

ELITE GUARDIANS [2]

WITHOUT WARNING

LYNETTE EASON



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Lynette Eason, *Without Warning*
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Dedicated to my family. I love you all!



Many thanks to those on my wonderful Facebook page who gave their input on the name of Daniel's restaurant. Here were the top ten:

Rewind—Valia Jade Warren

A Taste in Time—Pam Wright Burke

Bygone Bites—Sarah Thomas

Moments in Thyme—Tana Porter

Generations—Tana Porter

Yesterday Café—Jenice Pearson

Time Warp—Cassie Chidester

Vintage—Candy Arrington

Candle Light Café—Lynn McJunkin

A Taste of Yesterday—Rachelle Gwinn ****THE WINNER****

The name was chosen by the Revell staff and other voters on Facebook.

Thank you so much to all of my Facebook buddies who gave their input. You all did a fabulous job and I appreciate it very much!

[1]

A TASTE OF YESTERDAY RESTAURANT

EARLY SATURDAY MORNING

12:26 AM

Chink, chink, chink.

Seated at the desk and studying the frustrating spreadsheet, Daniel Matthews had ignored the sound for the past five minutes. Until he realized it wasn't supposed to be there. It came from somewhere below him, a barely there noise, but one that annoyed him—and had him curious. He looked up from the computer. Everyone else had gone home for the night, leaving him alone in the building. Hadn't they?

Of course he was alone. He'd escorted his last-to-leave interim chef, Marie Stewart, out the door and to her car. When she'd driven away, he'd returned to the restaurant and locked himself inside. He tapped his pen against the paper on the desk and thought. Okay, so if he was the sole occupant, what was making the noise? Something with the water heater again?

Chink, chink, chink.

Didn't sound like a water heater noise, but what did he know?

He rose from the desk and walked to the open office door. Just beyond the threshold, the steps to the basement and wine cellar were to his left. The door stood open because he'd promised his closing staff he'd take care of locking up. Before he left, he planned to check the wine inventory—he just hadn't gotten to it yet because the numbers on the spreadsheet had captured his attention.

He was working late, having come down to the restaurant after putting in a full day in his fifth-floor office at the headquarters building in downtown Columbia, South Carolina. He might be the CEO of A Taste of Yesterday, Inc., but he still liked to keep his hand on the day-to-day operations of all six of his restaurants. This one in particular, since it was his newest establishment—and losing money. Thanks to a business trip cancellation, he had a chunk of time he could devote to finding the problem and coming up with a solution. Was the loss strictly due to the theft he'd discovered by his former chef? Or something more complex?

The *chink, chink, chink* sounded again. He frowned and flipped the light on in the stairwell, revealing brick walls that were original to the old 1860s building. One of the few structures in Columbia that had survived Sherman's 1865 march when he and his troops had nearly burned the city to the ground.

Daniel started down. His hand slid along the rail and he tried to listen over the echo of his shoes on the matching brick steps. At the bottom, he paused, the chill of the basement penetrating the wool sweater he had on over a long-sleeved T-shirt. At the bottom, he stopped. Listened for the sound.

Heard . . . a footstep? "Hey! Is someone down here?"

He walked past the wine cellar. Just beyond that, rows of storage shelves greeted him on either side of the brick path that ran between them. He continued toward the back of the

basement, his heart picking up speed, his blood humming a little faster through his veins. As he got closer to the back, the temperature dropped. A lot. Why was it so cold in here? A shuffle of a footstep up ahead made him pause. “Hello? Who’s there?”

No answer. But he knew someone was there.

Uneasiness crept through him and he wondered at the wisdom of continuing on in his search for the source of the noise.

Chink, chink, chink.

What *was* that? The noise was louder now, so it was definitely coming from down here. More footsteps. But faint, like they were moving away. Daniel slipped back to the wine cellar and grabbed a bottle of wine from the nearest rack. Not much of a weapon but better than nothing. He patted his back pocket. He’d left his phone upstairs. He grimaced. Of course. And the Beretta M9 he’d removed from his shoulder holster and placed into the now-locked top drawer of his desk wouldn’t do him any good either. He rarely went anywhere without the gun on him but had gotten too comfortable in his office. Too complacent in a life without danger around every corner. If he went to retrieve the weapon, whoever was down here would get away. If he confronted the person, it could be a deadly mistake. Then again, it was highly unlikely the person up ahead would know Daniel had once been a Marine. And Daniel planned to use that to his advantage.

He gave a low grunt. So be it. Hand-to-hand combat it would be. No one was going to break into his restaurant and not expect to face consequences.

