



A TWISTED  
WILLOW  
NOVEL

# GLORIA'S GUMPTION

MARIA SECOY

# GEORGIA'S GAMPTION

An On-Trail Love Adventure



Maria Secoy

All Write Well



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To my husband, Bryan, who believes in me more than I  
believe in myself.

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# CHAPTER 1

## GLORIA

C learing the blue blaze trail between Great Hikes Hostel and the Appalachian Trail took a significant amount of Gloria's time each spring. As the winter snow melted, parts of the trail would need drainage work, and the softened earth set dead trees up for an easy crash landing when spring winds blew. Gloria didn't mind doing it, though. She loved being out in the woods and working with her hands. It was April, so she was gearing up and preparing for the busy season. This year, she had some extra time for that preparation since there had been two bodies found on the trail nearby. Most hikers were hopping off in Daleville and jumping up to Waynesboro to continue their northbound trek.

While two victims didn't constitute a serial killer, it would only take one more. At this point, Gloria was almost hoping that would happen. Local law enforcement was getting nowhere, and a third victim would bring in more resources. The current decline in guests threatened her financial security, but she could salvage the season so long as things could pick up in May and June. That meant she needed these murders solved sooner rather than later.

She and her dog, Spike, were hiking back toward the tree line of the clearing where the hostel's cabins and bunkhouse were built and away from the AT. The blue blaze was technically on the Appalachian Trail corridor of land, but she considered its maintenance part of the work of the hostel. She

also helped clear the section of the AT closest to her, even though she wasn't technically a trail volunteer, nor did she belong to the local trail club. She'd cleared the entire 0.3 mile stretch of the blue blaze trail earlier in the week and had spent today working on the trail north of her home. The shadows were getting long now, and she was ready to head home.

Spike looked back at her from several feet ahead, but he didn't heel. The wind blew, rustling the brush with a whispering voice that Gloria usually found comforting. This evening it felt different. Spike was well-trained to stay close and return to her side immediately. He had to be for her to let him hike with her without being attached to the leash. She wouldn't risk scaring a hiker by having a giant, hundred-pound mutt come running toward them. Even with his training, she only let him off-leash on the hostel property and the blue blaze trail. The Appalachian Trail was too well-populated not to have him clearly tethered to her.

"Spike, heel," she called to him, but he trotted off the side of the trail instead of returning to her. Was that why the hair on the nape of her neck was standing at attention? Or was the same ominous sensation prickling her senses, causing her dog to act unusually, as well?

"Spike. Come." She deepened her voice to ensure he knew how serious she was, but Spike's attention focused on the woods. His back was arched, and his hackles were raised. As she got closer, she could hear the low rumble coming from his throat.

What had he seen? Was it a hiker? There'd been very few the past few days, and Spike usually greeted them with glee. Maybe it was a bear. Spike hadn't encountered one up close. They were one of the many reasons she kept him leashed most of the time, but around Great Hikes, she kept an eye on the wildlife and had seen no signs of bears so far this season.

She jogged toward him with her feet sliding in the mud as she scanned the tree line for a bear. "What's gotten into you?"

She followed his line of vision into the woods, peering through the gray and brown tree trunks, wondering what had Spike so riled.

The sight hit Gloria hard, knocking the wind from her lungs. Lying beneath an old spruce tree was a figure – or at least the remains of one. The face was wrapped in leaves and vines, but the abdomen was sliced open for scavengers to enjoy. There wasn't much left inside the body cavity. The unbuttoned hiking pants marked the body as a hiker, but that was all Gloria could tell with a quick glimpse.

Horror washed over her, and she gasped in air, doubling over and emptying the contents of her stomach on the ground in front of her. The head, hands, and legs appeared untouched, so it didn't look like the body had been there long.

As quickly as horror had struck, so did fear. While the scene was on the southern side of the trail, that body had not been there this morning when she'd hiked out. Grabbing Spike's collar, she dragged him away and clipped on his leash. As a mutt with lots of retriever genes blended with some German

Shepard and a lot of heaven-only-knows-what, he was mostly black with a streak of white down his chest and brown on his paws. He was loyal to a fault and smart enough to get into trouble. In many ways, he was Gloria's best friend.

She pointed them toward her cabin and took off at a brisk pace while pulling her cell phone from her pocket. She stumbled, the heel of her hiking shoe getting caught in the mud. Scrambling to her feet, she didn't let go of her phone. She needed to call for help, but she wasn't willing to just stand around where a killer had recently been while chatting on the phone. She knew the police hadn't released all the details about the other two bodies but *gutted with face wrapped in vines* had spread up and down the trail. It looked like they'd be getting those extra resources sooner rather than later. Entering her log cabin and bolting the door shut behind her, she dialed 9-1-1 with shaking fingers.

Calming the fear that pulled her vocal cords tight, she managed to choke out a few words. "I just found a dead body along the blue blaze trail between Great Hikes Hostel and the Appalachian Trail. The person was definitely dead, but it looked fresh." It churned her stomach to describe the scene that way, but she also knew the dispatcher would need the information.

# CHAPTER 2

## COLLIN

Collin Warner caught the call from his police scanner. A body had been found near the Appalachian Trail at Great Hikes Hostel. A woman had called the police. A witness? Besides not having an arsenal of resources at his fingertips, the lack of a witness had been one of the most difficult parts of the case. No one had lived to provide a description of the serial killer stalking the trail, and if anyone had seen anything, the person wasn't coming forward with information.

He didn't remember Great Hikes from his own time on the trail, but that didn't mean anything. There were so many places to stop in this area, and he'd stayed at Stanimals in Waynesboro with his trail family.

A quick internet search revealed the address of Great Hikes Hostel, and Collin plugged the location in to his GPS. The body wasn't as close to the trail as the other victims. The first body had been found just near the Priest shelter and the second was found in the Hog Camp Gap. While the Priest wasn't exactly on the trail, it was one of the most popular shelters in the area and wasn't more than about a tenth of a mile down a blue blaze. Hog Camp Gap was a big field which the trail ran straight through. It made for easy camping and didn't require any extra hiking, so fast moving and lazy hikers loved it. Unfortunately, the water source was more than a quarter mile away, so most hikers only stopped there if they had plenty of



water already. It was a surprisingly effective way to keep the area from being overrun. Collin was well aware of the increased traffic on the trail and the trouble it could cause for the environment, but right now he was more focused on wondering what this meant for the killer's pattern.

The only way to find out was to see for himself.

Collin had been tracking the Grapevine Killer since that first body had been found. It had been the body of his cousin. His experience with the FBI combined with his gut helped him immediately recognize that the ritual involved clearly indicated a serial killer, but no one would officially label it that way until the third body was found. It was one of the reasons his supervisor had refused to officially put him on the case. But, Collin needed to find justice for his cousin. His mother, along with his aunt and uncle, were counting on him to catch Beth's killer.

Collin arrived on the scene in thirty minutes amid a flurry of activity. FBI agents were combing the area, shouting commands at the park rangers who'd been called to assist. The local police were on the scene as well. Collin scanned for a familiar face, irritation flickering when he spotted special agent-in-charge Mike Harrison talking to a short, curvy woman. Nothing about her said law enforcement or park ranger. She had to be the witness.

