

# STRANGER

A Death Valley Mystery

Melissa M. Garcia



iUniverse, Inc.  
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# Chapter 1

**W**hat happened to Tuesday?

She stared at the desk calendar and tried to remember the past twenty-four hours. *Could she have forgotten an entire day?*

Alex Delgado remembered every day she had been in prison. She could recall every minute of the ten years, two months, and seven days she had spent behind bars. There were days, early on, when she would have encouraged the blackouts. There were nights she would have loved to erase from her mind.

She had thought the memory lapses were in her past. She hadn't had a blackout since the night she'd been arrested.

"Did you hear me?"

She looked up at her brother, Ric, standing in the doorway of the office.

"I said the guy's dead in room 110."

"I heard you," she said, ignoring the sick feeling in her stomach.

Staring out the window at the brown desert, she wiped the perspiration from the back of her neck. She tried to keep the fear from rising in her gut. She didn't want to go back to prison. She rubbed her head, which was starting to pound at the temples—a side effect of the memory lapses.

Their guest had arrived on Saturday. Saturday she remembered. She even remembered Sunday and Monday, despite the fact that every day in this small, boring desert town was exactly the same as the day before.

She couldn't forget him because he was the only person staying in the motel other than herself and her brother. He hadn't looked sick. Nor had he looked suicidal.

"Please tell me he was older than he looked."

"Age wasn't an issue."

She turned to her brother. He was wearing a white wife-beater and black shorts. His arms were covered in tattoos, the largest a fading crucifix on his right forearm. There were also black stripes lining his left shoulder. His left arm was covered in Aztec art—a fading yellow sun, a pyramid, and a black snake with red eyes that slithered toward the black stripes. She had no idea how many more he had. The tattoos and his dark eyes gave him a menacing look.

"Alex, I gotta ask ..." He didn't finish. He didn't need to. He was pacing now. That worried her more than the dead body in room 110.

"I didn't do it," she told him, but a sick feeling in her stomach made her wonder if she did have something to do with this man's death. *Why couldn't she remember yesterday?*

"What's the scene look like?"

He stopped pacing and looked at her now. She waited for an answer despite the annoyed look on his face. He sighed.

"Door was closed, but no deadbolt. He was dressed. Looks like one shot to the side of the head. Dropped by the bed. Thirty-eight revolver at his feet. Blood and brain matter on the dresser."

"Revolver?"

He nodded and then rubbed his hand over his face.

She clicked on the fan and laid her head on her hand and closed her eyes to think. As her head continued to pound, her fear turned to nausea. The fan cooled the back of her neck as the sun warmed her face. She pushed away the fear. She needed to think.

She shouldn't have complained about the boring quiet life in Lake City, Nevada. It was better than prison.

She had gone to bed Monday night. As always she had trouble sleeping. *Then what?* The fog had crept into her brain. She remembered coming down the stairs to the office just before seven and relieving her brother at the front desk. He'd gone off to clean the rooms.

But the calendar showed Wednesday.

She hadn't heard a gunshot. Her room, 200, was close enough to room 110; she would have heard it. All she remembered was blackness. She tried to will her memory back, but knew the missing hours wouldn't return. They never had before.

"I need to see it."

She pulled her long black hair back in a ponytail. She felt Ric's eyes on her but she ignored him. She grabbed a lint brush from the drawer and rolled it across her chest and shoulders. She grabbed a pair of cleaning gloves for good measure.

"Not a good idea."

"Give me the card."

He handed her the card. "Don't do anything stupid."

She walked out of the office into the parking lot of the Death Valley Motel. Scanning the parking lot, the street, and the other rooms, she approached the door to room 110. She waited for a pickup truck to drive past, and when everything was quiet again she swiped the card, saw the green light flash, and slipped in.

Standing in the crime scene, her lungs expanded as if filling with air for the first time. She felt her heartbeat in every inch of her body as her eyes searched the room. She felt awake and alert. The fear of returning to prison faded, replaced by her childhood memories of wanting to be a cop.

She scanned the edges of the room first, taking in the scene. There was no forced entry. No sign of struggle. The back of the door was clean. A plaque hanging just under the peephole listed the checkout time. The window was closed, the shades drawn, the bedside lamp lit. It looked like a normal motel room, except for the smell.

