dog would be splattered all over the road when the next car came, and he had suffered enough.

Even if we did have digging tools in the car for some unlikely reason, I wouldn't have been interested in hanging around. My intestines coiled into knots over the idea of losing the light out there, within a stone's throw of those dark trees. The whorls on the bark resembled demonic sigils in the wicked half-light, and the long, skeletal limbs stirred in the breeze in a way I simply couldn't like.

There was a reason I hated these trees. I'd hid among them while my mother died.

While Chance took care of the dead dog, I gave Butch a drink and tried to reassure him that he wasn't doomed to suffer the same fate. His bulging brown eyes glistened with what I'd call a skeptical light as I hopped back in the Mustang. Chance joined us shortly, working the manual transmission with a dexterity I couldn't help but admire.

"What a welcome." He shook his head.

"Tell me about it." As I said that, we passed a faded white sign that I knew read WELCOME TO KILMER, HOME OF THE RED DEVILS AND THE WORLD'S BEST PEACH PIE.

"Think anyone will recognize you?"

I shook my head absently, taking in the familiar sights. It was bizarre. The road into town hadn't changed at all. Ma's Kitchen, an old white clapboard restaurant, still sat just outside the city limits. The shopping plaza on the left had been given a face-lift—fresh paint and new lines in the tiny parking lot—but the general store, the dry cleaner's, the Kilmer bank, and a coffee shop still occupied it. The names on the dry cleaner's and coffee shop had changed, but otherwise, the town seemed just as I'd left it.

If we stayed on this street, we'd wind up in the town square, where the old courthouse reigned like an aging duchess who refused to admit her day had passed. The clock on the tower hadn't worked since before I moved away, and I couldn't imagine, given the faded air, that they'd come into the money to fix it since. The "historical" district simply contained the oldest houses; most hadn't been restored.

But Kilmer retained a certain turn-of-the-century charm, if you didn't know what lurked beneath its exterior. I recognized Federal-inspired houses with their rectangular structure and slim, delicate iron railings; those stately old dames mingled freely with Georgian homes with hipped roofs and quoins.

Most of those neighborhoods exuded a genteel aura of decay. The streets hadn't

been paved in a long time; they were faded to the pale gray of rotting teeth from years of neglect, and Chance had to turn smartly to avoid the deep potholes.

“It seems sadder,” I said at last. “Smaller.”

“Well, you’re older now.” To his credit, he didn’t say I was bigger. That would’ve earned him a slap upside the head.

Anyway, I *wasn’t* bigger. I still needed to lose a few pounds, but I’d been pretty chunky at eighteen when I climbed on that Greyhound bus. At the gas station-cum-video store, I’d begged a lift from a farmer headed into Brunswick. I’d known buses ran from there, so I’d used my school ID to get a discount ticket and I rode all night. The next morning, I got off in Atlanta with just a backpack and a few dollars in my pocket.

My chest felt tight, remembering. I’d gotten work at a used bookstore the following day. The owner had felt sorry for me, I think, but I loved that job. I rented a room in a boardinghouse, and I was happier than I’d ever been in Kilmer. I had been sadder than Roy to see the bookstore go under. With no friends and little money in the bank, my life took a turn for the worse. I’d left Atlanta with only enough money for a bus ticket, and things went south from there.

But I didn’t want to think about that.

By the time Chance met me, I’d put myself back together somewhat. But I’d held eight different jobs in half as many years, and I seldom stayed in one place for long. There was nothing like running from your memories while trying to fit in, though I never made it. People always seemed to suss out that I wasn’t quite like them.

It was more than the scars on my palms that came from a gift I didn’t want. My mother’s death stayed with me in the form of the pain that subsumed me each time I read a charged object. There was a name for what I did. Most people called it psychometry; *I* called it a curse.

For years, I tried to forget.

When Chance came into my life, he changed everything. But I wouldn’t think about that, either. Sometimes the past needed to stay buried; it was the only way you could move on. And sometimes you had to dig it up, because that too was the only way.