Mike Harrison, Collin's former partner from way back, had apparently been named the current lead investigator on the case. Collin knew he'd want nothing more than for Collin to

disappear. Harrison was a good agent, but he was by the book. Collin wouldn't go far off the reservation, but he became an agent to protect people. They'd lasted less than a month as partners before they'd taken swings at each other and been forced apart. They'd both been forced to transfer to different offices, but Collin felt like it had worked out well for him. Now though, he worried Harrison wouldn't be willing to do what was necessary to catch this fucker.

Harrison had ten years more than Collin on the job, and he would use his connections to shut Collin out. Technically, Collin was on vacation. After several years of working relentlessly, he had a nice stretch of time built up. Maybe Harrison didn't believe Collin could be objective, but Collin had made a promise that he wasn't backing down from.

Collin knew the exact moment Harrison spotted him. Their eyes connected across the distance, hostility plain on Harrison's face. Collin gave Harrison credit for blatant honesty. They'd never gotten along, and Harrison hadn't pretended otherwise. The woman Harrison was speaking with turned, as well, looking over her shoulder in Collin's direction.

Collin hadn't seen her before, but his gut reaction was strong and swift. Even at this distance, he could see she was beautiful. She was tiny compared to Harrison's six foot, two-inch-tall frame, but she didn't look like she could float away on a breeze or snap an arm picking up her purse. She looked strong, healthy, soft, and was standing with her feet solidly planted and her arms crossed over her chest. Her red hair was pulled up into a messy knot atop her head, but several curls

were escaping confinement and using the wind to twine around her face. She wore tan hiking pants and a purple jacket that was similar to what many hikers wore. It was thin and lightweight but stopped the wind and retained body heat well. This time of year, it still got cold at night out in the woods.

Approaching Harrison was a bad idea, but Collin needed to speak to the witness. More than finding out what she knew, he wanted to talk to her. The impulse was so strong, he hadn't realized he'd left his observation spot until he was standing next to her, facing Harrison. She smelled of the outdoors, like fresh pine and earth. It reminded him of his time spent hiking the trail.

“What are you doing here? You don't belong at this crime scene,” Harrison said, annoyance clear in his voice. “You're related to one of the victims, *and* you're supposed to be on vacation.”

“I can spend my vacation however I please, and you know why I'm here,” Collin said. When the FBI had refused to assign Collin to the case, citing he couldn't be objective because he was too close to one of the victims, Collin had requested to take all his vacation time from the Bureau to investigate on his own.

Collin introduced himself, “Special Agent Collin Warner.”

Harrison rolled his eyes and huffed. “Stop misleading the witness. You're not working this case.”

Curiosity gleamed in the red head's eyes. She ignored Harrison and extended her hand. “Gloria Lopez. This is my

hostel. I am the person who found the body.” Her voice quavered, and he shook her hand. It was trembling.

Harrison gritted his teeth. “Why don’t you either enjoy your vacation or go back to work on another case instead of impeding my work on this one?”

Abandoning this case wasn’t an option for him. Beth’s killer deserved to pay, and Collin would see that she and his family had justice. “You know I can’t walk away from this one.”

Harrison’s face didn’t relax even a fraction of an inch. He believed it was most important to follow protocol, and allowing Collin anywhere near the scene flew in the face of the rules.

“If you won’t walk away, I can force you to stay away. Don’t make a nuisance of yourself,” Harrison said.

Collin tucked his hands into the pockets of his pants. “I don’t plan to be a nuisance. I plan to catch a killer.” He knew he shouldn’t do it, but he couldn’t help smirking. There was a sadistic part of him that enjoyed terrorizing Harrison.

# CHAPTER 3

## GLORIA

**G**loria rubbed her temples, a massive headache throbbing. Fifteen minutes after she had made the emergency call, park rangers and local police had converged on her land. The FBI had arrived shortly after.

The most recent arrival was a man who had planted himself beside her. His serious expression and deep-set eyes drew her to him. Whatever his reason for being on the scene, Gloria was glad he was. He brought with him an odd combination of serious determination and lighthearted joviality. Her instincts about people were usually pretty good, and her instincts told her Collin Warner was a good friend to have. Of course, he was also committed to solving the case enough to be spending his vacation investigating it.

He was handsome, almost too handsome. She felt a little guilty for thinking about his looks under the circumstances, but it was hard not to notice. His dark hair was cropped close to his head in a way she liked. Broad shoulders tapered to a lean waist, and the tailored cut of his black wool suit coat showed he had style. It looked great on him.

Special Agent Harrison continued to talk about the investigation. “The sheriff mentioned you live here with your sister. Where is she?”

The mention of her sister chilled Gloria to the core. She believed what she had seen in the woods to be the work of the Grapevine Killer. No one had outright said it, but she knew it.

Her concern for her sister increased tenfold. “Lily is hiking the trail. I haven’t heard from her in almost two weeks.”

“Sheriff Riley also tells me your sister has been in trouble around here,” Harrison said.

The sheriff of their town, also known as her former fiancé, was not a fan of Lily after she’d punched him in the nose when things between him and Gloria had fallen apart. What had he told them about her and Lily? “My sister was one of the first to start the trail down in Georgia in February. She was staying in touch regularly through the Triple Crown, but I haven’t heard from her since McAfee Knob.” Not since just before the first body had been found. Since that one was north of the hostel, Gloria had hoped to convince Lily to step off the trail for a bit and hang out until the killer was caught. Instead, her sister had gone silent. Her phone went straight to voicemail, which was now full and no longer accepting messages. Gloria had even called a few of the other hostels in the area to ask about Lily “Ribbit” Lopez, but while many people had heard of “Ribbit,” none of them seemed to know where she was.

“Is that unusual?” Harrison asked.

Lily was a free spirit, and Gloria worried it would get her killed. “Not unusual for Lily, but I have been concerned about her.” The skitter of fear never seemed to go away completely. Until Lily was home, she would worry. Lily had an uncanny ability to find trouble in the most peaceful of places.

“I wouldn’t worry too much. We don’t have a clear picture of the victim profile, yet. She might not be at all who the

killer's looking for."

Another tremor of fear traced up and down her body. She could become one of the victims. What if she fit the profile? Gloria forced herself to stop and breathe. She had been living on her own out here long enough to know how to handle herself.

"Why don't you give her a few minutes? You can see she's still taking this in. We've invaded her home and her land," Collin said.

Gratitude for Collin surged inside her. A few minutes to gather herself was exactly what she needed.

Special Agent Harrison snorted. "*We* are not doing anything. You'll return to your hotel room and forget we've found another victim. In the morning, check out and go home."

Collin didn't move. Gloria had watched animals circle each other over territory. This looked a lot like that. When Collin did move, it wasn't to turn back toward the vehicles. Instead, he turned toward her.

"I know this situation is difficult." The warmth in Collin's tone surprised her. It was the first time someone had expressed empathy for what she had been through tonight. The coldness in her chest lifted slightly.

"I control this crime scene. You need to leave. We can't have anyone compromising evidence," Harrison said. He sounded like a toddler convinced that he could make something happen by saying he wanted it.



