

Chapter 1

If there hadn't been a momentary lull in the fighting, no one would have heard the doorbell. As it was, the bell—which had once been tampered with by a boy whose single ambition was to shut out the world—sounded more like an outraged gasp than a summons. The fighting began again.

"Man, I know you took my shirt out of my pack. Someone saw you! Give it back or you're gonna pay!" A slight, still-forming young man doubled up his fist and waved it under the nose of a boy almost twice his size.

The larger boy, whose left arm was in a cast, spat on the floor. "Pay? Pay who? You? Who'd pay for one of your dirty little rags?" Contemptuously, he turned his head, as if taking in the whole room, but his eyes never left his opponent.

"Give it back!"

"I don't have your shirt. Who'd want it? It's probably crawling with bugs!"

The smaller boy moved in for the kill, although it was clear to all the fascinated kids watching the confrontation that he was going to be ground right into the frayed carpet.

The same thing was clear to Anna Fitzgerald. She had heard the screaming all the way from the director's office, where she'd just been dragged to hear a week's worth of bad news.

The fight was almost a relief.

Anna leaped down the stairs, three at a time, springing off the bottom step like a championship diver. Cleanly and with infinite skill, she parted the troubled waters.

"Stop it, both of you!"

The small circle of kids split neatly in half. Revealed in the middle were Wesley and Fang. Anna had known who was fighting before she raced out of Tom Schneider's office.

"Hit him with that cast and you'll end up having surgery on your arm," she warned Wesley as she darted between the boys, pushing Fang backward a foot or two. Fang, so-called because of one horizontally tilted front tooth, tried to stand his ground, but Anna had caught him off balance. He melted into the circle of kids. Nobody caught him when he fell.

Anna put her hands on her hips and faced Wesley. His cast-covered arm was still raised. "Put a torch in your hand and you'd look like the Statue of Liberty," she observed.

There were snickers behind her, but she didn't take her eyes off Wesley.

Wesley smiled. The smile was angelic, but there was something unholy in his eyes. "Move out of the way, Annie babe."

"Why? So you can say we threw you back on the streets? That's what you want, isn't it? Hey, you might make something of yourself if you stay around here."

"In this two-bit flophouse?" Wesley moved closer, spewing profanity and spit.

Anna didn't even blink, although he outweighed her by fifty pounds at least. Somewhere inside her she registered the click of the front door. She couldn't take her eyes off Wesley long enough to see who had come or gone. She hoped it was an arriving counselor. "You're not scaring me."

"You don't have much sense, then."

"I tell myself that every day."

"Get out of the way. Fang wants trouble."

"Since when is it your style to give anybody what they want?"

Wesley stood over her, his arm still raised. He moved as if to hit her. "I'm warning you."

Anna didn't move an inch. "Back off, Wesley. I know—"

Before she could finish, a man in a dark brown suit materialized out of the group of kids behind Wesley, grabbed the arm not sporting a cast and spun Wesley around. Anna, who had never counted on seeing any real emotion on Wesley's face, saw a momentary flash of surprise.

Wesley landed in a faded chintz armchair. In a moment the man was standing over him, making it perfectly clear that he wasn't to move. "Touch that girl," the stranger said in a menacing voice, "and you'll be listening to a cop read you your rights."

Wesley sat back casually, as if he were enjoying himself. "Oh, I'm scared. Real scared."

"Out," Anna said quietly to the kids staring open-mouthed at the tall stranger. "Go in the kitchen and start on supper." She didn't wait to see if they had done as she'd asked. She started toward Wesley.

The man barred her way. "Stay away from him."

"Look, I don't know who you are—"

"If you want to help, go find somebody who works here. If anybody does," he muttered under his breath.

"I work here."

The man gave her one quick glance. "I mean staff," he said, dismissing her.

Anna caught Wesley's eye. He was laughing at her, although you had to know him well to tell. One of Wesley's few admirable traits was his sense of humor. She had used it more than once to help him find his way back to civilization. She tried it now. "See what you've done?" she asked, ignoring the stranger for the moment. "You've *completely* subverted my authority. Tonight you wash dishes. All of them."

"You have to *work* here to tell me what to do," Wesley sing-songed.