For my mother’s sake, I had to deal with what’d happened in Kilmer. I’d find answers about the men who came by night to our house and burnt the place with her trapped inside. I’d discover why. Maybe then the dreams would stop. Maybe then she could rest. In the twilight, the town looked so quiet, almost peaceful, but to me, it hid a fetid air. Corruption fed in the stillness, like a pretty corpse that, when split open, spilled out a host of maggots.

I’d be the knife that cut this place wide and the fire that burnt it clean.

The Kilmer Inn

Chance parked the car because we were just driving aimlessly. He turned to me and rested his elbow on the back of the seat. “You all right?”

Well, no, I wasn’t. The bruises hadn’t completely healed from our last outing, and I had a fresh scar on my shoulder that’d come from a dead woman’s teeth. In addition, there was a secret society of Gifted individuals that I’d only just learned about, and the mentor who was supposed to teach me how to go on probably never wanted to see or hear from me again. That bothered me on a personal level as well, as I’d shared one smoking hot kiss with Jesse Saldana the night before everything went wrong.

This wasn’t the time to complain, and Chance certainly wouldn’t be interested in my emotional conflict regarding another man. In fact, bringing it up would just provoke him, considering he hoped we would be reconciled before this trip ended.

So I merely nodded. “We should find a place to stay. An old woman on Second Avenue used to rent out rooms. . . . I don’t know if she’s still alive, or if the boardinghouse is still open, but it’s a place to start.”

He checked the nearest cross street. “This is Tenth and Main. Which way?”

I thought for a moment. “North, about eight blocks—I think. It’s been a long time.”

Kilmer was laid out in a way that made sense, so we found the house, an old gingerbread Victorian, without too much trouble. Sometime since I’d left, it had been painted a pretty periwinkle and the trim done up in fresh white. The shutters gave the windows an open, welcoming look, and the garden would’ve been lovely at any other time of the year.

Salt weighted the air. We weren’t too far from the ocean, and maybe that had something to do with it, sandwiched in a desolate stretch of land between the coast and the Boggy Cypress Swamp. Rivers and tributaries tunneled all through this area, wandering inland from the ocean. I’d once loved going down to swim with my mama.

God, being here was harder than I’d expected. It made me miss her more. As I stood staring up at that fairy-tale Victorian house with all its fancy white flourishes along the roof, I wondered if I had the steel to see this through. I squared my shoulders. Of course I did. Otherwise I’d never know the truth, and I would’ve wasted Chance’s time.

Time to do this.

I didn’t see any sign from the yard to indicate whether this was a business or a private residence, but when we got out of the car and went toward the long wraparound porch, I saw a gleaming brass plaque that proclaimed KILMER INN. Well, that was new.

Old Mrs. Jensen hadn't bothered with any such niceties; just a pasteboard and wood stake in the yard that said ROOMS TO RENT. The place must be under new management. Just as well—Mrs. Jensen might have known me; she was a sharp old bird.

The current owners had a nice little patio set up with hand-carved rocking chairs and pretty little wrought-iron side tables. In season, the hanging baskets would probably be in bloom. I imagined sitting there beneath the black velvet of a sultry summer night, sipping a dewy glass of lemonade and watching the world go by.

Too bad it wasn't the idyllic town promised by such trappings, and we'd missed the warm summer nights, missed the sun of Indian summer; Kilmer was unrelentingly gray now and heavy with threatening rain. The clouds didn't look altogether natural to me; they were so dark, I sometimes thought I saw monstrous faces charged with lightning inside.

Kilmer was nothing like my home in Mexico. Instead of bright walls of stucco and adobe painted in vibrant shades, this town offered warped wood and peeling paint. None of the houses had aluminum siding, which seemed strange. A few were built from stone or brick, but most of them didn't look well kept. This was a town on the dirty side of decline. In fact, this home was the only one on this street that looked to be in good repair.

After a few seconds of silent debate, capped by mutual shrugs, we decided not to knock. A bell tinkled, signaling our entry into a charming foyer populated with warm mahogany and real antiques, which I priced in a single glance. Two striped damask chairs sat at studied angles from a cherry table, and the rug beneath our feet would sell for a pretty penny. I hoped Butch wouldn't pop up; I had a feeling this place wasn't pet friendly.