Gloria looked between the two men. “Do I have to leave, as well?” She hadn’t considered the possibility the FBI would want her to vacate the premises until they finished their search. Where would she go? She had a couple old friends in town, but since her parent’s funeral, she had been keeping to herself. What could she do with Spike if she had to leave? Would Ranger Todd let them stay with him?

Gloria didn’t have any neighbors within sight, but the man who owned the property next to her was a friend. He worked for the National Park Service. His full name was Todd Gilliam, but everyone in the area just called him Ranger Todd. He helped along the Blue Ridge Parkway all the way up to the southern end of Shenandoah. He was probably the closest thing to a friend Gloria had anymore, but they were still just casual acquaintances.

Harrison moved closer to her. “Your house isn’t part of the crime scene.” His voice had softened just slightly.

Crime scene. Her home, the place where she had always felt the safest, had become a crime scene. She wished her sister was home to help her. For that matter, she wished her parents were here. Anyone to take away some of the loneliness and emptiness, emotions that were amplified by her fears. They had once been happy on this property. They’d talked about their home being like a resort and their jobs nothing like work. Those memories were only a few years old, but they felt dim and distant.

Then she focused on the other part of his comment. He'd nodded toward her parent's old home on the other side of the clearing. "My sister lives in the big house. Once she'd graduated, and I'd renovated the cabins, I chose to move into one of them."

"Are the rental cabins part of the crime scene?" Collin asked.

Anger gleamed in Harrison's eyes. "Not at this time." The words were punctuated with irritation.

Collin retreated a step and faced Gloria. "Do you have another cabin available you could rent to me for a few days?"

Gloria swallowed hard, trying to think of a diplomatic way to handle this situation. She needed the income from renting one of the vacant cabins, but she didn't want to place herself on the wrong side of Special Agent Harrison. He could make life difficult for her—such as by insisting she leave Great Hikes for an extended period or leaking to the press that a murder had occurred at her hostel. If the threat of the Grapevine Killer didn't frighten away business, a murder on the premises surely would. Her business may not recover, and then what would she do? Her options were limited.

"I have a few empty cabins for rent," Gloria said slowly. "But if Special Agent Harrison and his team need a place to stay, I think it's fair to offer them first dibs." There. She hadn't lied to Collin, and she had given Harrison priority, even if something about him rubbed her the wrong way.

“We’re staying at a motel in town,” Harrison said, jutting his jaw. “Our mobile unit won’t make it across the bridge at the base of your road. But that shouldn’t matter. We don’t consider this location a hot zone.”

Yeah, that was it. He was a self-righteous ass who liked the sound of his own voice. *Hot zone! Ha!* There was a body right up against her property. “How can you know he won’t return?”

Special Agent Harrison lifted his brow as if her question amused him. “We know his profile. We know how he behaves. Now, if you don’t mind, I have some questions I’d like to ask in private.”

“I’m more comfortable with Collin staying with me.” There was no way in hell she was comfortable being alone with Agent Harrison. She might not know Collin, but somehow, he felt like the safer option here. If nothing else, it was always a good idea to have an extra person around as a witness. She didn’t know who looked more surprised: Collin or Harrison. If he was planning to question her about Lily, she wanted someone else in the room as a buffer. She would become defensive about her sister, and her irritation with Sheriff Doug Riley would shine through.

“Let me stay. You know I’ll ask her the same questions you’re planning to,” Collin said.

Harrison set his jaw. He looked between her and Collin.

After a few moments of hesitation, he let out his breath sharply. “Ms. Lopez, tell me what you were doing before you found the body.”

Collin moved closer to her, and the air around her heated. His stance was protective, almost as if he wanted to shield her from this unpleasant conversation.

Gloria started to answer Harrison's question, wanting to give helpful detail, but not sure what was important. Images of the victim flashed in her mind, but not clear enough to form a complete picture.

Living in this area, she was friendly with many of the trail's frequent hikers. Was the victim someone she knew? Gloria had read every social media post and article online about the killer and victims. The first victim had been a woman named Beth, so everyone had warned women hikers to be careful. Just two days later, the next victim had been found. *His* name was Jacob. That was when scuttlebutt had shifted to focus on the leaves and vines around the faces. They'd quickly been identified as grapevines, but no grapes were found anywhere near this part of the trail. Sure, there were vineyards in this part of Virginia, but none of them were natural, and they certainly weren't located within the trail corridor. That was why everyone started calling him the Grapevine Killer.

She would have recognized tonight's victim if she was her sister, right? She wanted someone to reassure her the victim wasn't Lily. "Do you know who the victim is?" Gloria asked.

Harrison shook his head. "We don't expect to make that information available until we've gotten positive identification and notified the victim's family."

The FBI agents weren't allowing her near the crime scene, and fear fogged her brain. Could the victim be her sister?

“Do you routinely walk your dog along this path?” Harrison asked.

Gloria struggled to clear her mind and focus. Routinely? No. Frequently? Sure. She tried to answer both that and his earlier question. “Yes, and no. It's not a routine with predictability, but we go up and down that side trail pretty much every day. Today we were—”

He tossed out another question before she could finish her thought. “Have you read or heard the news reports about the dangers on the trail? Have you spoken with your sister about the Grapevine Killer? Have you taken any precautions?” Harrison asked.

Was he trying to catch her off guard? Harrison studied her with his eyes burning into hers, as if the answer were hiding inside them. She needed a few minutes of quiet to compose herself and her thoughts. No way in hell was she letting this ass get the best of her. She glared back at him and took two deep breaths before she replied icily, “Like most hostel owners, I belong to most of the trail groups on Facebook. I've read about the Grapevine Killer. I've got a shotgun, a big dog, and a fair bit of common sense earned through time spent in the woods and on the trail.” Spike was a rescue dog, and Gloria thought he might be part Labrador retriever. He generally loved people, so on the rare occasion he expressed

concern about someone, she took it to heart and encouraged them to find elsewhere to stay.

“Why did you take your dog to that location?” Harrison asked.

Gloria didn't like the accusatory tone in his questions. “I was starting to tell you that we spent the day clearing the trail north of here and were on our way back,” she answered through gritted teeth.

Harrison stared at her. “And?”

Frustration pulled at the edges of her temper. “I don't know what you want me to say, but I'm starting to think it might be best said through a lawyer.”

Collin moved his body partway in front of hers. “Harrison, come on, she's had a rough night. She told you what she knows. If she thinks of anything else, she'll call. Let her get a good night's sleep and revisit this tomorrow.”

Gratitude for this near stranger surged inside her. She needed a break to cope with the horror of that night.

Harrison stiffened and his eyes narrowed slightly. “I'll call you tomorrow morning, Miss Lopez.” Harrison's gaze swerved to Collin. “Stop forcing your way into my investigation.”

Harrison stepped away from them in the direction of the crime scene, and Gloria relaxed. She'd been fisting her hands and curling her toes in her shoes. She pulled the collar of her

jacket up to block the wind that kicked up, “Mr. Warner if you want to follow me, I can register you.”

“Please call me Collin,” he said as he put his hand on her lower back to steer her toward the lighted porch.