The air wasn't on, making the room stuffy. That bothered her more than the stench of blood and the early stages of decomposition permeating the room. She could see no blood splatter on the window or drapes. She looked across the room, ignoring the body on the floor. The room seemed bare, even for a motel room, with no personal belongings visible. It reminded her of her own room upstairs.

The bathroom door was wide open. No blood on this door, either, but as her eyes traveled around the room, back to where she stood, she saw the deep red splatter on the television stand and the wall behind. More dried blood covered the dresser.

And gray brain matter, still wet.

A shot to the head. Their guest was tall. If he had been standing, the splatter was too low. *Maybe he was kneeling or sitting on the floor*, she thought. She felt her headache worsen.

She walked to the closet and edged it open. The rod was empty. A small suitcase sat on the floor. Moving aside the L.A. Dodgers cap on top, she flipped open the top and inventoried the clothes. Two shirts, tee shirts, two pairs of shorts, underwear, and socks. The guy didn't need much, and he hadn't bothered to unpack. She closed the bag.

Slipping off her flip-flops, she tiptoed carefully around the blood on the floor. The bed was empty, the pale blue bedspread pulled back to reveal the white sheet underneath, also splattered with blood.

She found a condom wrapper, torn open on the floor. She opened the nightstand drawer and found it empty. No wallet or cell phone anywhere.

She looked at the mass on the floor beside the bed. The skin was gray. She didn't check for rigor; she didn't need to touch the body to know he'd been dead for hours. His mouth was open slightly, as if he

were about to whisper a secret. She didn't look at his eyes, but she was positive it was the same man she had seen check in on Saturday. She was sure of that even though a portion of his head was gone and the rest was covered in dark blood.

In his late thirties, he had arrived alone. She had noticed a bad vibe as soon as he walked in the office. His intense, cold stare told her he was tougher than his small build suggested.

She had been concerned about the limp. He was too young for back problems. She presumed he was a gangbanger, but he was older than the guys she knew in Los Angeles. She guessed he'd been caught in a gun battle before and had escaped with just the limp.

This time he hadn't been so lucky.

He was dressed in jeans, a white tank top, and socks that had started out white but were now black from drying blood. His shoes were kicked aside, the shoelaces missing. She found the laces lying under the chair.

Tattoos covered his arm. On his left breast, above his heart, was penned the number 18. She found the 666 tattooed on his right hand.

A silver chain hung around his neck. She recognized the martyr on the metal: St. Jude. *Patron saint of lost causes*. She wasn't sure why she did it, but she pulled the necklace from him, wiped the blood off, and slipped it in her pocket.

As she started to back up, she spotted the gun on the floor—a revolver. It looked old. Well used or not well kept.

She looked down at the man's half-obliterated face. The gore didn't bother her. She'd seen worse.

She looked back at the condom wrapper and then the gun.

She was capable of finding a revolver. She was capable of pulling the trigger. She had access to the rooms. In the darkness of her brain where she couldn't remember, she could have come down the stairs to his room, opened the door with a keycard, and shot this man in the head. *But why?*

She glanced back at the television and the spray of blood. From where he had fallen, it was easy to explain it away as a suicide. A stranger in a lonesome desert town. But as Alex looked at the bed, she stopped. The fitted sheet that normally hugged the mattress was missing. The remaining sheet was pulled loose from the mattress and lay limply over the bed. Alex backtracked and checked the trash. She noticed a fast food bag, but no sheet. She slipped on her shoes and reviewed the room again, making sure she left no evidence that she had been there.

*Why was he in Lake City? Why was the blood splatter so low? The shoe laces, the missing sheet?* There were no answers in this room, only more questions.

She glanced through the peephole before walking from the room. She closed the door behind her and followed the hallway straight to the dumpsters behind the motel. She peered over. A sheet lay right on top of the trash, marred by several black stains. Blood.

Her head pounded as she stared at the bloody sheet. She looked back at the door of room 110. She had no reason to kill this man, but she knew she would be the perfect suspect.



## Chapter 2

**R**ic was watching a movie when Alex returned to the office. Two extremely uncomfortable folding chairs provided the only seating in the room. Ric sat in one of the chairs in front of his so-called entertainment center: a 20-inch television, a DVD player, and a printer. His feet were propped up on Alex's desk.