Anna managed a smile and turned her attention to the stranger. He had been a blur to her during the excitement. Now she took in a lanky broad-shouldered body and shining mahogany hair. His eyes were a matching brown. He had wide cheekbones and a narrow-lipped mouth that hadn't once relaxed its grim line. She tried to change that. "I'm Anna Fitzgerald, the assistant director of this zoo. Step away from Wesley, please. He's been known to bite."

The man turned to face her, although he didn't turn his back to Wesley—which lifted him a notch in Anna's estimation. "Assistant director?" This time his eyes took a leisurely tour from the toes of her ragged Reeboks to the short golden spiked locks framing her impossibly young face. "First Day's being run by a rock band?"

Anna held out her hand. "And you are?"

He hesitated, then took her hand. "Grady Clayton."

She'd heard the name before, but so had everyone else in the city of Ponte Reynaldo. Grady Clayton. She should have known.

"Mr. Prosecutor." Anna dropped his hand immediately. "We weren't expecting you for another hour."

"I have no trouble believing that."

Her polite smile died. In Tom Schneider's office, only minutes before, she had discovered that First Day was going to be visited by Sun County's popular acting State Attorney. A week wouldn't have been long enough for Anna to steel herself to be nice to a politician. Now she had already tapped her entire reservoir of good manners. "Move out of that chair before I get back and you're a dead man," she said to Wesley, who was watching the conversation with interest. She turned back to Grady Clayton. "I'll take you to Tom's office. I believe you came to see him."

"I think I've seen what I came to."

She spoke before she thought. "You'd need to have your eyes open for that, Mr. Clayton."

Grady's expression didn't change. He was under fire from a disheveled teenager with a self-righteous frown as expressive as her astonishing turquoise eyes. He didn't allow his grudging respect to show. "My eyes are always open, Miss Fitzgerald. What I've seen here is chaos. It's easy to recognize."

"Then you're going to have to decide if you're willing to look any deeper. If you aren't, you're wasting your time." She lifted her chin and stared straight at him. "And our time is precious. Just like our kids."

They stared at each other, taking each other's measure, until Wesley interrupted. "Hey, the cop-fink gets to make decisions, just like we do. Maybe you should put him through the program, Annie babe. Teach him how."

"Stay in that chair." Without another word to either male, Anna turned and started up the stairs. She was almost surprised when she reached Tom's door to find that Grady had followed her.

"I always come a little earlier than I'm expected." Grady sat back in the chair beside Tom Schneider's desk. Coffee steamed enticingly in front of him, but he ignored it. "I get a better idea of what's going on."

"Some might say that's wise," Tom said, nodding pleasantly. "And some might say it was downright sneaky."

"The second group doesn't interest me much."

"Since you're a man who goes straight to the point, I'll do the same. I'm not going to apologize for what you saw when you got here. Fights occur every day. First Day isn't a Sunday school, and the kids who live here aren't angels."

"And the girl trying to get control of the situation wasn't old enough to *teach* Sunday school."

Tom made a tent of his stubby fingers and regarded Grady over them. He was a quiet, good-humored man who could size anybody up in ten seconds or less. He already knew he liked Grady Clayton. "That bothers you?"

"You know my reservations about your program. Now I find you've got teenagers running the place. How can kids adequately supervise kids?"

"Anna's twenty-two."

Grady reached for his coffee to hide his surprise. “She looks fifteen.”

“She can look her age when she has to, but what does that have to do with her ability to handle runaways? She’s effective precisely because they can relate to her. Anna’s young enough to know what they’re feeling and old enough to help them deal with it.”

Grady impatiently waved aside the other man’s words. “We both know I’m not here because your assistant looks like a runaway herself.”

“No, you’re here because you’re afraid that First Day is involved in drug dealing.”

“One of your charges was caught with a roll of cash in one pocket and an illegal pharmacy in the other.”

“And that’s unfortunate.”

Grady lifted a brow. “Why? Because he was caught?”

Tom smiled. “You and I are on the same side, Mr. Clayton. I hate drugs as much as you do, and so does all my staff. We have strict rules against them. The kids who live here know they’re out of the program if they use or deal.”

“The kid we caught was still in the program.”

“The kid you caught drifted in and out of it. He was never a long-term resident. He came in occasionally for rest and shelter and a hot meal. We don’t turn kids away if they come in clean and stay clean while they’re here. What they do on the outside is out of our control.”

“Isn’t *everything* they do out of your control?”

“This is a runaway shelter, not a prison.”

There was a perfunctory rap on the office door, and Anna entered, taking the empty chair beside Grady before either man could stand.