Normally, she wouldn't have liked a man being so forward with her, but *normal* had been left back in the woods with the dead, and gutted, body she'd found. Collin's hand through her jacket was a warm and comforting reminder that life was still going on, and she welcomed the connection.

When her sister had announced her plans to hike the trail, Gloria hadn't realized how much she would miss her. It wasn't the first time she'd been alone at Great Hikes. It was, however, the first time that the hostel had been void of hikers this time of year, and it gave Gloria a creepy, abandoned feeling. Now, knowing someone had been murdered on her property, a chilling sense of fear ran along her spine. She forced herself to play hostess to Collin and welcome him to Great Hikes.

“I wish we were visiting under happier circumstances. This is a great hostel. The views are beautiful, and it's usually peaceful and quiet.” She was wondering how different her response to him might be under different circumstances.

He tossed her half a smile, and her heartbeat quickened. “Believe me, I wish the same.”

Spike rushed to greet her after she opened the door to her cabin. She snagged his collar before he ran outside and caused a commotion. She hated to keep him penned up in the house, but now wasn't the time to let him run around the hostel. He

would drive the investigation team crazy, and she didn't want him hurt. Harrison's words came back to her, *the Grapevine Killer was still at large*, and she had to suppress a shiver of fear. Gloria stroked the dog's ears.

"This is Spike. He was with me when we found the body. He found it first. Unfortunately, I don't think he will make a very good witness." Her anger was finally abating, but it left her feeling discombobulated. She was sad for the woman who had died, terrified for her sister, exhausted from her hard day's work, and stressed about the financial future of Great Hikes. Her stomach was rumbling, but she couldn't imagine standing in her kitchen and making herself dinner right then.

She dragged the dog away from the door, and after Collin stepped through, she shut and locked it behind them while enjoying the warmth of the room against her face. She hadn't realized how cold it had gotten outside. As soon as she registered Collin into one of the cabins, she would turn up the wood stove and curl up near the heat with a cup of hot tea.

She doubted she would sleep tonight.

"I'm sorry you have to go through this," Collin said.

Gloria blinked her eyes with exhaustion. She sat at the kitchen table and stared at the blank registration sheet in front of her. "Why here?" she couldn't help giving voice to the question. "Why pick this hostel, of all places?" The Appalachian Trail was over 2000 miles long. Great Hikes Hostel had been her sanctuary from the world.



Collin took a seat kitty corner from her. His nearness both calmed and excited her. “I haven’t determined how he chooses the specific location or why he chooses the victims he does.”

“Does that mean he could come back?” Gloria asked. Harrison didn’t seem to think so.

Collin looked from her to her dog. “I don’t think he’s finished here. You told Harrison the body hadn’t been there when you walked past in the morning. This victim wasn’t posed the way the other two were. I think you and Spike interrupted the killer before he finished his routine.”

Her stomach grew queasy, and Gloria closed her eyes. “He was posing his victims? I hadn’t heard that mentioned.”

“It’s a detail the FBI has been keeping close to the chest. It also isn’t terribly obvious unless you’re looking for it.”

“Why are you working this case? Special Agent Harrison indicated he didn’t want your help.”

Collin’s face darkened as a shadow crossed his eyes. “My cousin was the killer’s first victim. I’m doing this for my family and my aunt.” Grief underscored every word.

“Oh Collin, I’m so sorry for your loss.” Her words were a useless platitude. She remembered what hikers had said about that first victim. She’d hang out with others at the shelter in the evening. She was solo, which wasn’t uncommon, and had seemed competent and friendly. They’d seen each other in the morning, though she’d been the last to leave and head back toward the trail. She had been fully packed and was making

final adjustments when the others had left, so they figured she'd be right behind them. It was almost 12 hours later when two other hikers stopped by, planning to stay the night, that her body was found. There was no cell service at the shelter, but the hikers had been able to go a short way up the trail to call 911.

“Thank you. Finding Beth’s killer is the only way I’ll sleep easy at night,” he said.

“You don’t trust Harrison to find her?”

“No.”

No explanation.

With his intense dark eyes watching her, she found her whirling mind slowing down as her thoughts floated away. Finding the body and the exhaustion catching up to her combined with the eerie feeling of the empty trail and missing Lily must be getting to her if she was able to be this calm with a strange man in her house. She needed a human connection, and at that moment, Collin was the only one who fit the bill. It probably helped that Spike was resting his head on the man’s thigh and drooling a wet puddle on his pant leg while Collin scratched behind his ears as if it was completely normal for a hundred-pound dog to dribble a gallon of saliva on his leg.

Collin straightened his shoulders, as if pulling himself together. “I know you’re tired, but I’d like to ask you a few more questions, if you’re willing to answer them.”

Gloria pulled her hair free of the elastic band holding it. She rubbed her fingers along her scalp, trying to massage away the headache that pulsed there. “Does that mean you’re not planning to follow Harrison’s suggestion?”

“Never considered walking away. Stopping him from killing again is too important.”

# CHAPTER 4

## COLLIN

The Grapevine Killer was killing a new victim every two days. There didn't appear to be a pattern between them, except they were all hikers spending time on the Appalachian Trail, and each was a model citizen by the accounts of friends and family. Collin didn't believe the killings were random. He just didn't think they'd figured out the pattern yet. Different genders, ages, hometowns, and professions ruled out the obvious. They weren't even all thru-hikers. This last victim only had a daypack on her, so they were guessing she was a local. But, there had to be a common thread and reasoning for being chosen. The first two victims had been carefully posed and tied down so the body wouldn't change position, even as the exposed innards were ravaged by scavengers. The use of non-native plants showed there was planning involved. He didn't see the connections yet, but he knew they were there.

Collin had two days until another body turned up. If the killer was hunting in this area, he needed to get one step ahead of him. He needed an expert in the region, someone to help him pinpoint hiker hangouts and popular camping spots. Though the trail had seen few hikers in recent weeks, the Grapevine Killer would find someone. "How much do you know about this area?" Collin asked Gloria.

He had been hiking since he was a teen and had completed his own thru-hike of the AT several years before. He knew firsthand how helpful a local could be. There were always

details about areas that only the locals were familiar with. If Gloria could fill in the knowledge he was missing, Collin would find the killer that much faster.

Gloria shifted in her seat, pushing her dark hair over her shoulders. “I’ve lived here all my life. I know the trail and the plants and animals, at least in this area.”

It was what he’d hoped to hear. “I’d like to hire you to help me.”

Gloria inclined her head. “To help you how? Discovering this victim is as close as I plan to come to a killer.”

Collin was glad to hear that. He leaned forward. “I need to know more about the trail in this area, including details that only a local would know and that most wouldn’t be excited to share with law enforcement.”

Gloria shook her head, her hair falling around her shoulders. “You mean the local party spots?”

“And more. Do you know if anyone keeps a cache in the area? Maybe stuff they aren’t eager for others to find? Maybe deer blinds that are extra close to the trail?”

Based on the searching look Gloria gave him, she knew exactly what he was talking about. “I’m sorry. I can’t help you. I understand this is difficult for you, but it’s too dangerous for me to be involved. People who will hunt illegally tend to have a general shoot first and ask questions never mentality.”