He had pulled on a long-sleeve shirt to cover the tattoos, or to cover his past. His eyes were no longer red. He looked respectable now, respectable enough so he wouldn't draw interest from the cops that would be swarming soon.

He would seem relaxed to most people, but Alex saw his interest wasn't in the movie. He often put his feet up when he was heavy in thought. She also recognized the worry on his face.

She threw him the keycard and took off her gloves. He caught the card one-handed without taking his eyes from the screen.

Cheerful music spilled from the speakers. Confused, she peered over

her brother's shoulder and recognized the movie. Mr. Blonde was pulling a shaving blade out of his boot. Alex watched as he danced around to the music. The camera panned to the left, and the playful music increased. Then shrieks of pain filled in the blanks that the image refused to show.

Alex knocked Ric's dirty boots from the desk and turned away from the screaming. "Call it in," she said.

Behind Ric was her makeshift kitchen, a sink and a coffeemaker. She poured out the stale coffee and made a fresh pot.

"Already did," he said. "Patrol's on the way. You need to leave."

She shook her head. It would be the smart thing to do, but she couldn't leave now. Her blood was moving. "I think it's time to meet the local pigs."

He grunted at the term, but looked at her. "I wasn't asking."

She could see the concern in his eyes. "We both know talking isn't your specialty. Neither is being friendly to police. I'm staying."

He jabbed a finger at her. "*You* talking is dangerous. I can keep up a basic conversation about a dead body without drawing suspicion or shooting someone."

"Fine. I'll stay quiet if you promise to be good. Either way, I'm staying."

He said nothing.

She opened the refrigerator. Only she and Ric knew it never held food, but rather the surveillance system they had installed less than a month earlier.

The red light glowed. As always, Ric had thought ahead and turned the cameras off before she walked into room 110. She pulled the disc from the recorder and took her time inserting a blank disc and setting it to record again. The green light lit up. She expected Ric to say something, but he remained silent.

"What was his name?" she asked.

"Eddie Chavez, from Henderson, Nevada, just outside Las Vegas."

He was still watching her, watching her hands. The concern on his face had changed to worry. He was thinking, and that made her uneasy.

She returned the stare until he turned back to the movie. He pushed up the volume on the remote.

She turned to the computer on her desk and glanced through the record he had pulled up on their guest. It was basic information Ric had received from the customer's driver's license. It would tell her nothing about why her guest had appeared in Lake City four days ago.

"Where's his car?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Missing. I didn't see it at all last night. I figured he was out when I went to clean the room."

No other guests were booked in any of the rooms. That meant the cops would be left with only Ric and herself to question as witnesses. This was going to be a problem. They would need to give the cops a suspect, or the cops might turn on their only witnesses.

She noticed there was a note on room 105 for cleaning. "Did we get someone else in last night?"

There was a pause. Alex looked back at her brother.

"Ric?"

"We had one check in last night. She stayed for a few hours, then checked out. Paid cash. It's already in the safe."

"Stop renting our rooms out to prostitutes. This isn't a brothel."

He didn't take his eyes off the movie. "Hey, hookers have to sleep somewhere, too. Last I checked, it's not a crime to check into a motel. I can't turn them away. They'll just find another place to do business. Besides, we could use the money."

She didn't bother to comment that he had given her five excuses. She had recently noticed he did that when he was uncomfortable with the conversation. Spending all this time in the hot desert alone was making her more conscious of his habits and his changing attitude.

"They're committing crimes inside our rooms," Alex rebutted, "and we have the cops on their way. She's now a witness." She recalled the scene. "Or a suspect."

He shook his head. "She wasn't here but a couple of hours. My guess, he bought the farm after she left."

Alex started to protest, but he held his hands up. "I'll find out for sure," he offered.

"Try not to mention her to the cops, or they'll have something else to hang me on."

She pulled her old sweater over her tank top. She didn't have any tattoos like her brother, but the scar on her right shoulder could bring unneeded attention. The sweater was old and ratty beyond anything her old pit bull had ever destroyed. It had once been red, and now couldn't even be called pink, but it was her favorite. It smelled of home, so she refused to throw it away. She would endure the heat for the comfort it now brought. The sweater was also a size too big. Not that she had meant to lose the weight. She had no desire to be 110 pounds. The weight loss had left her gangly and awkward. That's what happened when you sat in a prison cell for ten years, she supposed. If she continued to push herself, she would gain it back in muscle before New Year's.