Grady watched as she sprawled beside him. She hadn’t changed out of her faded denim shorts, rolled up to the tops of her thighs, and her sunshine-yellow blouse was still knotted loosely around her midriff. But she had made a stab at combing her hair. The punky spikes had become soft golden fluff with delicate wisps decorating her neck and cheeks. He noted pale freckles on the bridge of her nose.

“I was just trying to tell Mr. Clayton a little about our program,” Tom told Anna. “Is everyone settled downstairs?”

“Craig just got in. Car trouble again. He’s keeping his eye on things in the kitchen, but Fang had to go to work anyway, so he and Wesley will be separated for a while.”

“Fang?” Grady couldn’t help himself.

“He won’t tell us his real name.” Anna fidgeted in her chair until she was facing Grady. She’d had a few minutes to get her temper under control. She was hoping it was enough to do the trick. “When Fang first came three months ago, he was so black and blue we couldn’t even write an accurate description of him for our records.”

“Have you done anything to find out who he is?”

“We’ve tried to make him feel safe enough to tell us. But we don’t do detective work, if that’s what you mean. We’d have a lot of empty beds here if we did.”

“Maybe they’d be empty because the kids would be back home.”

Tom interrupted. “We do know that Fang’s father as good as put him here when he beat him in a drunken rage. We’re less interested in Fang’s real name than in helping him grow up without bruises.” Tom leaned across his desk. “You’re going to have lots of questions, all of which I’ll answer later. Let Anna show you around first. Ask her anything you want.” He turned his attention to Anna. “Be polite,” he warned her.

A faint blush colored Anna’s cheeks, and she made a face. Tom knew her better than anyone in the world. It was Tom who had held her hand through the worst days of her own life, Tom who had given her the courage to become the woman she was. Now, behind thick spectacles, his blue eyes shone with confidence. “I am always polite,” she said primly. She pushed herself out of her chair. “Unless I’m rude.”

Grady laughed. He hadn’t known he had a laugh left inside him. The day had been grueling, beginning with meetings at six a.m. and continuing straight through without a break, or even without two things to do at once. It was dinnertime already, and he couldn’t remember one meal he’d eaten, with the exception of stale doughnuts at a campaign coffee with a local ladies’ guild. He didn’t really want to be here. And he didn’t want to laugh—couldn’t even manage one. Except that he just had.

The laugh somehow freed the knot of fatigue and tension inside him. He stood. “I’m afraid I’m the one who’s been rude.”

“Arrogant.” Anna looked up at him. She was surprised to see him smiling. It was a down-home smile, Davy Crockett-gone-to-Congress with the polish of urban sophistication instead of a coonskin cap. She understood for the first time how this man had so charmed conservative Sun

County that despite his relative youth, the voters might make him their official State's Attorney in the upcoming election.

"I think it's more exhaustion than arrogance," Grady said candidly. "But at least part of it's genuine concern. This county is my responsibility now. Your program is under scrutiny."

Tom answered. "You'll find nothing here to worry you. We exist to help kids, not to feed their bad habits. But we don't work miracles, we give chances. Some kids are too far gone to take what we offer. Maybe Paco Hernandez was one of them."

"Maybe?"

"We know Paco pretty well," Anna broke in, before Tom could explain. "He's been on the streets since he was fourteen. Like a lot of kids, he figured out right away that he could sell drugs or his body to survive. He chose the first. Who's to say he made a bad decision?"

Grady grunted noncommittally.

Anna went on. "By the time First Day was there to give Paco a third choice, we didn't add up to much next to the limousines and beachfront villas of the guys he was working for. But he kept coming back for a day or two, anyway. There always seemed to be a chance with Paco." She met Grady's eyes. "Maybe there still will be, if he's put in a rehab program instead of jail."

"We're pushing for the maximum sentence."

"A shortsighted mistake."

Grady wondered how he could have believed Anna was a teenager. Looks had never so completely deceived him before. Now, as he stared into her turquoise eyes, he saw what he had missed at first. Anna looked fifteen, but she was at least a hundred. His mother, who studied reincarnation, spoke often of old souls. If there was such a thing, its name was Anna Fitzgerald.

"You have very strong opinions," he said carefully, "yet you're obviously just out of college. Have you really had enough experience to be so sure of yourself?"

"I didn't learn what I know from books."

"No?"