Not only did she know what he was talking about, she knew the kinds of details he was looking for, too. Returning his gaze

to her face, he tried to hide the eagerness in his voice. “Please, Gloria. My family is counting on me.” He had given his mother and his aunt his word. He had promised them that Beth would have justice. He couldn’t go home until he had seen his promise through.

Gloria searched his eyes. She was considering it. Weighing her options. The Grapevine Killer was dangerous and looking to add more victims to his list.

Collin decided to try a different angle and hoped he was reading her right. “You and I both know the AT comes with its own culture. We’re in a much better position to catch the killer before your sister makes it this far north.”

“Assuming she isn’t already here,” Gloria replied thoughtfully.

“Wouldn’t she be literally here at the hostel if she were in the area?” Collin asked.

Gloria looked at him as if she were trying to assess if she could trust him. Finally, she spoke, “My sister had some trouble in high school. She’s gay, and that’s hard in this area. My parents tried to be supportive, but they didn’t always succeed. Lily ended up struggling. She’s had some mental health challenges that led to a few incidents that required cops to intervene.”

Collin schooled his reaction. He didn’t think Lily would be involved, but maybe Lily did know details about what was happening. Heck, that was probably true for most of the hikers

on this section of the trail. “Are you saying you’re worried your sister could be involved?”

Gloria huffed out a big breath before responding, “I’m certain she’s not, but I’m also certain that Sheriff Doug Riley will be sure to tell Agent Mike Harrison all about how unstable she is, her violent history, and her current status as missing.” Gloria looked equally sad and aggravated.

Sure, Lily was from this area and had a sketchy history. That didn’t mean she would help cover for a killer. Collin was more concerned that she’d end up becoming a victim. “So, work with me to prove she’s not involved and find her at the same time.”

Gloria considered for only a moment. “I could show you a few places around here that are popular.”

Relief rushed over him. “Thank you, Gloria. You’re doing a brave thing.”

Gloria set her elbows on the table and rubbed her forehead. She muttered something that sounded like, “Brave my ass; my shotgun will be coming along for the adventure.”

The urge to comfort her struck him, and Collin laid his hand over hers. Unexpected heat flared at the contact. Her eyes flew to his, and he held her gaze for a long, loaded moment. He’d need to remind himself to keep every interaction professional. A flirtation or an affair with Gloria would be a distraction from the case, and now wasn’t the time for that.



Collin withdrew his hands before he was tempted to stroke her hand or wrist with his thumbs. “The FBI has undercover agents canvassing up and down this section of trail. If she’s on this stretch of the main trail, they’ll find her. We’ll be checking the off-shoots and lesser-known spots they’re likely to miss.”

“My parents died five years ago. I won’t lose my sister to a serial killer.”

What could he say to make her feel better? The odds were good most hikers would cross paths with the Grapevine Killer, but as evidenced by only three victims, most people would survive the encounter. For some reason, he didn’t think she’d find that reassuring. “If Lily is as strong and spunky as you say, I have a feeling she could give the killer a run for his money.”

Gloria got an odd look on her face. “You keep saying *his*. Are you sure the Grapevine Killer is a man?” she asked.

That caused Collin to pause. Most serial killers were male, so they assumed it was a man. He reconsidered the profile of this killer. They hadn’t let anyone know, but each victim had died by poisoning before being wrapped in grapevines and leaves and posed. Poison was typically a woman’s method for killing. But he just couldn’t picture a woman stalking up and down the AT killing hikers. “I can’t say for sure until we find him, or her, but we have a basic profile. A nature fanatic over the age of 40 who buys into conspiracy theories and legends. People who know him, or her, would describe him as a kooky loner, but not view him as dangerous. They don’t like

weapons. You're right, though, we've all assumed male because most serial killers are men."

Gloria surprised him with a huff before she responded, "You just described a full third of the people who hike the Appalachian Trail. I'm glad to see your profile narrows the pool of candidates." Then she shook her head and walked to the kitchen.

She filled an electric kettle with water and turned it on. "How often does a serial killer break pattern? This one's never left two bodies at the same location."

Collin hedged. He hadn't expected the killer to leave a body this far from the trail in the first place. "Great Hikes is the first hostel where a body has been found and the first time a body hasn't been within a few yards of the trail. Then again, we don't have much of a pattern established since one victim was found at a shelter and the other was right along the trail." Gloria shuddered. "In other words, they've broken their pattern or there isn't a pattern."

Both were possibilities. "Yeah." Collin sighed. He hated how little information he had for her.

# CHAPTER 5

## GLORIA

**G**loria swallowed hard. Her world had been flipped upside down by the killer. She'd lost reservations. Parents who'd enrolled their children in her after-school nature program had pulled them out. She lived with the constant fear of Lily being in danger.

Her kettle of hot water burred, and she pulled out two mismatched mugs, one with a picture of a bear stamped across the front and the other with a white blaze painted down the bark-like textured ceramic. Hot tea would make everything better. "Can I get you a mug?" she asked and held up her fancy wooden box of tea bags.

"Thank you. That would be great."

"Pick your poison." She carried the box over to let Collin choose his flavor.

He gave her an odd look before browsing through and pulling out a satchel of Earl Grey.

Gloria dropped a tea bag into each mug before cleaning up the kitchen area and carrying them out to the living room where Collin had taken a seat. She handed him the cup before realizing she'd forgotten to offer him sugar. "Oh, I always drink mine as is, but I have sugar if you'd like some." Then she lifted her cup to her lips, blew across the top, and took a sip.

“No, this is perfect as it is. Thank you.” Then Collin did the same with the cup she’d made him. “What would you say to allowing me to return the favor? I can take you into town for dinner, so you don’t need to cook. Plus, it would give you a chance to take a break from all the events of the day.”

Gloria almost spilled her mug. His question was a jolt to her system. Was Collin asking her out? His interest was in tracking a killer. Was his request in that vein?

Collin flashed a smile at her. One that reached to the corners of his eyes. It made his entire face change. The intensity disappeared, and the harshness was erased. He seemed more approachable and laid-back. She pressed her hands to her mug, keeping herself from reaching out and touching his jawline. Running her thumb over his lips to see if they felt as soft as they looked. Pressing her lips to his to taste him. Pushing her body up against his. One gorgeous smile and her imagination took flight. She had lost her damn mind. Maybe the solitude of the hostel was getting to her. After she had ended her engagement to Doug, she’d sworn she was done with relationships.

Huh. Gloria thought for a moment. Perhaps she could enjoy Collin’s company without turning it into a relationship. Maybe a good romp was exactly what she needed. Then she remembered who she was and admitted casual sex just wasn’t her thing. Hell, she developed affection for the rocks on her property; there was no way she could let someone see her naked and not make a thing of it.

Collin set his mug on the table. “You can show me where the locals hang out on the weekends. We might catch some rumors about the murder that could prove useful.”

Not a date, then. Good, right? Why did she feel disappointed? In the space of a couple hours, her emotions had been slammed around inside her, leaving her off-kilter. Fear. Excitement. Lust. Confusion. “Going into town has nothing to do with the trail.”

“You can point out the people who have stayed here, and I can talk to them about what they’ve heard about the Grapevine Killer. With the number of investigation vehicles here, rumors will run wild. People will want to talk to you about the murder, and I can ask them what they know.”