With his adrenaline surging, he made his way back toward the sound. The recently replaced exposed pipes above his head rumbled. He’d never noticed that before. True, he’d had everything checked out before he’d bought the place, but since it had been renovated and opened to the public, he’d spent little time in the basement.

He finally came to the end of the row of shelves. The room opened up and light from the parking lot filtered through the open basement door. He heard the roar of an engine and a chill that had nothing to do with the physical temperature swept over him. He raced to the door in time to see taillights fade into the distance. Someone had been in the basement. But why? Who?

A gust of wind caught him full in the face and he flinched. Goose bumps pebbled his skin.

Chink, chink, chink.

Daniel spun toward the sound. His eyes landed on a body hanging from the ceiling pipe, held there with a chain wrapped around his neck. Daniel inhaled sharply and backpedaled as he recognized the grotesquely distorted features on the body that gently swayed back and forth. The dead eyes stared at him, as though accusing Daniel of letting him die.

Another heavy burst of wind came through the open door behind him and the extra length of the chain knocked against the exposed pipe.

Chink, chink, chink.

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Katie Singleton fought a yawn as she crossed the Broad River on 76 and headed home. To her left, and up ahead off Elmwood Avenue, the road that ran parallel to 76, blue and red flashing lights caught her attention. Briefly she wondered what was going on but was too tired to think any more about it. At least it was a good tired.

She'd just come off a job that had ended well. It had been a fun concert with a well-behaved, well-mannered celebrity who appreciated—and listened to—her security team. A dream assignment. As far as she was concerned, it was the perfect way to start her week of vacation. Well, week of renovation. Which

was vacation to her. She'd just purchased the home she'd grown up in as a child. A 1920s Charleston-style home on Gadsden Street that was "livable" but still needed a lot of work. Next on the agenda was her kitchen. The cabinets had been ordered and were due to arrive on Tuesday.

She glanced in her rearview mirror, the law enforcement lights catching her attention once again as she passed them. She gave a slight start. Was that Daniel Matthews's restaurant? A Taste of Yesterday?

Riley Matthews, Daniel's niece, was one of Katie's students in the self-defense class she taught twice a week at the local gym. Katie pulled off the highway at the next exit, then drove to Elmwood to head back toward the lights. She passed Elmwood Cemetery on her right and slowed. The cemetery sloped downward. At the bottom of the hill, a brick retaining wall separated the burial grounds and the back of the restaurant. She could see the action focused on that part of the building.

She pulled into the parking lot and stopped when a uniformed officer lifted his hand and frowned at her. Behind him she recognized Detective Quinn Holcombe, a man she worked with in a professional capacity on a regular basis. She rolled to a stop on the outside of the yellow tape and caught Quinn's eye. He raised a brow and jogged over. The officer who'd waved nodded at Quinn and stepped back when he saw that Quinn knew her.

She lowered her window. "What's going on?"

"Katie." He placed a hand on the top of the car and leaned toward her. "What are you doing here?"

"I was on the way home from the concert across the river and saw all the lights. It looked like it was coming from here. I know Riley Matthews, Daniel Matthews's niece."

The light went on for him. "I see." He glanced back at the

building. “Apparently someone broke into the basement of the restaurant and hung himself.”

“Apparently?” Katie blinked. “*Hung* himself?”

“Well, that’s what it looks like, hence the word ‘apparently.’ I’m not saying that’s what happened.”

“Murder?”

He hesitated and she knew it wasn’t because he was afraid he was talking out of turn. Thanks to the mayor and her work with the Elite Guardians Agency, Katie had special credentials that allowed her to be “read in” on cases, even contracted as a professional in certain circumstances. She knew Quinn was just pausing, trying to figure it out in his own head. “Maybe,” he finally said. “I think so, but that’s just speculation. We’ll have to wait for the ME’s report, of course, but—” he shrugged—“Matthews said he heard footsteps and made it to the door just in time to see a car drive away. Like I said, we’ll see.” He nodded to the cameras mounted on the side of the building. “I’ll be real interested to see what those show.”

“Do you know who the victim is?”

“The chef Matthews fired week before last.” He consulted his notebook. “Maurice Armstrong. It seems they had words after Matthews caught him stealing from him and confronted him. Armstrong denied it, but Matthews had it on video. He told him if he ever set foot on one of his properties again, he’d turn him in and have him arrested.”

“Ooh, that doesn’t sound good.” She frowned. “Why *didn’t* he call the police and have him arrested?”

“Armstrong has a fifteen-year-old daughter he’s got sole custody of. There aren’t any other relatives that will take her—at least none that are in good health. I think there’s a grandmother, but she’s pretty sick, from what I understand. If Armstrong was to go to jail, she goes into the system.”