"I learned it on the streets. The hard way." She turned and started toward the door. Once there she paused, then looked back over her shoulder to see if he had followed her. "Come on, Mr. Prosecutor, let me show you a little of what I know. These kids are your constituents, too. Give them a chance."

Half an hour later Grady had decided that if these kids were his constituents, a political career was out of the question. If he had been tired when he started, he was dead on his feet by the time they made it to the first floor staff room.

There had been kids everywhere. Long-haired kids with pale, unhealthy faces. Short-haired kids who looked as if they belonged on high school football teams. Madonna-like teens lugging babies on their hips. Mary Magdalene-like teens wearing provocative clothing and size-‘em-up looks on their faces.

There had been mass confusion and a surprising regimentation beneath it.

He had watched the kids with Anna and reluctantly agreed with Tom Schneider’s assessment of her. She was one of them, but not quite. They respected her, although they didn’t show it in the traditional ways, and when she told them to do something, they listened.

He had also watched the looks on their faces when he had been introduced. He was a cop to them, or, in Wesley’s words, a cop-fink. These were kids who had lived beyond the law and probably still considered themselves above it.

Which was why he had come.

Anna closed the staff room door behind them, and the noise, a blend of loud rock music, shouting teenagers and dinner preparations, ebbed to a comfortable roar. Anna flung herself on the sofa, but Grady noticed she still tapped her foot in rhythm, as if she was anxious to move on.

“We used to call this the staff lounge, until we realized that nobody ever got to lounge here. We use it for just about everything else, though. Talking with kids, writing up reports, phone calls, whatever has to be done.”

The room was like every room in the old house, cool and dim. First Day was located in a huge stucco mausoleum with pretensions to Spanish architectural design. The walls were thick and laced with crushed coquina shell, and there were minimal windows decorated with black iron grillwork to let in the blistering Florida sunshine. Entryways were gracefully arched, and the white walls were set off with dark woodwork. Outside, a red tile roof rose above the two-story house and looked out over three acres of trees and gardens.

The house had once been a showplace. Now it had the marks of an institution. Clean but shabby. Smoke alarms and overhead sprinklers. Department store furniture and cheap poster art. There was nothing wrong with the house that half a million dollars and a team of interior designers couldn’t cure, but what would be the point? The house had been donated, forever

hallelujah, to First Day. It would never again be the site of pre-opera cocktail parties or oh-so-posh charity fund-raisers. It would remain a shelter for runaways until it fell down around its new tenants' ears.

Anna waited for Grady to respond. He looked like a man who had just survived the London blitz. "I gather we're a bit overwhelming," she said dryly.

"I knew Mrs. Garson. I was just wondering what she would think about what you've done with her house."

"Mrs. Garson willed us the house because she believed in what we were trying to do. The First Day program has served over a thousand kids since we moved here. I think she'd be proud."

Grady frowned. "A thousand kids?"

"Give or take a few dozen." Anna tried to smile and hoped it would be contagious.

"Surprised?"

"The house is big, but not that big."

"A lot of those thousand kids only stayed a night or two at our intake shelter on West 15th. First Day Inn. Remember, this is our long-term facility. The kids here are committed to staying off the streets and making their way back into society. The kids who come through our intake shelter are fed and housed and counseled on a short-term basis. A lot of them head home, others go to different programs more suited to their needs, others just disappear back onto the streets."

"Like Paco?"

"That's right."

"So Paco wasn't here?"

Anna weighed her answer carefully. "He showed up from time to time. A lot of the kids know each other, and they visit back and forth. Sometimes the intake kids come here to see what we're about. And sometimes, if we have a spare bed, they come here because First Day Inn is filled to overflowing."

"Then Paco had contact with kids who are still in your program?"

"I won't deny it."

Grady slouched comfortably in a chair and watched her fidget. Sitting still seemed to be impossible for her. "What would you do if you caught a kid who was staying here using drugs? Turn him back out on the streets? Call the cops? Have a heart-to-heart talk?"

Anna wondered how he had managed to keep cynicism out of a question made for it.
“We’ve done all three of those things. It depends on the kid.”

“Then you don’t necessarily turn in kids who are breaking the law?”

“If you were a parent, Mr. Clayton, and you caught your kid smoking marijuana, would you take him right to the local precinct house or would you try to get help for him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then you’re kidding yourself. What kind of parent puts his own kid in jail for a first offense? And what kind of program would this be if we didn’t look at each case individually and give our kids the benefit of the doubt whenever we possibly can?”