Gloria swallowed hard. She avoided going into town for many reasons. Among them was keeping away from gossip and crowds. Dealing with everyone knowing a body had been found at Great Hikes Hostel did not sound like the kind of thing that would improve the experience. She hadn’t processed the events of the day and wasn’t ready to discuss them in public. “I don’t want to talk about the murder.” She gritted her teeth and tried to remind herself that this was for the good of the investigation.

Collin inclined his head. “I’ll deflect questions from you. You won’t have to say anything.”

But she’d have to hear it. The gossip and slander. She was best staying here at her own hostel. “I’ll take you to an

available cabin and give you a list of places to eat in town. I'll give you directions, and you can go on your own."

He shook his head. "I won't know who to talk to and insiders won't talk to an outsider like me. I need you with me, Gloria. You're honey to the bees." His voice was low and smooth, rolling off his tongue, utterly persuasive for those who fell prey to used car salesmen. It wasn't what he said. It was the smooth way he said it. He was overly polished – like he practiced his lines in the mirror.

Then she looked closer and saw a flinch in his eyes. Could he be nervous about her saying no? Did she need to say no? Perhaps she was making a big deal about nothing. She could go into town this once and get it over with, show the town she was fine after her broken engagement and a murder at Great Hikes. She'd face the gossip head-on, set the record straight and not let it blow out of control.

"Fine," she relented. "We can have dinner in town. A quick dinner." Of course, showing up in town with a handsome stranger would set off new rounds of gossip, but Gloria would survive it the same way she'd survived the rest of the gossip. She'd flip them all the bird and enjoy her own peace and quiet, closer to the trail.

Collin radiated an air of authority, and in combination with his good looks, he could talk his way into anything. It didn't endear him to Gloria. Doug had been that way, charming and sweet. But he wasn't ready to settle down, a fact he'd hidden from her but not from many of the others in town. Collin's

saving grace had been the way he'd pulled her away from Agent Harrison and demanded she have time and space. She also realized he hadn't picked at her about Lily. She shook her head. Today was not the day to try guessing the motives of people showing up on her doorstep. It was time to call it a night.

"I'll show you to your cabin." Gloria set her mug on the counter and grabbed the key to the cabin she'd rented him. The paperwork could wait. She needed to put some distance between them.

She and Collin trudged outside. The wind had picked up, and the temperature had dropped. Many nights, Gloria had enjoyed sitting on her front porch rocker and drinking in the tranquility of her slice of heaven. Tonight, for the first time in years, she felt a skitter of fear of the woods and of what she couldn't see. A killer had invaded the perfect soothing darkness of her home.

Gloria ignored the people milling around, tried not to think about the body, and pretended Collin was any other guest renting a cabin. "Have you ever done any backpacking or hiking?" Gloria asked.

"I hiked the entire AT a few years ago." Collin scratched the back of his neck and looked down at his feet. "Actually, I guess it's been about a decade now. I'm more of a city guy now, though this case has required I spend a fair bit of time out amongst the trees."



Mother Nature was strong, swift, and unforgiving. “I’ve marked the paths through camp. I recommend you stay on them whenever possible.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, sounding serious.

If he did as she asked, she wouldn’t spend the night wandering in the dark looking for him. It was also how she maintained the trails while keeping the rest of the forest wild. She looked over at his broad form. Then again, finding Collin in the dark could have some interesting possibilities. Do not think sexy thoughts about smooth investigators. Do not think sexy thoughts about smooth investigators. Maybe if she chanted it enough times, her lady parts would get the message.

“I plan to have my trusty trail guide with me if I venture beyond the hostel grounds,” Collin assured her.

She stopped and faced him. “I said I would help you, but I’m not sure how much I’ll be able to do. Don’t get your hopes up.” Set the bar low and be pleasantly surprised if things went well, was her motto.

Collin touched her upper arm and said, “You’ve already helped me more than you know, and I have confidence in your knowledge of the area and the people who live around here.”

She gave him a wry grin and stepped away from him. “Usually, civilized people assume I’m just a fluffy hostel owner who has no trail legs.”

“Why’s that?” Collin asked.

Was he digging into her psyche, or did he really not know? “I’m not a twenty-year-old twig of a woman with the latest and lightest gear. Many people assume I can’t handle more than a couple of miles a day. Also, I’m what some people call “chubby.” All my life, I’ve been trying to wish away my curves, but apparently, they’re just a part of who I am. The good news is they come with the strength and endurance to handle long distance hikes. The year before my parents passed, I completed the Long Trail in Vermont. Since I opened Great Hikes, I stay closer to home but still hit ten- and twenty-mile days pretty regularly.”

Gloria took the stairs to the front door of the cabin. She looked around and noticed that Agent Harrison was watching them. Why was he opposed to Collin working the case? Did he worry Collin would uncover something he couldn’t?

“I don’t think you’re old or chubby. In fact,” Collin’s voice cut off abruptly. There was a pause before he lamely ended his thought with, “I think you are a beautiful person.”

Gloria grumbled with derisive laughter and fumbled with the keys, trying to make them work. She could have sworn he was going to pay her a genuine compliment, right up until he didn’t. That was the way it was, though. She had responsibilities. She took care of herself, her sister, this hostel, and all her guests. When her parents had passed, she’d had to think on her feet to figure out how to keep Lily with her and earn enough money to live on. Thank goodness for being able to turn their property into a profitable hostel instead of the rarely visited vacation cabins her parents had half-heartedly

offered. The idea someone else wanted to bear some of the weight she carried was like dangling a carrot in front of a bunny, which was why it was so important for her to remember that it was only an illusion. Gloria lived in the reality where no one else would ever truly care about her success or failure.

The scoff that followed her chuckle must have been audible. Collin stepped closer, his fingers reached and covered her hand, and he took the keys from her. "Let me get it."

The brushing of his hand against hers sent electric currents moving from the point of contact all the way to her toes. She released the keys, and he unlocked the door without issue. He pushed it open and stepped inside.

She could feel the heat radiating from his body, and she fought the impulse to lean close and sniff him. That would be entirely inappropriate and uncalled for. She was not a dog in heat. She had more control than this. Collin would think she came on to every man who stayed here. She shoved her loneliness into a deep, dark place, and slammed the door on it.

"Nice place," he said without any hint of sarcasm. "I've stayed in many motels that were less inviting."

It had been Gloria's idea to remodel the cabins and add some luxuries for the hikers. Each one now had indoor plumbing and a small microwave and refrigerator. She also used quality linens and hung black out curtains to make it easier for exhausted hikers to get the rest they needed. She did the cleaning and maintenance herself. Though the cabins were

small, she'd arranged the furniture into a small eating area and a sitting area and placed a queen bed in the alcove opposite the fireplace. The wood-burning insert with a fan to circulate the heat from the fireplace through the small cabin generated enough heat to keep the cabin toasty in the winter and the shade from the forest combined with open windows to keep it tolerably cool in the summer.

