

PROLOGUE

Who do you love?

It's a question anyone should be able to answer. A question that defines a life, creates a future, guides most minutes of one's days. Simple, elegant, encompassing.

Who do you love?

He asked the question, and I felt the answer in the weight of my duty belt, the constrictive confines of my armored vest, the tight brim of my trooper's hat, pulled low over my brow. I reached down slowly, my fingers just brushing the top of my Sig Sauer, holstered at my hip.

"Who do you love?" he cried again, louder now, more insistent.

My fingers bypassed my state- issued weapon, finding the black leather keeper that held my duty belt to my waist. The Velcro rasped loudly as I unfastened the first band, then the second, third, fourth. I worked the metal buckle, then my twenty pound duty belt, complete with my sidearm, Taser, and collapsible steel baton released from my waist and dangled in the space between us.

"Don't do this," I whispered, one last shot at reason.

He merely smiled. "Too little, too late."

"Where's Sophie? What did you do?"

"Belt. On the table. Now."

"No."

"GUN. On the table. NOW!"

In response, I widened my stance, squaring off in the middle of the kitchen, duty belt still suspended from my left hand. Four years of my life, patrolling the highways of Massachusetts, swearing to defend and protect. I had training and experience on my side.

LISA GARDNER

I could go for my gun. Commit to the act, grab the Sig Sauer, and start shooting.

Sig Sauer was holstered at an awkward angle that would cost me precious seconds. He was watching, waiting for any sudden movement. Failure would be firmly and terribly punished.

Who do you love?

He was right. That's what it came down to in the end. Who did you love and how much would you risk for them?

"GUN!" he boomed. "Now, dammit!"

I thought of my six- year- old daughter, the scent of her hair, the feel of her skinny arms wrapped tight around my neck, the sound of her voice as I tucked her in bed each night. "Love you, Mommy," she always whispered.

Love you, too, baby. Love you.

His arm moved, first tentative stretch for the suspended duty belt, my holstered weapon.

One last chance . . .

I looked my husband in the eye. A single heartbeat of time.

Who do you love?

I made my decision. I set down my trooper's belt on the kitchen table.

And he grabbed my Sig Sauer and opened fire.

1

Sergeant Detective D. D. Warren prided herself on her excellent investigative skills. Having served over a dozen years with the Boston PD, she believed working a homicide scene wasn't simply a matter of walking the walk or talking the talk, but rather of total sensory immersion. She felt the smooth hole bored into Sheetrock by a hot spiraling twenty-two. She listened for the sound of neighbors gossiping on the other side of thin walls because if she could hear them, then they'd definitely heard the big bad that had just happened here.

D.D. always noted how a body had fallen, whether it was forward or backward or slightly to one side. She tasted the air for the acrid flavor of gunpowder, which could linger for a good twenty to thirty minutes after the final shot. And, on more than one occasion, she had estimated time of death based on the scent of blood—which, like fresh meat, started out relatively mild but took on heavier, earthier tones with each passing hour.

Today, however, she wasn't going to do any of those things. Today, she was spending a lazy Sunday morning dressed in gray sweats and Alex's oversized red flannel shirt. She was camped at his kitchen table, clutching a thick clay coffee mug while counting slowly to twenty.

She'd hit thirteen. Alex had finally made it to the front door. Now he paused to wind a deep blue scarf around his neck.

She counted to fifteen.

LISA GARDNER

He finished with the scarf. Moved on to a black wool hat and lined leather gloves. The temperature outside had just crept above twenty. Eight inches of snow on the ground and six more forecasted to arrive by end of the week. March didn't mean spring in New England.

Alex taught crime- scene analysis, among other things, at the Police Academy. Today was a full slate of classes. Tomorrow, they both had the day off, which didn't happen much and warranted some kind of fun activity yet to be determined. Maybe ice skating in the Boston Commons. Or a trip to the Isabelle Stewart Gardner Museum. Or a lazy day where they snuggled on the sofa and watched old movies with a big bowl of buttered popcorn.

D.D.'s hands spasmed on the coffee mug. Okay, no popcorn.

D.D. counted to eighteen, nineteen, twent—

Alex finished with his gloves, picked up his battered black leather tote, and crossed to her.

"Don't miss me too much," he said.

He kissed her on the forehead. D.D. closed her eyes, mentally recited the number twenty, then started counting back down to zero.

"I'll write you love letters all day, with little hearts over the 'i's," she said.

"In your high school binder?"

"Something like that."