Before long, a platinum blond woman came hurrying down the corridor. "Good afternoon," she said without a touch of a drawl. "Did you have a reservation?"

"No, ma'am," Chance said. "But we *were* hoping to rent a room."

Her sapphire blue gaze went to my left hand. "Just one?"

Blame it on my mean streak.

I answered, "Yes, please."

Chance seemed surprised, as well he might, but he just nodded. "Do you have anything for us? We'd like a weekly rate; you have such a sweet little town here."

That seemed like laying it on pretty thick, but by the way the woman lit up, you'd have thought she'd founded the place. Since I couldn't hear any activity, I couldn't imagine she was full. I didn't know what would've brought an obviously city-bred woman to Kilmer, looking to open a bed-and-breakfast. Maybe a bad marriage or a broken relationship. Despite her well-kept skin and figure, I guessed she was past forty, so it could have been a number of things.

Truthfully, it wasn't just a desire to torment Chance with what he couldn't have that led me to ask for a single room. I also couldn't face the idea of sleeping here alone—not in this town. Wholly illogical fear clutched me tight, but then . . . fear was *usually* irrational. Most people weren't aware enough to fear the things that could *really* hurt them.

The proprietor made a show of checking her appointment book. "Oh, I think I can accommodate you. I can give you the Magnolia room for three hundred a week. You'll

share a bath with the Plumeria, but that's currently unoccupied. Meals are served promptly in the dining room at nine, one, and six. If you'd like to use the kitchen to fix yourselves snacks and such, I can let you have access for another forty dollars a week."

"That sounds perfect," Chance told her, producing three hundreds and two twenties.

That changed the woman's demeanor measurably. "It's a pleasure to have you stay with us. I'm Sandra Cheney. My husband, Jim, handles the repairs and restoration around the place, so you won't see him much. Our daughter, Shannon, cleans the rooms. I do the cooking and ensure guest satisfaction." By her expression, she'd do a *lot* to please a man who looked like Chance and carried hundreds in his wallet. I wondered what Jim would say about her dedication to customer service.

Well, I was used to that. After all, Chance was worth a second look: long and lean with vaguely Asian features, smooth brown skin, and a pair of tiger's eyes that could melt your knees at thirty paces. When you dated a guy who looked like Chance, you got accustomed to women checking him out, but that wasn't my problem anymore.

"Thanks," he murmured, noncommittal. He'd gotten good at pretending not to register all the double entendres that came his way.

Sandra didn't seem to mind, as long as he had money. "If you'll fill out this card, I'll get the key to the Magnolia room."

I watched him, chuckling softly when I saw him write the name *Chance Boudreaux*. He looked about as Cajun as I did Navajo. He flicked a smile in my direction as he saw me reading over his shoulder. The man made a game out of leaving different names anywhere we stayed. People who knew him understood they'd never get more out of him regarding his true name than "Chance."

I never had, either. I didn't want to mind, but deep down, I did. It had taken this long for me to admit it, but I'd had enough of Chance's secrets. Even meeting his mother, Min, hadn't done anything to dispel the shadows around him. In fact, she encouraged the obfuscation, saying it would be dangerous for anyone to find out the truth.

But *I'd* never hurt him, at least not with a spell tied to his true name. The hurt I inflicted on him went deeper, I supposed, more than skin-deep. He still wore scars on his back, gained saving my life a few weeks earlier. Chance had sheltered me with his own body as the glass flew all around us, the result of a sending that caught us flat-footed in a warehouse, where we'd been looking for his mother.

I sighed as he signed the guest registry with a flourish. It just didn't pay to think about such things. *Better to stay in the here and now*. I hated torturing myself with might-have-beens. While he wrapped up with Sandra, I went to the Mustang to fetch our stuff.

The night offered complete calm, not even a whisper of a breeze. Dead man's hands ran down my spine as I studied the dark windows all around us. There should have been people running errands, going about their daily routines, right? I tried to talk myself out of misgivings that were probably imaginary. Most likely, people just hadn't returned from work. Even knowing that, I couldn't shake the feeling something was wrong—bad wrong.