Gloria walked to the far end of the room where a large picture window gave an amazing view of the forest. "This cabin is my favorite. It was the first one we remodeled." Gloria pulled the dark green curtains closed to block out the moonlight. Not being able to see into the woods in the darkness was making her feel as if someone was watching them. "In the morning, you'll probably catch a few deer wandering past. I've seen a few foxes at night, too, and of course, raccoons and opossums are everywhere. I'll bring you some wood for the stove." She turned, feeling the heat of Collin's gaze at her back. He was watching her with perceptive eyes, and she knew he was noticing every detail.

She started a fire using the kindling and firewood she kept prepared in every cabin. It would take time to heat, but once it did, it would throw off a lot of heat.

"Don't worry about bringing in more wood. I can gather some as I need it." His husky voice had dropped to a lower baritone. She felt a shift in the air as heat started to crackle.

Her skin felt achy and hungry to be touched. It had been six months, almost seven, since she'd gotten laid. Her last date

had been with Doug, but by then their relationship had been circling the drain. She had found out he was cheating, and they'd been pretending they could move past it. That denial lasted about a week.

“There’s plenty of logs in the woodshed just behind my cabin. I’m careful about what I cut and burn, so please don’t collect random wood from the forest floor. The fireplace and fan should keep you warm, but it can get cold in the morning. There are extra starter pellets and matches on the hearth if it goes out during the night.” She was rambling, a nervous habit, trying to deflect some of her feelings away from Collin and fixate instead on the cabin.

He stopped a foot from her, sliding his hands into his trouser pockets, setting his attention on her. His gaze smoldered and a shower of sparks burst from her chest. Was she imagining the fire between them, or was this a reflection of her feelings for him?

He shifted, and she caught a glimpse of the gun strapped to his side. His eyes blazed with passion, never leaving her face. This man was dangerous in more than one way.

She was hyperaware of the bed eight feet away, knowing the sheets would be cool and clean, and the feel of his body on top of hers heavenly. She drew in a deep breath, feeling as if there wasn’t enough oxygen in it. She wouldn’t let herself be stupid over a man again.

Collin had warning signs she couldn’t ignore. He had lost his family member. He was desperate for her help to find a

killer, and he was only around for a short time. They could keep their relationship firmly on professional ground for a week. When the killer was caught, Collin would move on.

Gloria needed to go outside and get some fresh air before she became light-headed. “Let me know if I can get you anything.” She said it casually, but replaying the words in her mind, she wondered if he heard the unintended double entendre. *Anything*. Her in bed? She rolled her eyes at her own ridiculous train of thought.

He caught her arm and heat sizzled in his touch. “Tomorrow evening, drink and dinner at seven?”

She made the mistake of meeting his gaze. “Seven is fine, but I won’t stay out late.” She needed some boundaries between them, and she wanted an excuse to end the night early.

He dropped her arm and stepped back. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

With a final nod, Gloria fled outside.



The next morning, Gloria waved farewell to the last of the investigators and turned her focus to her business. She had four women scheduled to stay with her for the following week, as they enjoyed long day hikes along the Appalachian Trail. They were old enough to want the comforts of two of

the cabins on her property but were still planning to hike at least ten miles most days.

Slack-packing hikers was one of her favorite parts of owning a hostel. She loved dropping the hikers off in the morning and picking them up many miles up the trail that same evening. Inevitably, dinner conversation would revolve around what the hikers had seen that day, and they were always in good spirits as they returned to a home-cooked meal and comfortable bed for the night. Thru-hikers enjoyed carrying a lighter pack as they left their heaviest items behind, and many section hikers told her that slack-packing was the only way they were able to enjoy the trail due to any number of issues that made sleeping on the ground, in a tent, or in the middle of the woods impractical for them.

Gloria decided to call Betty and get a feel for what the women were thinking and ensure they were aware that a third body had been found. Part of her knew that her bank account really needed the women to follow through and stay with her, but she couldn't help feeling irresponsible for allowing them to hike into a dangerous situation. Maybe she could convince them to come and stay but skip the hiking.

Heaving a giant sigh at the unlikeliness of that, Gloria picked up her phone and called Betty's number.

It only took two rings before Gloria heard a cacophony of barking dogs, squawking, and firm female shouts to knock it off and hush up. That same female voice was the one to say hello as the ruckus subsided, and Gloria couldn't help but

chuckle at the woman's shift from *bossy and in-charge* to sounding like a sweet little old lady.

“Hello, this is Betty.”

“Hi, Betty. This is Gloria calling from Great Hikes Hostel. I wanted to discuss your upcoming reservation. I show that you're planning to arrive the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh, yes. The girls and I are so excited to get out on the trail! We're planning to drive halfway tomorrow and get a hotel room, so we should arrive mid-afternoon on Thursday.”

“Betty, have you heard anything about the deaths along the AT here in Virginia?” Betty had sounded so confident and excited Gloria was disappointed to have to be the one to dampen it. But her guests deserved an honest assessment of the situation, and a serial killer certainly counted as a situation.

“Why of course we have! The way those deaths are making national news, it's impossible to miss! Geri's already been calling all of us this morning to see if we could leave today and arrive tomorrow instead of waiting, but Linda has a doctor's appointment this afternoon and my house-sitter isn't available until tomorrow morning. Though, perhaps we could drive down tomorrow,” Betty's voice sounded farther away, and Gloria wondered if it was because she turned away from the phone or if her voice had gotten softer as she'd shifted from speaking to Gloria to thinking aloud.

Betty continued with her thoughts, “Geri would love it if we drove straight through tomorrow, and that would let us start hiking first thing the next morning. Then again, that's a long



drive and Joan's legs get stiff if she sits for too long. Maybe we could still break up the drive but make a long day of it by taking long and frequent meal breaks to walk around and stretch our legs."

"Betty!" Gloria interrupted to remind Betty that she was on the phone still.

"Huh? Oh my! I'm so sorry! Of course, we don't even know if you have two cabins available for tomorrow night."

Gloria took a deep breath in to help herself focus and figure out where to start. She decided that laying out the facts would be best.

"Betty, the third body was found right here on the blue blaze trail from my hostel to the AT. I'm just not sure that it's safe to be on-trail right now. Most of the early thru-hikers are skipping over this section and coming back to it once authorities figure out what's going on."

"Oh, that's so exciting!" Betty sounded positively gleeful. "I mean, not the death. That's a terrible tragedy. But to have the killer so close! We'll definitely be out tomorrow. Do you have space available?" Betty asked in response.

Pulling the phone away from her ear, Gloria looked at the screen to confirm that she had a good connection and was speaking to the right person. She was trying to tell Betty that it might not be a good idea to follow through with their hiking plans, but Betty didn't seem deterred in the slightest.

Gloria decided to try a different approach, “I just worry about people who are staying here at my hostel getting hurt.” In her head, Gloria silently added, or killed.

“Pssh! You don’t need to worry about us suing you or any nonsense like that. We’re excited about the adventure. Besides, we can take care of ourselves just fine. Now, I completely understand if you don’t have cabins available for tomorrow night, but if you do, I think we’d like to add that extra night to our reservation, please.”

By the time Gloria had hung up the phone, she’d added an extra day of shuttle service in addition to the extra night’s stay. After hitting the red end button, Gloria stared down at her phone for a few minutes and contemplated what had just happened. She’d made the call expecting to cancel the reservation, but somehow the opposite had happened. At least her bank account would stay in the black.