Alex stepped back. D.D. hit fourteen. Her mug trembled, but Alex didn't seem to notice. She took a deep breath and soldiered on. *Thirteen, twelve, eleven . . .*

She and Alex had been dating a little over six months. At that point where she had a whole drawer to call her own in his tiny ranch, and he had a sliver of closet space in her North End condo. When he was teaching, it was easier for them to be here. When she was working, it was easier to be in Boston. They didn't have a set schedule. That would imply planning and further solidify a relationship they were both careful to not overly define.

They enjoyed each other's company. Alex respected her crazy schedule as a homicide detective. She respected his culinary skills as a third- generation Italian. From what she could tell, they looked forward

LISA GARDNER

to the nights when they could get together, but survived the nights when they didn't. They were two independent-minded adults. She'd just hit forty, Alex had crossed that line a few years back. Hardly blushing teens whose every waking moment was consumed with thoughts of each other. Alex had been married before. D.D. simply knew better.

She lived to work, which other people found unhealthy, but what the hell. It had gotten her this far.

Nine, eight, seven . . .

Alex opened the front door, squaring his shoulders against the bitter morning. A blast of chilled air shot across the small foyer, hitting D.D.'s cheeks. She shivered, clutched the mug more tightly.

"Love you," Alex said, stepping across the threshold.

"Love you, too."

Alex closed the door. D.D. made it down the hall just in time to vomit.

Ten minutes later, she remained sprawled on the bathroom floor. The decorative tiles were from the seventies, dozens and dozens of tiny beige, brown, and harvest gold squares. Looking at them made her want to puke all over again. Counting them, however, was a pretty decent meditative exercise. She inventoried tiles while she waited for her flushed cheeks to cool and her cramped stomach to untangle.

Her cellphone rang. She eyed it on the floor, not terribly interested, given the circumstances. But then she noted the caller and decided to take pity on him.

"What?" she demanded, her usual greeting for former lover and currently married Massachusetts State Police Detective Bobby Dodge.

"I don't have much time. Listen sharp."

"I'm not on deck," she said automatically. "New cases go to Jim Dunwell. Pester him." Then she frowned. Bobby couldn't be calling her about a case. As a city cop, she took her orders from the Boston turret, not state police detectives.

Bobby continued as if she'd never spoken: "It's a fuckup, but I'm

LISA GARDNER

pretty sure it's *our* fuckup, so I need you to listen. Stars and stripes are next door, media across the street. Come in from the back street. Take your time, notice *everything*. I've already lost vantage point, and trust me, D.D., on this one, you and I can't afford to miss a thing."

D.D.'s frown deepened. "What the hell, Bobby? I have no idea what you're talking about, not to mention it's my day off."

"Not anymore. BPD is gonna want a woman to front this one, while the state is gonna demand their own skin in the game, preferably a former trooper. The brass's call, our heads on the block."

She heard a fresh noise now, from the bedroom. Her pager, chiming away. Crap. She was being called in, meaning whatever Bobby was babbling about had merit. She pulled herself to standing, though her legs trembled and she thought she might puke again. She took the first step through sheer force of will and the rest was easier after that. She headed for the bedroom, a detective who'd lost days off before and would again.

"What do I need to know?" she asked, voice crisper now, phone tucked against her shoulder.

"Snow," Bobby muttered. "On the ground, trees, windows . . . hell. We got cops tramping everywhere—"

"Get 'em out! If it's my fucking scene, get 'em all out."

She found her pager on the bedside table—yep, call out from Boston operations—and began shucking her gray sweatpants. "They're out of the house. Trust me, even the bosses know better than to contaminate a homicide scene. But we didn't know the girl was missing. The uniforms sealed off the house, but left the yard fair play. And now the grounds are trampled, and I can't get vantage point. We need vantage point."

D.D. had sweats off, went to work on Alex's flannel shirt.

"Who's dead?"

"Forty- two- year- old white male."

"Who's missing?"

"Six- year- old white female."

"Got a suspect?"

Long, long pause now.

LISA GARDNER

“Get here,” Bobby said curtly. “You and me, D.D. Our case. Our headache. We gotta work this one quick.”

He clicked off. D.D. scowled at the phone, then tossed it on the bed to finish pulling on her white dress shirt.

Okay. Homicide with a missing child. State police already on-site, but Boston jurisdiction. Why the hell would the state police—

Then, fine detective that she was, D.D. finally connected the dots.

“Ah shit!”

D.D. wasn't nauseous anymore. She was pissed off.