Alex said, "I think he raped someone."

Ric looked at her. "How do you know?"

"There's a bloody sheet in the dumpster," she said.

"Maybe it's his blood on the sheet."

"Yeah, he walked over to the trash and dumped it in after he shot himself."

He shrugged. "Maybe the killer did."

"Why dispose of the bloody sheet? There's plenty more blood on the floor and walls," she said.

"Maybe the killer got cut and it's his blood."

"The dumpster would be part of the crime scene; the police will find it. If you're trying to prevent yourself from getting caught for murder, you hide the sheet better than that. The blood is completely dried. I think whatever caused that blood happened earlier. He had a gun. Condom wrapper and bloody sheet points to rape."

"You're stretching. Or projecting."

She started to argue, but he stood and stared out the window.

"Put the gloves back on. Your friends are pulling up now."

Alex obeyed her brother and put on the gloves. She slipped the disc into her sweater pocket.

“Last chance to take off,” Ric said.

“Not a chance.”





## Chapter 3

**T**wo patrol cars pulled into the lot. Two officers stepped from one cruiser. Alex watched as one pulled a box from his trunk and scanned the lot. The second stood waiting for instructions. Out of the second patrol car a third officer emerged, pulled on his jacket, and walked toward the office.

She quickly evaluated the three men and determined she could take any of them with no problem.

As the officer pushed open the door, Ric stepped forward and introduced himself first. Alex knew it was his way to assert his control in the room.

“My name is Patrol Sergeant Jeff Morgan with the Lake City Police Department.”

The man’s jacket covered his name badge. His pants were a dull green. His boots could have used some polish. His hair could have used a comb. His appearance didn’t invoke a lot of confidence.

“You called dispatch about a deceased male?” The sergeant glanced at Alex and then back to Ric.

“He’s in room 110.” Ric handed him the keycard. “It’s all yours. We’ll be here when you’re done.”

At least he had kept it simple, Alex thought.

“My men will work the scene. What can you tell me about the victim?” he asked.

Alex watched Sergeant Morgan. He shifted his weight, but continued to slouch. She noticed his gun holster was unlatched. On his left side was his Taser. She stared at it until her focus was broken by the man’s voice.

“Like I mentioned to dispatch,” Ric continued, “we have a dead guest. Male, mid-thirties. Checked in four days ago. Gunshot wound to the head.”

“Can you turn the television off for a minute?” the sergeant asked.

Ric flipped off the television and glanced at the sergeant. “Do you get distracted easily?”

“You said the dead body was in room 101. Who was registered to the room?”

Ric clenched his fists and then released with a sigh. “Room 110. If you’re going to interview me, then do it right. I talk, you write. There’s no excuse for lousy police work.”

Alex prayed her brother wouldn’t blow up. She didn’t want to play referee.

“I’m just doing my job, Mr. Delgado. If you let me, I can be out of your hair quickly. Otherwise, we’ll do the interview at the station.”

Ric’s eyebrows rose. “Are you going to arrest me, Sergeant?”

He didn’t answer, but he did glance at Alex again. Maybe he had hoped she would help him out. She decided to keep her mouth shut.

“Who was registered to room 110?” Sergeant Morgan asked.

“He said his name was Eddie Chavez.”

“How did he pay?”

“Cash.”

Morgan shifted his feet, wrote a note and then asked, "When was the last time you saw him?"

"I didn't see him yesterday and he refused housekeeping. I did see him Monday afternoon. He was leaving. I didn't notice him return."

"How did—"

"He seemed normal to me," Ric interrupted, expecting the question. "He didn't seem antsy or troubled. He didn't look angry or frightened. He didn't look suicidal either. He just drove out. I didn't ask where he was going."

"You have access to all the rooms?"

Ric didn't answer.

Alex turned at the sound of another car. A burgundy Escalade pulled to a stop behind the patrol cars. Clean and shiny, even in the desert dust. She wondered how a small town police department could afford such a vehicle.

A man stepped from the Escalade's driver's seat. He walked as if he owned the town, Alex thought. He wore jeans, tennis shoes, and an olive green polo shirt. Athletic build. Tall. Shades covered his eyes, but he had a stern look on his face.