Grady didn’t smile. “A program that wasn’t out of compliance with the law.”

“We don’t break the law. And we don’t give our kids permission to break it, either. But we’re not dealing with your garden-variety suburban sweet peas here. These kids have problems you probably don’t even know the names for. They come here sick and hungry and battered. And even after they get here, they make mistakes.”

“Did you know that Paco Hernandez was selling drugs? Did you overlook it in hopes you could make a good little boy out of him again?”

“You have an evil mind, Mr. Clayton.”

“Which is why I’m the State’s Attorney.”

Anna was on her feet, pacing the room, before she spoke again. Even though he was engulfed in weariness, Grady admired the way she moved. She was neither graceful nor clumsy but so filled with vitality that the air around her seemed to shiver. Watching her almost energized him.

She pointed to the door. “Did you see anything out there except possible tenants for your filthy, overcrowded prison system?”

“You’d prefer your criminals on the streets?”

She ignored his logic. She was moving past the point of logic herself. He was treading on sacred ground. “These kids are not criminals! They’re kids, scared kids, sad kids, angry kids. Some of them have done horrible things to survive. Some of them have had horrible things done *to* them. They need a chance now. They don’t need a pogrom.”

“Pogrom?”

She waved her hands. “A purge, a hysterical law-and-order demonstration!”

Grady stood, too, his exhaustion fading away. “I wasn’t having Auschwitz readied, if that’s what’s worrying you.”

Anna stopped pacing. The last cautious voice inside her was now silent. “It’s not so different, though, is it? You come here with preconceived notions of who’s good and who isn’t, who deserves a chance and who doesn’t. You look at the faces of these kids and you see trouble! They’ll never elect *you* to office. They’ll never be part of the elite power structure that makes the decisions that affect us all. So why bother with them? Why give them a second chance? Why not just shove them somewhere so they’ll never see the light of day again?”

Exhaustion had disappeared. Grady moved forward so that he and Anna were only a step apart. His face was a thundercloud. “You know nothing about me and what I believe!”

“Look, I know your type! You think what you are is a secret, but I understand all about you.”

“What in hell are you talking about?”

“You go after power and damn the foolish who get in your way! You say whatever your voters want to hear and do whatever brings you the greatest glory. I know your type, all right. And I know that eventually you get to the point where you think everyone in the world was put there to serve your whims, no matter how twisted or evil they are, no matter who you destroy—” She stopped, and, slowly, her eyes widened.

As Grady watched she seemed to grow paler. He took the last step toward her, anger forgotten. “Anna?”

But she was in the grip of something else. She moved away from him, growing paler still.

He lowered his voice. “Anna? Are you all right?”

She shut her eyes, as if to block out the sight of him.

He reached out *to* put his hand on her arm. “Maybe you’d better sit down.”

She jumped as if he had burned her, and her eyelids flew open. “Don’t touch me. Don’t ever touch me!”

Grady’s patience evaporated. “Who in hell are you looking at? I’m sure it isn’t me!”

“Anna!” Tom’s summons came from the doorway. Neither Anna nor Grady had heard him open the door.

Anna turned to look at Tom, her eyes bewildered, defeated.

Tom stuck his thumb over his shoulder. “They’re about to serve dinner. You’re needed to figure out the cleanup schedule.”

Anna’s eyes flashed back to Grady. She stared at him for a long moment, almost as if she were trying to figure out exactly who he was. Then she turned and left the room without another word.

Tom closed the door behind her and waited for Grady to speak.

“How much of that did you see?” Grady asked at last.

“Enough.”

“What’s going on here? The staff’s as confused as the residents!”

“The staff and the residents are people with pasts. I would guess that Anna was just living a little of hers.”

“How much of her past do you know?”

“Not a bit.”

Grady ran his hand through his hair in exasperation. “You hire staff without knowing their credentials and checking their references?”

“I hired Anna *because* I knew her.”

“You just said you don’t know her past!”

“Not her past before she came here. Anna was a First Day resident before she started working for us. In the four years I’ve known her, she’s never even told me her real name. I suspect she just told you more about who she used to be than she’s ever told anyone here.”

“Am I supposed to be flattered?”

Tom’s smile was sad. “Flattered? No. Compassionate? Yes, Mr. Clayton. And maybe just a little sorry that you provoked her.”