She grabbed her pager, her creds, and her winter jacket. Then, Bobby's instructions ringing in her head, she prepared to ambush her own crime scene.

2

Who do you love?

I met Brian at a Fourth of July cookout. Shane's house. The kind of social invite I generally refused, but lately had realized I needed to reconsider. If not for my own sake, then for Sophie's.

The party wasn't that large. Maybe thirty people or so, other state troopers and families from Shane's neighborhood. The lieutenant colonel had made an appearance, a small coup for Shane. Mostly, however, the cookout attracted other uniformed officers. I saw four guys from the barracks standing by the grill, nursing beers and harassing Shane as he fussed over the latest batch of brats. In front of them were two picnic tables, already dominated by laughing wives who were mixing up batches of margaritas in between tending various children.

Other people lingered in the house, prepping pasta salads, catching the last few minutes of the game. Chitchatting away as they took a bite of this, a drink of that. People, doing what people do on a sunny Saturday afternoon.

I stood beneath the shade of an old oak tree. At Sophie's request, I was wearing an orange-flowered sundress and my single dressy pair of gold sparkling flip-flops. I still stood with my feet slightly apart, elbows tight to my unarmed sides, back to the tree. You can take the girl out of the job, but not the job out of the girl.

I should mingle, but didn't know where to start. Take a seat with the ladies, none of whom I knew, or head to where I would be more comfortable, hanging with the guys? I rarely fit in with the wives and

LISA GARDNER

couldn't afford to look like I was having fun with the husbands—then the wives would stop laughing and shoot daggers at me.

So I stood apart, holding a beer I'd never drink as I waited for the event to wind down to a point where I could politely depart.

Mostly, I watched my daughter.

A hundred yards away, she giggled ecstatically as she rolled down a grassy knoll with half a dozen other kids. Her hot pink sundress was already lawn-stained and she had chocolate chip cookie smeared across her cheek. When she popped up at the bottom of the hill, she grabbed the hand of the little girl next to her and they chugged back up as fast as their three-year-old legs could carry them.

Sophie always made friends instantly. Physically, she looked like me. Personality-wise, she was completely her own child. Outgoing, bold, adventurous. If she had her way, Sophie would spend every waking moment surrounded by people. Maybe charm was a dominant gene, inherited from her father, because she certainly didn't get it from me.

She and the other toddler arrived at the top of the hill. Sophie lay down first, her short dark hair contrasting deeply against a patch of yellow dandelions. Then, a flash of chubby arms and flailing legs as she started to roll, her giggles peeling against the vast blue sky.

She stood up dizzily at the bottom and caught me watching her.

"Love you, Mommy!" she cried, and dashed back up the hill.

I watched her run away and wished, not for the first time, that I didn't have to know all the things a woman like me had to know.

Hello."

A man had peeled off from the crowd, making his approach. Late-thirties, five ten, hundred and eighty, buzz-cut blonde hair, heavily muscled shoulders. Maybe another cop, given the venue, but I didn't recognize him.

He held out his hand. Belatedly, I offered my own.

"Brian," he said. "Brian Darby." He jerked his head toward the house. "I live down the street. You?"

LISA GARDNER

“Umm. Tessa. Tessa Leoni. I know Shane from the barracks.”

I waited for the inevitable comments men made when meeting a female officer. *A cop? I'd better be on good behavior, then. Or, Ooooh, where's your gun?*

And those were the nice guys.

Brian, however, just nodded. He was holding a Bud Light in one hand. He tucked his other hand in the pocket of his tan shorts. He wore a blue collared shirt with a gold emblem on the pocket, but I couldn't make it out from this angle.

“Got a confession,” he said.

I braced myself.

“Shane told me who you were. Though, to give me some credit, I asked first. Pretty woman, standing alone. Seemed smart to do a little recon.”

“What did Shane say?”

“He assured me that you're totally out of my league. Naturally, I took the bait.”

“Shane's full of shit,” I offered.

“Most of the time. You're not drinking your beer.”

I looked down, as if noticing the bottle for the first time.

“Part of my recon,” Brian continued easily. “You're holding a beer, but not drinking it. Would you prefer a margarita? I could get you one. Though,” he eyed the gaggle of wives, who were well into the third pitcher and laughing accordingly, “I'm a little afraid.”

“It's okay.” I loosened my stance, shook out my arms. “I don't really drink.”

“On call?”

“Not today.”

