

Chapter 3



Celeste scanned the shuttered buildings across the street before turning the air-conditioning in the Prado to a higher setting. The chill during the past hour had seeped into her bones. She rubbed up and down her arms and looked across at Orette, who was immune to the cold in a navy suit.

"My blood is turning to ketchup in my veins," she said.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Celeste. We'll be leaving soon."

She grumbled, and continued chafing her arms. "Let's hope I don't turn into an icicle first."

Orette rolled the window down, and then shut off the air-conditioning.

She glanced down the road, thinking the owner of the restaurant needed his head examined. Whoever heard of a food establishment in a section of town that resembled a graveyard at night?

She wanted to get back to the comfort of the hotel, but Orette insisted on going to a nightclub with Ramon Evans, his business associate with whom they had dinner. He sat in a Jeep ahead of them, waiting for his companion. She had gone back inside the restaurant—for only she knew what—and hadn't come out as yet.

Celeste's misery came creeping back. Orette wouldn't know how to cope with her if she decided to be difficult. She'd gone from relaxation to simmering anger within an hour. On their way into The Hummingbird earlier, they had passed Mark on his way out, accompanied by two women, and a man who could have been his twin.

She had turned aside to avoid the sight of Mark cupping the smaller woman's elbow, ignoring the way her heart flip-flopped and twisted at the sight of him. A few minutes earlier, when she got out of the van, her blood had rushed through her veins the way it did whenever she was close to him and some sixth sense confirmed Mark was near.

When he came into view, a picture of a wild stallion reared in her brain and she slid an arm through Orette's to support herself.

Mark had flung a glance at Orette and she could have sworn his lips curled as though he wanted to curse her out, but opted to stop himself.

He knew about her arrangement with Orette, therefore jealousy was out of the question, but he also wouldn't be pleased. He didn't like Orette, and hinted that he was involved in shady business. Celeste had never seen any evidence of that and didn't plan to give up her friendship with Orette because Mark couldn't stand him.

She straightened in the seat, reminding herself she didn't care what Mark thought. They weren't together anymore.

A man in a suit walked out of the restaurant and stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. While they had dinner, he sat across the room with a bowl of soup in front of him. He had seemed too interested in the happenings at their table, which Celeste found curious. When his intense gaze met hers, she put it down to interest in Désirée and herself. Some men were strange that way. Always interested in what they couldn't have.

She hiked her elbow on the window, and let out her breath. What was that dizzy woman doing inside for so long?

Someone outside spoke to Orette, his words indistinct.

Orette shifted and then responded. "You're barking up the wrong tree, I don't—"

She turned her head, waiting for a pause to pepper Orette with complaints. She'd had it with sitting on the side of the road as if she was homeless. "Why doesn't Ramon go get that twit out of—"

Thunder exploded in her ear.

Once.

Twice.

She sucked in her breath when a moist substance splattered her face, seeped into her mouth, and plastered the fabric of her dress. Gobs of crimson goo warmed her face and arms. Pink gobs of Jell-O clung to the windshield like a colony of slugs.

She blinked, wiped the sludge off her skin, and moaned. Blood filled her mouth. Not good.

Orette slumped forward, his face dripping.

Celeste's dinner threatened to spew out, backing up the scream in her throat.

A fireman's alarm bell jangled in her head while she stared at her hands. Where had the slush come from? She scraped her palms across her skirt and refused to look at Orette, afraid to confirm what the van's interior suggested.

The odor of blood and raw meat twisted her stomach. She gagged. Runaway hoof beats pounded her chest. A whimper worked its way up from her throat and turned into repeated cries she couldn't hear.

Light gleamed over metal and drew her eyes. She let her head fall against the headrest, and stilled her shaking hands. She wasn't ready to give up her life. Panic shot along her nerve endings while warm liquid flowed out of her and wet the seat.

The man who'd done this still stood outside the window.

Silently, she begged the shadowy figure to leave, sure he was staring at her.