As I returned, she was saying, "All set. Let's go on up. You're on the second floor. You intend to check out the historical sites, am I right? You simply can't leave without

visiting Sapelo Island.”

We let her chatter as she led the way up the polished stairs in her twill slacks and cashmere twin set. She lacked only a set of pearls to qualify as a perfect Southern hostess. When she realized I just had a backpack, and Chance, a duffel, she looked a little put out. I guess with a money roll like his, we ought to have been traveling with designer luggage.

Still, her smile dimmed only slightly. She rattled off the amenities and then told Chance he could follow the gravel trail to park the Mustang around back. I glazed over well before she left.

The click of the door jostled me out of the innkeeper-induced coma, and I took stock. She hadn't lied; it was a nice room, done in pastels—lots of pretty pictures of magnolias and lots of Victorian lace. I liked the wallpaper with its fat candy-pink and white stripes. Sandra had done a nice job of blending colors and patterns into a sweet whole.

“I'm losing man points just by standing here.” Beside the antique brass bed, Chance looked even more masculine by contrast.

It wasn't nearly big enough. We'd be all over each other in the night, but I still couldn't face the idea of closing my eyes here with a wall between us. I had to own it; being here terrified me. I'd run from Kilmer as soon as I could, and I had to be out of my mind for coming back. But at least I wasn't alone this time.

The dead dog seemed symbolic in more ways than one. If I'd had any sense, we would've called this thing a loss and just moved on. But I couldn't. Running would mean I was letting them win. I deserved answers—and closure. Once I put this behind me, I hoped the dreams would stop. I'd go back to the pawnshop; go back to enjoying my quiet life.

Butch stuck his head out of my bag and whined as if in sympathy. I forced a smile and petted him in reflex. “I'm fine; don't worry.”

Chance quirked a brow. “Saying it repeatedly doesn't make it true, Corine.”

Because I felt hunted, fragile, I bit back. “Fine, but my mother *died* here. How would you feel about Mexico, Chance? If that mountain had been Min's grave.”

He didn't move; didn't flinch. Dammit, I'd never known when I wounded him, and I still didn't. I hated that he could read me like a book, whereas he was microfiche to me, and I didn't know how to work the machine.

“Like you do now. And I wouldn't stop until I had the people responsible for it. I *do* understand your reasons; I just want to make sure you can bear up. It isn't likely to get easier, if just being here unsettles you.”

He had a point.

I exhaled. “I'm sorry. That was uncalled for. Yeah . . . I'll hold. Don't even worry about me.”

His smile came sad and sweet, like the dying notes of a blues sax at closing time. “I can't help that.”

Well, I knew. I'd always think about him too. Some things just never stopped being true. My heart ached at his expression, quietly resigned but hungry for what I couldn't give. Not when he couldn't offer what I needed back.

More as a distraction, I set Butch down and let him run around, sniffing. He pronounced the room clean with a little yap and jumped into the armchair by the

window. The little dog circled three times and then lay down on the pale yellow cushion. He'd eaten and had a drink at the last place we stopped for gas, and done his business outside town, so I expected him to be good for a while.

With the last light gone, the sky looked like a bruise over the treetops in the backyard. I gazed outward, wondering what they were doing—the men who'd murdered my mother. Were they eating their dinners and then settling in with their TVs? What the hell *happened* all those years ago?

Chance came up behind me, but he didn't touch. I could feel his warmth just beyond my personal space, and I wanted to turn into his arms; let him hold me and kiss my throat until the hurt receded into heat.

I didn't.

When I finally spun round, I managed to move back in the motion. "We'll get started in the morning." I made my tone businesslike as I checked the time on a reproduction vintage clock. "You feel like rummaging in the kitchen for us? Looks like we missed dinner."

"Anything special you want?" Why, oh why did he have to put it that way?

"Fruit and cheese." I hesitated. "Thanks, Chance."

Not just for getting dinner—for everything. Without him, I had no hope of getting at the truth. We'd always possessed a symbiotic relationship, where our gifts were concerned. It was all the emotional stuff that tripped us up.

He went out the door smiling, as if he knew I'd meant more than I said and felt more for him than I wanted to admit, even now.

But then, I always had.