“I'm not a cop, so I won't pretend to know the life, but I've been hanging out with Shane a good five years now, so I like to think I understand the basics. Being a trooper is way more than patrolling highways and writing tickets. Ain't that right, Shane?” Brian boomed his voice, letting the common lament of any state trooper carry over the patio. At the grill, Shane responded by raising his right hand and flipping off his neighbor.

LISA GARDNER

“Shane’s a whiner,” I said, letting my voice carry, as well.

Shane flipped me off, too. Several of the guys laughed.

“How long have you been working with him?” Brian asked me.

“A year. I’m a rookie.”

“Really? What made you want to be a cop?”

I shrugged, uncomfortable again. One of those questions everyone asked and I never knew how to answer. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“I’m a merchant marine,” Brian offered up. “I work on oil tankers. We ship out a couple of months, then are home a couple of months, then out a couple of months. Screws with the personal life, but I like the work. Never boring.”

“A merchant marine? What do you do . . . protect against pirates, things like that?”

“Nah. We run from Puget Sound up to Alaska and back. Not too many Somali pirates patrolling that corridor. Plus, I’m an engineer. My job’s to keep the ship running. I like wires and gears and rotors. Guns, on the other hand, scare the crap out of me.”

“I don’t care for them much myself.”

“Funny comment, coming from a police officer.”

“Not really.”

My gaze had returned automatically to Sophie, checking in. Brian followed my line of sight. “Shane said you had a three- year- old. Holey moley, she looks just like you. No taking the wrong kid home from this party.”

“Shane said I had a kid, and you still took the bait?”

He shrugged. “Kids are cool. I don’t have any, but that doesn’t mean I’m morally opposed. Father in the picture?” he added casually.

“No.”

He didn’t look smug at that news, more like contemplative. “That’s gotta be tough. Being a full-time cop and raising a child.”

“We get by.”

“Not doubting you. My father died when I was young. Left my mother to raise five kids on her own. We got by, too, and I respect the hell out of her for it.”

LISA GARDNER

“What happened to your father?”

“Heart attack. What happened to her father?” He nodded toward Sophie, who now appeared to be playing tag.

“Better offer.”

“Men are stupid,” he muttered, sounding so sincere that I finally laughed. He flushed. “Did I mention I have four sisters? These are the things that happen when you have four sisters. Plus, I have to respect my mom twice as much because not only did she survive being a single mother, but she survived being a single mother with four girls. And I never saw her drink anything stronger than herbal tea. How about them apples?”

“She sounds like a rock,” I agreed.

“Since you don’t drink, maybe you’re also an herbal tea kind of gal?”

“Coffee.”

“Ah, my personal drug of choice.” He looked me in the eye. “So, Tessa, maybe some afternoon, I could buy you a cup. Your neighborhood or my neighborhood, just let me know.”

I studied Brian Darby again. Warm brown eyes, easygoing smile, solidly built shoulders.

“Okay,” I heard myself say. “I would like that.”

Do you believe in love at first sight? I don’t. I’m too studied, too cautious for such nonsense. Or maybe, I simply know better.

I met Brian for coffee. I learned that when he was home, his time was his own. It made it easy to hike together in the afternoons, after I’d recovered from the graveyard shift and before I picked up Sophie from daycare at five. Then we caught a Red Sox game on my night off, and before I knew it, he was joining Sophie and me for a picnic.

Sophie did fall in love at first sight. In a matter of seconds, she’d climbed onto Brian’s back and demanded giddyup. Brian obediently galloped his way across the park with a squealing three-year-old clutching his hair and yelling “Faster!” at the top of her lungs. When they were done, Brian collapsed on the picnic blanket while Sophie

LISA GARDNER

toddled off to pick dandelions. I assumed the flowers were for me, but she turned to Brian instead.

Brian accepted the dandelions tentatively at first, then positively beaming when he realized the entire wilted bouquet was just for him.

It became easy, after that, to spend the weekends at his house with a real yard, versus my cramped one- bedroom apartment. We would cook dinner together, while Sophie ran around with his dog, an aging German shepherd named Duke. Brian bought a plastic kiddie pool for the deck, hung a toddler's swing from the old oak tree.

One weekend when I got jammed up, he came over and stocked my fridge to get Sophie and me through the week. And one afternoon, after I'd worked a motor vehicle accident that left three kids dead, he read to Sophie while I stared at the bedroom wall and fought to get my head on straight.