The door of the building whooshed open and a woman's high-pitched laughter, tinged with fright, pierced Celeste's cotton candy world. Then everything went silent.

A grunt forced its way up from her voice box, but she struggled to keep it down.

The woman who emerged from the doorway cut a diagonal path to Ramon's van.

Under her lashes, Celeste watched the shooter slip the gun inside his jacket, and saunter down the sidewalk.

A set of tires screeched and Ramon's Jeep pulled away from the sidewalk.

Gasping as if the air had been sucked out of her lungs, Celeste put both hands to her throat. A sob worked its way out of her mouth. She rocked in the seat, forcing herself not to look at the man next to her. Another sob raked her throat and against her will she looked at her friend. The lights around her dimmed and she slipped into the dark space that beckoned.



Light intruded behind her lids. Her lashes fluttered, and she frowned. Someone was squeezing her wrist in a vise. She dragged her arm away and opened her eyes. A series of flashes blinded her while someone snapped a succession of pictures from the window. Blue lights danced on the buildings, an army of people scurried around the van. What were they doing?

Celeste knew she was missing an important detail, but what?

Someone tugged her arm.

She turned her head to stare at the man hovering to her left. He spoke, but his words

didn't make sense. Someone had loosed a colony of bees between her ears. She couldn't hear a damn thing he said. What had happened since dinner?

When she shook her head to dislodge the memory, she caught Orette's slumped figure in her line of sight. She screamed then, which only increased the humming in her brain. Covering her ears with both hands, she hunched and rocked herself.

Orette couldn't be dead. He just couldn't.

She must have gone to bed and woken up in a death-and-disaster movie. That would teach her to eat so much before going to sleep.

"Miss. Miss!"

That man was talking to her again. She wasn't in a dream. She was in the van.

Orette was dead and Mark, Mark...where had he gone?

She moaned when fresh waves of fright washed over her body. She was alone on this godforsaken island. Where was Ramon? She peered through the gore on the windscreen. No sign of the black Jeep.

Had she imagined it? Of course not. She wasn't one of those women given to flights of fancy or hysterics when things went wrong. She kept both feet firmly planted on the ground at all times.

Ramon wasn't part of her imagination. How could he leave, considering what had happened? She was alone at a murder scene, didn't know anybody, and didn't know why that man shot Orette.

Tears trickled down her face, but she didn't wipe them away. If she did, she would have to acknowledge her lapse.

The man still leaned over her, his head tipped sideways.

Celeste stared into his eyes. "Is...is he dead?"

He pursed his lips. Then he nodded.

She gave in, and pressed her fingertips to her eyes. She had avoided self-pity her whole life and didn't intend to give in to it now. She'd deal with the situation. Take things as they came. She could do this.

She pushed open the door and the man retreated.

"Don't move," he said.

She ignored him, and got to her feet, which put her in danger of falling. Her rescuer gripped her by both arms and forced her to sit sideways in the seat. She closed her eyes, hung her head, and tried to think of something other than the lifeless body sitting behind her. The moisture between her thighs shamed her, and she hoped nobody found out she'd peed on herself.

A second man walked up behind the one now prodding her head and face. "Is she injured?"

Gentle fingers worked their way down her neck. "Hard to tell with all this matter in the way. It'll be easier when we get her in the ambulance."

The paramedic fixed his eyes on hers. "Can you tell me your name?"

"Celeste. Celeste Davies."

"D'you remember what happened?"

She nodded. "Yes. We went to dinner. Then we were sitting in the van...someone walked up to the window...and shot Orette."

He tipped her chin toward him. "You're not from here, are you?"

She shook her head.

"Know anybody else on the island?"

She hesitated; Mark would want no part of this, nor could she think of involving him. She didn't have the right. She jerked her head from side-to-side. "No, only the man who Orette met for dinner this evening."

"If you give me his name, I'll try to contact him."

She licked her lip and then made a face at the nasty taste in her mouth. That suggestion made no sense. He'd left, hadn't he?