“So what happens now that Armstrong’s dead?”

“No idea. Either the sick grandmother or foster care.”

“That stinks.”

“Don’t I know it.”

He did. Better than most. “Sounds like Matthews isn’t such a bad guy.” Which was the impression she’d already gotten from what Riley said about him.

“First impressions indicate he’s one of the good ones,” Quinn reluctantly admitted.

Katie lifted a brow. Quinn didn’t say many positive things about anyone. “He made an impression on you.”

Quinn shrugged. “He’s a former Marine who served two tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. I’m former military. I want to believe he’s on the up-and-up. I think he’s tough and can have an attitude, but the jury’s still out on whether or not he’s a cold-blooded killer.”

But he *was* a man who could take care of himself. And while his actions sounded honorable—even compassionate—were they? Or had he not reported the theft for ulterior motives? From what little she’d picked up from Riley, the girl adored her uncle. But she might be wearing rose-tinted glasses. “Matthews—Daniel—was here alone? And he found the body?”

Quinn pursed his lips and nodded. “Yeah.”

“You think he killed him and staged it to look like a suicide?” She didn’t want to believe it for Riley’s sake, but she lived in the real world and knew Quinn had to consider the possibility even while his gut was telling him something different.

“I think someone did. But like I said, I don’t have the feeling it’s Matthews.” He scowled. “I’ve been wrong before, so I’m not ruling him out, of course. We’ll know more as time passes.”

“If it’s truly a suicide, I can see the guy hanging himself in the restaurant as being some sort of freaky revenge for Daniel

firing him. But other than that, why would anyone kill him, then decide to string up his body in the basement of the restaurant where he was fired from?” she murmured.

“Good questions. The only answers I can come up with for now would be to make Matthews look bad. Guilty.”

“Frame him?”

“Or paint him as responsible for the man’s despair. I don’t know, but we’ll figure it out.”

“No doubt. Did Armstrong leave a note?”

“Haven’t come across one yet.”

“Any more security cameras on the other side of the building?”

“Two. I’m hoping they picked up something. If not, we’re not going to have much to go on other than what the crime scene unit finds.”

She glanced past him. “Where’s Bree?”

Brianne Standish, Quinn’s partner, was usually on scene with him, but Katie hadn’t spotted her.

“Her sister had a DUI, she’s dealing with her—and her mother.”

Katie winced. “Ouch.”

“Tell me about it.”

Bree had some family issues that were making her crazy, but she was coping as best she could—and she had a partner who understood and had her back. She’d be all right. “Okay, I’ll get out of here. I just wanted to . . .” What? She shrugged. “I don’t know what I wanted. Guess to make sure Riley wasn’t somehow involved and that she didn’t need anything. And see if I could help in any way.”

Another officer rushed from the building. “Quinn!”

Quinn straightened and turned. “Yeah?”

“We’ve got another development.”

“What’s that?”

“One of Matthews’s other restaurants is burning over on North Lake Road.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Nope. Fire trucks are already on the scene.”

Quinn tapped the hood of Katie’s car. “You want to join the fun?”

Katie’s first reaction was a resounding no. Before the word left her lips, she considered it. Did she *want* to? Yes. *Could* she do it? As a former agent with Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms and a trained arson investigator, the thought of the fire intrigued her, fascinated her. However, flashes from the past during her stint with the explosives squad made her hesitate. “Um . . . no. I don’t think so.”

Quinn studied her for a moment. “That’s not the answer I’m looking for. You know you want to.”

Yes. Yes she did. “It’s not a matter of want to, you know that.”

“Come on, Katie, you can do this.”

“Quinn . . .” She sighed.

“Just come. Stand there and watch the fire. Give me feedback on it. You don’t have to do anything else.”

His furrowed brow and intense stare didn’t faze her. Her internal struggle did. Very few people knew the reason she was no longer with ATF. Quinn was one of those people. “Fine. I’ll ride over. I know where the place is.” She pursed her lips, wanting to recall the words. But she didn’t.

She caught the brief flash of surprise in his eyes before he nodded. “Good. See you there.”

“Where’s Daniel?”

“Still answering questions. He’s pretty shaken up.”

“Are you going to arrest him?” she asked.

He blew out a puff of air. “No. Like I said, I don’t think he

did it. But even if I did think him guilty, I've got no evidence to support an arrest tonight."

She hesitated. "Why don't I give him a ride? I can come back here on my way home and drop him off to get his car."

"I'll tell him."

So much for her renovation vacation.