

A Bloody Stiletto, Cold Lasagna, and a Bestseller

An Anna Romano Mystery Series

Book Two

By Cheryl Denise Bannerman

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| Prologue

I had just pulled the lasagna out of the oven when my phone rang. It was Shirlene. She was checking on me again for the tenth time this week. I guess she was as surprised as me that I was tangled up in yet another murder. She knew how stubborn I could be, and wanted me to lay low and follow John's instructions to stay out of the investigation. I couldn't believe how stingy he had been with information on the case in the past few days. It just didn't seem fair. I mean, I did find the first body. Geez.

"Don't mess this up! John is one of the good ones!" Shirlene said as if she was scolding a small child.

"I won't, don't worry," I responded as I hung up the call while rolling my eyes as far up into my head as medically possible.

Famous last words of a nosy Italian woman. Ha!

I wrapped the lasagna in my insulated food carry bag to keep it warm and headed for the car humming to myself.

It's the least I could do.

I plugged the address in to Sherman Atkinson's home that I retrieved from my search on the Internet and started on my way.

I was rehearsing what I was going to say to him when the GPS told me I had arrived at my destination. I pulled into the long driveway and stared up at the large two-story home in awe. I was gathering my bags in the front seat when Mark stepped out of the front door and headed towards my car.

I stepped out to greet him, and he offered to help me with the bags.

"Oh no, I'm fine. Thank you. Just brought a little something to say how sorry I am about your mom. How are you holding up?"

"Okay, I guess. Just headed to a friend's house. My dad's inside. Thank you for the food, it smells great," he replied as he walked to his car and got inside. Such a polite young man, I thought to myself.

I waved as he pulled off and was startled to find Sherman Atkinson right behind me when I turned around.

“Mr. Atkinson. How are you? I was just dropping off a pan of lasagna for you and your son for after the funeral tomorrow. I know cooking is the last thing on your mind when these things happen. I’m so sorry about your wife,” I said while forcing an awkward smile.

“That’s very nice of you...Ms. Romano, right? You were the one that discovered her body in the bathroom at the charity ball,” he seemed to confirm and question at the same time.

I nodded with empathy. “Yes, it was such a terrible thing that happened to her.”

“Aren’t you also that detective’s girlfriend?” he asked, as we walked through the door and he graciously took the pan out of my hands.

“Well, yes, but...yes, I am.”

As we entered the foyer and walked towards the kitchen, I looked around at the beautiful designs. Marble floors, exquisite art, abstract sculptures...

“Was your wife the decorator of the house?” I asked in awe. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Yes, it was one of her many hobbies. She enjoyed collecting antiques and visiting auctions quite a bit”, he smiled to himself.

As he was taking the pan out of the carry bag, and placing it on the kitchen counter, his cell phone chirped. Suddenly, his facial features changed and he turned to me with a furrowed brow. “Why don’t you tell me the *real* reason you are here, Ms. Romano.”

Just then, my phone chirped. It was a text from John.

John: *Hey. Where are you?*

Me: *Don’t be mad at me...dropping off a pan of lasagna at Mr. Atkinson’s house.*

John: *He’s a suspect in the murders. GET OUT NOW!*

John’s text is the last thing I remember before feeling a cold knife pressed to my neck.



Chapter 1



The Lady in Red...with a Touch of Flowers

I must say, everything has been going quite well with my handsome detective. The biological clock has officially stopped ticking. I actually have a real life, with a real romance, and a real future. John and I have been dating for a little over a month and tonight is our first date out in public.

I've decided to wear this new dress I picked up last week. It's a cute little red dress with white flower details that have a touch of yellow inside each flower.

I added a bit of red lipstick and a spritz of my favorite perfume before heading into the living room to see if John was dressed and ready to go. I smiled as I noted his personal items scattered about the room. A shirt here, a jacket there, his duffel bag in the corner. For some reason, it gave me a personal sense of security without feeling smothered. I liked having him here for most of the week and then back to his apartment for a few days.

He was on a call (on speaker) when I entered the room, so I smiled and quietly did a twirl in front of him, showing off my new duds. He mouthed the word "Wow" and put his index finger up to indicate 'one minute.'

Apparently, the DA wanted to confirm John's testimony for an upcoming trial this week. The attorney for the defendant was going to do his best to twist John's words making it seem like he and Billings did *not* have probable cause to enter the premises, and that the gun they found was *not* in plain sight. I admired his dedication to the job. Dealing with criminals, attorneys, and trials could be extremely stressful.

He ended the call and looked up at me from the couch.

"Wowsers! You look absolutely beautiful Anna!" John exclaimed.

He was always so flattering. I blushed and asked if he was ready to go. Our reservation was at seven, and it was already half past six. Although the restaurant was not far away, we just never knew how traffic was going to be on Route 1.

John was dressed in a pair of navy slacks and a white dress shirt. He was just reaching for his suit jacket when the phone rang again.

"Solace."

Silence.

“Listen Billings, can we talk about this in the morning, I’m kind of in the middle of something....Okay, thanks. Bye.”

My important and handsome man of law enforcement was shaking his head and apologizing as we headed out the door. I was secretly hoping he put his phone on ‘do not disturb’ for the rest of the evening.

It was our first time experimenting with a new cuisine. Since I could easily make Italian at home, it seemed silly to go out to an Italian restaurant.

John was eager to introduce Thai food to me, and despite my aversion to spicy foods, I agreed. He said he knew the perfect place right up the road.

We were seated by the fireplace in the rear of the main dining area. Grinning from ear-to-ear, we stared into each other’s eyes, tasting authentic Thai cuisines from each other’s plates and sipping wine. I decided on *Tom Kha Kai* (Chicken in Coconut Soup) and *Pad Krapow Moo Saap* (Fried Basil and Pork), while John went for dishes with a higher spice level, *Tom Yum Goong* (Spicy Shrimp Soup) and *Gaeng Keow Wan Kai* (Green Chicken Curry).

We were in the middle of an intense conversation about dessert in bed when we were interrupted by a female voice who was not our waitress.

“John? John Solace?” the woman said, as she approached our table.

John looked up confused, and then he suddenly recognized the face. “Francine? Oh my goodness. How are you?”

The woman responded with open arms as John stood up to complete the embrace.

Apparently, they knew each other from Newark...when he was married to Martha. Awkwarrrrrrrd.

They spent a brief moment reminiscing about old times, and she expressed her condolences about Martha. Her and her husband, Martin, were just visiting family in Hamilton and this place had come highly recommended for authentic Thai food, so they stopped for dinner. Martin was out getting the car to pull around to the front, while she used the restroom. Martha headed for the front doors after letting us know she couldn’t wait to tell Martin who she’d run into.

Confession: I felt immensely proud when John introduced me as his

girlfriend. I was definitely blushing.

He wrapped up the spontaneous meet-and-greet and turned his attention back to date night.

“I’m so sorry about that Anna. What are the chances of running into someone who knew me back then when...you know...I was...um” he stumbled awkwardly.

“It’s okay, John. We both had lives before we met. We both have pasts. She seemed like a nice lady,” I replied. Although, I was thinking to myself how the reminder of his wife and being new to dating may be triggering second thoughts about our relationship.

“Not as nice, and sweet, and beautiful, and talented, and tremendously sexy as the woman in front of me,” John said seductively while he gently kissed the top of my hand.

“Check!” I said aloud as I flagged the waitress.

It was time for dessert...at home...hopefully by the fireplace. And I don’t mean cannoli. It was time to make this relationship official. We had been putting it off for weeks.

Cheers to new experiences! I thought to myself, as I gulped down my last bit of wine.