Later I sat curled up against him on the couch and he told me stories of his four sisters, including the time they'd found him napping on the sofa and covered him in makeup. He'd spent two hours biking around the neighborhood in glittering blue eye shadow and hot pink lipstick before he happened to catch his reflection in a window. I laughed. Then I cried. Then he held me tighter and we both said nothing at all.

Summer slid away. Fall arrived, and just like that, it was time for him to ship out. He'd be gone eight weeks, back in time for Thanksgiving, he assured me. He had a good friend who always looked after Duke. But, if we wanted . . .

He handed me the key to his house. We could stay. Even girl the place up if we wanted to. Maybe some pink paint in the second bedroom, for Sophie. Couple of prints on the wall. Princess rubber duckies in the bathroom. Whatever it took to make us comfortable.

I kissed his cheek, returned the key to the palm of his hand.

Sophie and I were fine. Always had been, always would be. See you in eight weeks.

Sophie, on the other hand, cried and cried and cried.

Couple of months, I tried to tell her. Hardly any time at all. Just a matter of weeks.

LISA GARDNER

Life was duller with Brian gone. An endless grind of getting up at one p.m., retrieving Sophie from daycare by five, entertaining her until her bedtime at nine, with Mrs. Ennis arriving at ten so I could patrol from eleven to seven. The life of a single working mom. Struggling to stretch a dime into a dollar, cramming endless errands into an already overscheduled day, fighting to keep my bosses happy while still meeting my young daughter's needs.

I could handle it, I reminded myself. I was tough. I'd gotten through my pregnancy alone, I'd given birth alone. I'd endured twenty-five long, lonely weeks at the live-in Police Academy, missing Sophie with every breath I took but determined not to quit because becoming a state police officer was the best shot I had to provide a future for my daughter. I'd been allowed to return home to Sophie every Friday night, but I also had to leave her crying with Mrs. Ennis every Monday morning. Week after week after week, until I thought I'd scream from the pressure. But I did it. Anything for Sophie. Always for Sophie.

Still, I started checking e-mail more often because if Brian was in port he'd send us a quick note, or attach a silly picture of a moose in the middle of some Alaskan main street. By the sixth week, I realized I was happier the days he e-mailed, tenser the days he didn't. And Sophie was, too. We huddled together over the computer each night, two pretty girls waiting to hear from their man.

Then finally, the call. Brian's ship had docked in Ferndale, Washington. He'd be discharged the day after tomorrow, and would be catching the red-eye back to Boston. Could he take us to dinner?

Sophie selected her favorite dark blue dress. I wore the orange sundress from the Fourth of July cookout, topped with a sweater in deference to the November chill.

Sophie, keeping lookout from the front window, spotted him first. She squealed in delight and raced down the apartment steps so fast I thought she'd fall. Brian barely caught her at the end of the walk. He scooped her up, whirled her around. She laughed and laughed and laughed.

I approached more quietly, taking the time for a last minute tuck

LISA GARDNER

of my hair, buttoning my light sweater. I stepped through the front door of the apartment complex. Shut it firmly behind me.

Then I turned and studied him. Took him in from eight feet away. Drank him up.

Brian stopped twirling Sophie. Now he stood at the end of the walk, my child still in his arms, and he studied me, too.

We didn't touch. We didn't say a word. We didn't have to.

Later, after dinner, after he brought us back to his place, after I tucked Sophie into the bed across the hall, I walked into his bedroom. I stood before him, and let him peel the sweater from my arms, the sundress from my body. I placed my hands against his bare chest. I tasted the salt on the column of his throat.

"Eight weeks was too long," he muttered thickly. "I want you here, Tessa. Dammit, I want to know I'm coming home to you always."

I placed his hands upon my breasts, arching into the feel of his fingers.

"Marry me," he whispered. "I mean it, Tessa. I want you to be my wife. I want Sophie to be my daughter. You and her should be living here with me and Duke. We should be a family."

I tasted his skin again. Slid my hands down his body, pressed the full length of my bare skin against his bare skin. Shivered at the contact. Except it wasn't enough. The feel of him, the taste of him. I needed him against me, I needed him above me, I needed him inside me. I needed him everywhere, right now, this instant.

I dragged him down to the bed, wrapping my legs around his waist. Then he was sliding inside my body and I groaned, or maybe he groaned, but it didn't really matter. He was where I needed him to be.

At the last moment, I caught his face between my hands so I could look into his eyes as the first wave crashed over us.

"Marry me," he repeated. "I'll be a good husband, Tessa. I'll take care of you and Sophie."

He moved inside of me and I said: "Yes."