A badge and a gun were at his right hip, but she could have pegged him as a detective without them. His walk was fast, determined, maybe even a little impatient, as he approached the officer stringing police tape around the parking lot. He pointed toward room 110, then toward the office. As the detective turned, she turned her head back toward her brother and the sergeant.

"Where were you yesterday?" the sergeant asked.

"I slept from noon to about six. I spent the remaining evening sitting right here. All night. I didn't hear anything. I checked his room this morning and found him dead on the floor. Called you guys right away."

"What else do you know about the victim?"

"He drove foreign wheels, but his car is gone."

"Foreign wheels? Mexican plates?"

"I'm done," Ric said, looking at Alex, obviously frustrated.

"Sergeant Morgan, I believe your detective just arrived," Alex said, pointing out the window.

Morgan turned to look. "Excuse me a minute."

After he left, Ric joined her at the desk.

"Your thoughts?" she asked.

"I'm wondering who Sergeant Moron slept with to get his stripes."

"Why the jacket? It's hot out there," Alex said.

"Either he forgot his badge or his name plate. He doesn't want to get caught so he covers his uniform with the jacket. What about the other cops?" Ric asked.

"They broadened the crime scene to include the parking lot and dumpsters. The taller one waited for the detective before he started taking pictures."

The sergeant spoke briefly to the detective before heading toward room 110. The detective headed toward the office.

"How are we playing this?" she asked her brother.

"Straight," Ric said. "Let me start. This guy isn't going to miss anything, so he's going to turn to you at some point to talk. Keep it simple," he said as the door opened.

"Mr. Delgado, I'm Detective Will Stellar." He offered his hand. "You found the body?"

Ric shook the man's hand. "Yes, sir. Ricardo Delgado. I'm the manager."

The detective turned his attention to Alex. He removed the sunglasses and dropped them on the counter. Ray-Bans. Expensive frames for a cop.

He reached his hand out to her. "And you are?"

"Alex," Ric answered for her. "Alex Delgado, my sister."

She didn't offer her hand.

Detective Stellar dropped his hand but continued to stare at her. His intense blue eyes seemed to look through her. She didn't look away. She should have, but her interest overpowered her reasoning. Strong jawbone.

Chin cleft. Just enough stubble to know he was a usual shaver, but recently he was neglecting his face. It gave him the rugged look, or the hungover look. His eyes looked alert and clear. Strong but observant.

He returned his focus to Ric and pulled out a notebook and pen.

“Fairly new in town?”

“Been here four months. Lived in Los Angeles before that.”

Detective Stellar looked confused, as if he had never heard of Los Angeles before. As he wrote, Alex noticed the watch on his wrist. A Rolex, solid and expensive. She spotted a tattoo sneaking out from under the shirt, possibly a name, but she couldn’t identify it.

“Tell me how you found the body?”

Ric folded his arms over his chest. “I thought he was already gone. I didn’t see his vehicle. I went in to clean, but the blood on the walls was a little too much for me.”

“And you’re sure he was dead?”

Ric nodded. “Doesn’t take a doctor. Half his skull is gone. It looked like an old .38 revolver on the floor.”

“Are you familiar with guns?”

Ric smirked. “A bit.”

He waited to see if Ric would elaborate. He didn’t. Ric’s shoulders relaxed, his face slackened. Stellar glanced at his notes. Alex reminded herself to breathe.

“Do you remember the make of the car?”

“Best guess from what I remember, it was probably a Benz. Newer model. Gray or black. Two-door. It’s not in the lot.”

Stellar wrote it down. “Did he provide identification when he checked in?”

“ID said his name was Eddie Chavez.” Ric spelled it for him.

“Make a copy?” Stellar asked. Ric shook his head. “How many other guests do you have right now?”

“None. We’re in a dry spell.”

“Summer in the desert will do that. Was there anyone else with him?”

“He checked in alone,” said Ric. “I never saw him with anyone. In fact, I don’t think he knew anyone from town.”

“You didn’t clean the room yesterday?”

“No. He was in the room when we normally clean. I waited until noon, but he hadn’t left. I knocked, but he said he was okay on towels.”

“Did he open the door?”

“No.”

