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FOR REVIEW  
PURPOSES ONLY

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*An Annie Collins Mystery*

HELEN STARBUCK



Routt Street Press

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2018

***No Pity in Death: An Annie Collins Mystery***

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*Death is as casual—and often as unexpected—as birth.*

—JIM BISHOP

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 PROLOGUE

CURIOSITY KILLED THE cat as the saying goes, and it's true curiosity gets you into all sorts of trouble; isn't it Pink who suggests that it's better not to ask why? I'd done a lot of asking the previous year. I got answers, but they weren't the ones I'd hoped for, and the consequences had been unimaginable.

A friend of mine was worried about some patient deaths in the ICU step down unit. But as I knew all too well, people die for all sorts of reasons, some expected and some totally baffling. Sometimes your number is just up.

What would have piqued my curiosity about his concerns a year ago, held no interest for me now. Curiosity had nearly gotten me killed then—not an experience I intended to repeat.

 ONE

AS THE FLASHBACK washed over me, I could feel him gripping my face, pushing the tube down my throat, and forcing the deadly concoction of wine and oxycodone into me while telling me how I had made him do it. How he was just *'cleaning up a problem'* by overdosing me, like he had done when he killed my friend Libby and her lover Jeff. I felt him kiss me on the cheek and tell me 'Sweet dreams, Annie' as he left me in my bed to die.

I ended up bent over the grocery cart crying, telling myself I was okay, I was okay, it wasn't real.

"Dear, are you all right? Can I help?" an older woman asked me. Her hand hovered near my shoulder. She seemed hesitant to touch me, but was obviously concerned.

I stood up and wiped the tears off my face trying to still my shaking hands.

"I...I'm fine. I...thank you, I'm fine," I stammered. I grabbed my purse, left my cart in the aisle, and nearly ran out of the store.



"I WANT you to come see it and let me know what you think," Angel said over the phone. It was toward the end of June, and he'd spent the month looking for a suitable living arrangement for us.

The previous year had been disastrous. Two people I knew had been murdered, in addition to a third person, and I'd nearly died at the hands of someone I thought I knew and loved. Angel and I had lived next to each other for more than four years, but both sides of the duplex we shared seemed poisoned by the experience.

We agreed to go see the place after work.

Angel, known outside his circle of friends and family as Angelo Cisneros, was an assistant DA in Denver. He was appropriately nicknamed. Tall, with loosely curled dark hair, and deep brown eyes, he looked like an angel, just one who got into his fair share of trouble. We weren't lovers, although there had always been an undercurrent of attraction between us, which I had steadfastly resisted because of his hit-and-run tactics with women. We were good friends who'd gotten used to living near each other long before the events of last year. He claimed he'd always enjoyed the arrangement because the trouble I got into made life interesting.

It reminded me of the old Chinese curse: *May you live in interesting times*. I was tired of interesting times and desperately wanted life to bore the hell out of me.

He brushed away the curl that always insisted on falling onto his forehead as he drove to the destination. "It's an older triplex—it's been remodeled. Two bedrooms in each unit, and all three are vacant. I thought if it looked good to you, we can finalize things and get moved in."

I'd spent the last part of April and most of May in what I now thought of as hibernation, following a final conversation with my former lover after he was convicted and before he was sent to prison. Ian's threat to get out of prison and come back to *settle the score* with me for helping put him in prison, left me with an incapacitating terror.

Ian had been sentenced to two consecutive life sentences without parole, twenty years for conspiring to have another person beaten, who ultimately died, and an additional thirty years for my attempted murder. There was no chance he'd get out—at least that's what everyone told me, but I'd seen Ian's face and felt the hatred and I knew if he could find a way to get out he would, and he *would* make good on his promise.

As a result, I think I tried to finish the job he'd started by taking to my bed, not eating, and scaring the hell out of all the people who cared about me.

Multiple conversations with Angel's grandmother who he called in desperation and who was a formidable woman, had helped me get up and try to go on. I was not doing well; every day felt weighed down. I was, however, performing a reasonable impression of a normal person if you didn't look closely. That seemed to be what everyone expected. Mrs. Sandoval had assured me that, eventually, I would be.

I had serious doubts about that.

We pulled up in front of a small brick triplex in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, so named because of its proximity to the Colorado State Capitol building. It was one of those 1930s-1940s style, multi-unit, bungalow affairs with a tiny front porch on each unit and fanciful brickwork near the roofline.

"I know it looks old, but it's pretty nicely redone inside. What d'you think so far?" Angel seemed a bit anxious that I like it, and it sounded as if he really did.

"I like the outside. The front yard space needs some work." The grass in front of each unit and a small city-owned strip of grass bordering the street had just given up, not even weeds were growing there.

"Well, yeah, but you like to garden so you could probably get it to look better. Let's go inside," he said as he fished some keys out of his jacket pocket and opened the door to the end unit.

It was cute inside, but not huge; houses of that vintage rarely were. The living room would accommodate the few pieces of furniture I had left, having sold or given a number of things away because of their connection to Ian and the memories they recalled.

"Nice kitchen," I said, checking out the new cupboards and appliances. "What does the bath look like?" The kitchen had been updated, and I hoped that was true of the bath. I didn't want to deal with old plumbing and moldy tile.