"Don't bother," she said.

"The police will want to know."

That got through the fog. "Police?"

He smiled, showing a gap in his front teeth. "The guys over there in blue."

He poked around her shoulders, put a hand against her ribs, and asked her to take a deep breath. Next, his fingers tracked down her back. "Any numbness in your hands or feet?"

She shook her head, hair hanging heavy with the stuff that belonged inside Orette. She let her shoulders droop, and rubbed her fingers over her eyes. She wanted to cry again. What the hell was wrong with her?

Something compressed her arm and pain sliced through it. "Ouch! Stop that!"

He loosened his grip, but squinted at her arm. "Squeeze my hand."

She did, biting back a groan. "That hurts, man."

"I think you've been shot," he murmured.

Why wasn't she surprised? Now that he mentioned it, her arm felt like someone was stabbing her with a screwdriver.

He wrapped a gauzy material around the injured area. "We need to get you to the hospital," he said.

"Surprise, surprise," she muttered, and tried to stand up.

He pressed her down. "Keep still."

While she stared at the black asphalt, then up at the scene around her, he manipulated her lower limbs. Yellow police tape stretched around the Prado in a square, which also enclosed the entrance to the restaurant. Uniformed officers from four cars consulted with each other. A van drove up and three men got out, pulling on gloves as they approached.

The paramedics got Celeste to her feet, placed her on a stretcher, and loaded her into the ambulance. The door slammed shut.

She heard that.

She smiled at the ceiling, until Orette's bloody head appeared on the white surface. She closed her eyes. Bad idea. The bloody splatters appeared behind her eyelids.

"You all right?" someone said above her.

She nodded, but understood why he asked. Her tear ducts had gone into overdrive. She was leaking again. How else to describe something she saw as a weakness? She never cried. Well, almost never, if she counted her near breakdown a week ago. But she didn't want to think about that now.

As though he understood the need for distraction, the medic chatted to her, and continued his examination. Cool air stroked her chest, and her eyes flew open. He'd snipped the bodice of her dress down the center.

"What d'you think you're doing, medicine man?"

His gap reappeared. "Checking for possible bleeds in your torso."

"Oh." She went back to thinking, until the sirens intruded.

"Is that racket necessary?" she asked.

"Gets us there faster," he said. "Now, I need some information from you."

During his questions, she let her thoughts roam. She didn't think Orette had any children but knew his mother was alive. How would she deal with the news? Hopefully, she had other relatives to support her while she grieved.

At the hospital, a team waited to descend on Celeste the second the paramedics transferred her to a gurney.

She bit her lip to stop herself from begging her 'friendly neighborhood medic'—as she now thought of him—to stay with her. He must have seen the desperation in her eyes, for he murmured, "You'll be fine."

After a reassuring pat on her hand, he vanished.

The urge to weep overwhelmed Celeste once more.

They wheeled her through a set of metal double doors, while she stared at the fluorescent light bulbs, willing herself not to cry. A dark-skinned woman met her eyes, pen and form held at the ready. "Can you tell us who's your next of kin?"

"Anya...Anya Davies...in Jamaica."

Her arm started to throb again, and her head ached. The drying blood in her hair, on her skin, in her clothes, sickened her and made it hard to swallow.

"Is there anyone we should notify here?"

Now she really was going to cry. She shook her head and whispered. "No."

Then above the rustle of bodies and feet, Mark's delicious tenor hit her ear. "It's all right. I'm responsible for her."

She had to be hallucinating, but he seemed all flesh and blood. She wanted to refuse his help, but the knowledge that she was no longer alone made her forget her fears. She breathed out, her anxiety slipped away, and her head spun with relief.

He stood at the foot of the gurney, gray eyes unreadable in his nut-brown face. She blinked, and then a quick scan confirmed that he stood in the room—eyes now filled with worry, mouth tight, hands fisted.

Right now, she adored the sight of him. Later, she would let herself go back to hating him.