The detective looked up. “Did you think that was odd?”

“Not at the time. I figured he was nursing a hangover or something. Drinking too much is a popular thing to do around here, right, cowboy?”

Ignoring the comment, Detective Stellar asked, “Did anyone else go in the room this morning?”

Alex held her breath. Ric had a thing about lying to cops. He never did it. Ever.

“I didn’t see anyone go in.”

The detective nodded and glanced up at Alex, as if to make sure she was still there. He turned back to Ric. “Did you hear anything last night? Maybe a gunshot?”

“Lots of ’em. Watched *Scarface* around eight. Then did a *Godfather* marathon right after. I never left the office.”

Stellar grunted. “Good flicks.” He looked at Alex. “Were you here last night?”

She nodded.

“She lives in room 200,” Ric answered for her. “But she has the evenings off. She stays away from the guests.”

Stellar kept his eyes on Alex. “Did you hear anything last night?”

She shook her head. Stellar seemed to consider this. Alex knew what he was thinking. A revolver is loud. She wished for her memory to return.

“Any visitors or phone calls in or out of his room?”

Ric shook his head. “He kept to himself. I never saw anyone with him and I checked the phone system. No calls, although I did see him with a cell phone when he checked in.”

“Lonely man in a lonely town. If you think of anything else, let me know. Sergeant Morgan will be back later to have you complete an interview card. We’ll get this cleaned up as soon as we can, but suicides can be a little messy.”

He turned toward the door, but Alex couldn’t let him leave.

“It wasn’t a suicide.”

Both men turned toward her. Her brother’s eyes narrowed on her. She ignored his annoyance. The detective’s eyebrows rose in interest.

“You don’t know the man, but you don’t think he’s capable of suicide? Are you some sort of expert?”

She shook her head. “He has tattoos. I saw them when he checked in. He had ‘666’ tattooed on his hand.”

“So you think the devil came for him?”

“It’s not devil worship.”

He sighed. “I know. He’s probably with the Eighteenth Street gang. This isn’t my first encounter with Latino gangs, but even gangbangers have been known to commit suicide.”

“He didn’t commit suicide. The Eighteenth Street gang is known for auto theft, drugs, extortion—”

“Don’t forget rape, assault, and murder. How do you know about Eighteenth Street?”

Ric coughed but didn’t interrupt.

“And arms trafficking,” Alex continued, ignoring the detective’s question. “He would have had access to the very best automatic weapons. He wouldn’t kill himself with a piece-of-shit revolver.”

He was analyzing her again, as if his first estimate was incorrect. He wrote something down in his notebook. It made her uneasy, but she said nothing.

“Did you go into the room this morning?”

She shook her head. “I trust my brother when he tells me a guy’s dead. Besides, I can’t stand the sight of blood,” she lied.

He continued to write, taking his time before looking back up at her.

Ric shifted, then moved between Alex and Stellar. "The room's yours, Detective. Let me know when you're done."

Stellar retrieved his glasses from the counter. At the door, he turned to Alex. "Thanks. I'm sure I'll be back later with more questions."

He smiled at her. It was the first crack in the stern demeanor, and Alex immediately felt uncomfortable. The stern look returned as he walked out into the sun, the shades already hiding his eyes again.

Alex watched the detective walk back to the Escalade. One of the men handed him a bag. She watched as Stellar scanned the parking lot. His head moved slowly. He spent a few minutes looking at the pool. Then his eyes moved to the motel room doors. Then the stairwell.

*He's thorough*, she thought.

"I don't like the cowboy," Ric said. "He's hung over."

"We all have our hang-ups."

Ric grunted. "He's arrogant and cocky."

"Have you ever met a good cop that wasn't?" She watched through the window as Stellar spouted orders to his officers.

"You know him?" she asked.

Ric didn't answer.

She looked at her brother. "You called him cowboy."

"I've seen him around. He rides horses. His family owns cows. I don't like the way he looked at you. I thought you were going to keep your mouth shut."

She turned back toward the window. "He's a small-town detective. He's not going to cause any problems for me."

Outside, Stellar took the camera Sergeant Morgan offered and walked slowly toward room 110, as if each step was more important than the last. Before he entered the room, he glanced back at the office.

"Too late," Ric said. "He's already decided we're suspects."