"It's been redone as well, in all the units." He ushered me down the hall, opening the door to one bedroom and then another and finally opening the door to the bath.

“It’s really nice. But Angel, the rent on this place is probably through the roof. I don’t know if I can afford it.”

I wanted desperately to move, but I was short of cash. I had recently returned to the surgery department where I’d worked in the main OR. I was now working in the outpatient surgery pre-op area, easing back into practice. Much to my chagrin, Angel had paid my bills and rent the entire time I had checked out. I owed him money and, although he had yet to ask and might never ask to be repaid, I had to start bringing in a paycheck again.

“No, I worked out a deal, it’ll be fifteen hundred a month plus utilities. I think you can manage that, right?”

“Yeah, what kind of deal?”

“I bought the place,” he replied with a huge grin on his face.

“You what?”

“I bought it. It’s about time I bought something.” Angel was pretty much footloose and fancy free, much to the consternation of his family, who thought he should be married and settled by now. I wasn’t sure whether buying property constituted being settled to them, but that wasn’t my worry.

“We need someplace to live, neither one of us can continue to live where we are. Gabriela and Marisol desperately want to move out and get away from the parents. If my sisters were living next door to me, my folks would probably go for it.”

“I like it, a lot.” I would have liked anything that I could afford, just to move. More embarrassing to me was that I *needed* Angel next door. Although it was something I would never admit to, the thought of living without him close by terrified me. He seemed more than happy to comply.

His face lit up with a smile. “I knew you would! Let’s figure out which units we want, then I’ll let my sisters know and they can work on my folks.”

“I haven’t been around your sisters much. They aren’t party hearty, loud-music nuisances, are they?”

“Jesus, Annie, you sound about eighty years old; next thing you’ll be telling people is to get off the lawn.” He laughed. “Well, what there is of it.” He opened the door to the middle unit and we took a look

around. “They’re in school at UCD. They’re normal eighteen-to-twenty-year-olds, but with big brother around, it’s not likely there’ll be any real insanity.”

We toured the other end unit, and I finally said, “I’d like one of the end units, I think. I’d prefer you were in the middle one, to give me some buffer from the sibs.”



A MONTH into the new living arrangement, I wondered if my choice had been a mistake. The problem was not with Angel’s sisters. They kept fairly regular hours, kept their music at a non-ear-drum-puncturing level, and were as pleasant as girls their age usually were. The problem was with the soundproofing between units. Specifically, between Angel’s unit and mine—there wasn’t any. I heard the occasional laughing, music, and wall bumping, presumably from his headboard, and tried hard to ignore it. Tonight, however, it was driving me crazy.

Once we moved, Angel had jumped enthusiastically back onto the dating bandwagon. He’d given it up for nearly three months while trying to work, check on me, and make sure I hadn’t succeeded in offing myself. Now, apparently, he’d decided to make up for it in spades. It was weird; he seemed distracted most of the time and the endless stream of women felt almost frantic to me. I wasn’t sure what that was all about; perhaps he was just making up for lost time.

The rhythmic pounding of the headboard against our common wall seemed to go on and on. It was hard not to picture what was going on between him and his latest conquest, and I didn’t want to. It pissed me off and, although I rarely slept well anymore, I was tired and it was keeping me awake. At last I sat up, took a shoe and beat on the wall as hard as I could, and yelled, “Give it a rest!”

The thumping stopped immediately. It was very quiet and then I heard some muffled conversation, which escalated considerably in volume. Eventually, his front door opened and slammed shut, and I heard a car start and drive off. Not long afterward, someone, Angel, I presumed, was pounding on my door.

I got up, went to the door, and looked out the peephole. Yep, it was Angel, so I opened the door. He stood there without shirt or shoes, wearing jeans that rested low on his hips; his dark curls in disarray and a bite mark on his neck. I had never seen him without a shirt, and I had to admit it was a lovely sight. Well-muscled chest and abdomen with a lovely crop of hair across his pecs that met in the middle and drifted in a faint line down to his navel where it disappeared into his jeans like an invitation.

“You,” he said, pointing a finger at me, “give new meaning to the phrase *coitus interruptus*! She was so upset she left!”

“And you,” I replied, pointing my finger at him, “are incredibly annoying with your headboard banging on the wall. For God’s sake, move the damned bed away from the wall. I can’t sleep!”

He had the grace to blush, then said, “I’d have thought you’d had enough sleep these last few months to last a lifetime.”

“You fucking bastard!” I said, and slammed the door in his face.

“Well, I’m not now, am I? Thanks to you!” he yelled at me through the door.

I heard his door slam shut a minute later. So much for neighborly relations. Neighborly relations, however, were the least of my concerns. Angel and I would sort something out eventually. It was noticeably quieter in the ensuing days; I assumed he had moved the bed.

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AS MOST AUTHORS say, this is a novel. The characters live only in my mind and are not real people. The Denver setting is real. Although I may have described some places slightly differently than they are in real life, the descriptions are for the most part accurate.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**C**OLORADO NATIVE, OR nurse, and author of the Annie Collins mystery series, Helen Starbuck lives in Arvada, Colorado. Following the adage to “write what you know,” she writes her mysteries from the perspective of Annie Collins, an OR nurse. Her debut novel was *The Mad Hatter’s Son*. For more information, visit her website at [www.helenstarbuck.com](http://www.helenstarbuck.com).