# CHAPTER 6

## COLLIN

The FBI and park rangers finished at the scene mid-morning. The last vehicle to leave was the county coroner's van.

Collin had slept restlessly. It wasn't just the noise. It wasn't just the beautiful red head sleeping in the cabin next door. He was closer than he'd ever been to catching the Grapevine Killer. Excitement and determination sizzled in his veins. Nothing could get in his way. Not Mike Harrison and not Collin's attraction to Gloria.

Collin dragged a hand through his hair, rereading the page of case notes he'd written. Too little sleep and too much coffee had his nerves on edge, his concentration frayed. The words on the page were interrupted by thoughts of Gloria. Of course, the only witness on the case would be the kind of woman he dreamed of. Collin enjoyed the company of a pretty woman, but in this situation, he would have preferred a bridge troll who he found unbelievably unattractive and who wouldn't create any unnecessary distraction. He needed to focus on the case. He had enough factors playing against him.

Collin turned to a fresh sheet of paper and jotted down a few notes about Gloria, her sister, and Great Hikes Hostel. It was easier to record his observations of her while she was on his mind. Maybe if he wrote it down, he'd stop thinking about her. He was sucked into his work, one detail leading to another, and when he looked at the clock, it was nearly six-

thirty in the evening. He'd been reviewing the case since six am, and after over twelve hours of graphic descriptions, photos, and notes, he needed a break.

Collin showered and changed into clean clothes, figuring he'd treat his evening out with Gloria like a date to make it easier to blend in with the townies. Waltzing into a local hangout and announcing he was investigating a murder had a way of sealing lips and making people nervous. On the other hand, taking a woman out for dinner had a way of inviting gossip, and if anyone had learned what had happened at Great Hike's Hostel, they'd be eager to talk about the case.

Which suited his motives perfectly.

At precisely seven pm, he knocked on Gloria's door. She opened it almost immediately, making him wonder if she'd been waiting for him, and if she had, why it sent a pulse of excitement through his body. He was doing this to find justice for his cousin, not to have an affair with a pretty outdoorswoman.

He let his eyes wander over Gloria. Her hair was loose around her shoulders, and she wore a pair of black trousers and a green fitted top. It was a casual outfit, but it would catch the attention of every man in the restaurant.

A possessive streak tore through him, and Collin disliked the idea of her flirting with someone else. He had suggested this outing to gather information, purely professional. Yet seeing her now, his interest roved south of professional and straight into the full burn of sexual interest.

He focused on their professional relationship. Gloria could point out people most likely to have heard rumors about the killer, or better, have useful information about the case. It didn't matter how she looked. His attraction shouldn't factor into their working relationship.

Realizing he was staring, he strove for indifference. "You look great," he said.

She smirked at him before replying, "The drool on your chin says I look better than great. But thank you. You look nice, too. Maybe a bit overdressed for Colton's Steakhouse."

Then she laughed at him when he lifted his hand and started to wipe his face. It was her laughter that brought him back into focus. It was a very unladylike snorting chuckle that he loved instantly.

"I'm most comfortable in my suit. Plus, I guessed you'd look stunning no matter what, and I didn't want to look like a stray you just dragged off the trail."

She shrugged and stepped onto the porch, pulling the door closed behind her. He tamped down the disappointment that she hadn't invited him inside. His primary intention was to find Beth's killer. As Gloria moved past him, her shoulder brushed his chest, and he caught the scent of pine and spice. It reminded him of zero days spent in town during his thru-hike. He'd enjoy great food, do laundry, and relish in the feeling and scent of the woods paired perfectly with the comforts of running water and a soft bed.

The drive down the mountain took thirty minutes, and it was another five to Colton's. Collin parked next to a pickup truck with a rusted-out bumper and a red sedan with a plush monkey pressed to the back window. He took the keys from the ignition and turned to Gloria. "I'd prefer it if we pretended to be a couple."

Gloria fiddled with the strap of her belt as she thought for a moment. Then she looked deep into his eyes and responded, "I don't think that's a good idea."

He set his hand on her upper arm and smiled at her. If anyone saw them, he didn't want to blow his manufactured story. "I'm an outsider wearing a suit. If they think I'm with you, people will open up."

"So you're admitting you shouldn't have worn the suit?" She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Oh, hell no! I look damn fine in this suit. I'm just saying the evening will be more productive if you let me call this a date.

Gloria reached for the door handle. "If you think it will help, fine. But I think you'll find most people take a step further away when they find out you're with me."

Collin liked the idea of keeping Gloria close but couldn't help wondering about her history with the town. Most hostel owners either had a great relationship with the local community or allowed rampant drug use, alcohol abuse, and other nonsense that very few sane humans appreciated. Gloria

didn't strike him as that type, so he'd expected her to be a well-respected member of the community.

They climbed out of the truck, and he circled around to stand beside her. He set his hand on her lower back and smiled at her when she glared at him. Then he lowered his mouth close to her ear and whispered, "Just playing the part."

Her sigh and eye roll made his grin spread even wider.

He guided her toward the entrance to the restaurant, and the sound of country music seeped through the door and covered windows into the parking lot. As he opened the door, the music grew five times louder to become nearly deafening. Collin scanned the restaurant and the patrons, a few of whom looked up from their drinks to scan Gloria and him. After entering, they found a table near the window, and he pulled out Gloria's chair for her.

When her hackles raised, he subtly shook his head and pointedly encouraged her to sit. His formality was intentional. Everyone in the room would recognize this was a date. Once Gloria took her seat, Collin did the same.

A waitress with blond hair nearly to her waist tossed two menus on the table and then set her hand on her hip, jutting it toward Collin. "Hey Gloria, who's your friend?"

Collin watched Gloria's face shut down and turn into a blank façade.

"This is Collin."

That was all she said.



The waitress huffed before turning to Collin herself and expanding on Gloria's introduction. "I'm Stephanie. I'll be taking care of you today, and unlike *Miss Thang* over there, I promise to be polite and attend to all your needs."

Her emphasis on the word *all* made it very clear to Collin that she meant more than just fetching some ketchup for him.

"Now, what can I get you to drink?" she asked, while turning her back toward Gloria.

What was the dynamic between these two? Obviously, there was some history here.

"I'll have a seltzer with lime, please." Gloria interjected in a loud and saccharine voice.

Stephanie turned to Gloria as if she'd completely forgotten about her. "Oh, of course. Sure thing. That's the same as club soda, and we have that even if it ain't labeled as fancy as seltzer." Then she turned back to Collin. "And for you?" Collin was guessing that smile had gotten Stephanie a good number of dates, but he wasn't buying it.

"I'll take a sweet tea. Thanks."

Stephanie jammed her pad into the apron tied around her waist. "I hear you had some trouble at the hostel."

Gloria's eyes flashed with panic for just a second.

"Not at the hostel," Collin said, keeping his voice low and calm.

Stephanie gave him a side eye before leaning toward Gloria. “I heard you found a body in one of your cabins.”

Gloria looked horrified, but Collin chuckled and brushed away the lie. “Rumors can grow out of control quickly.” He’d promised to run interference on rumors, and he always kept his promises. “The body was absolutely *not* in one of the cabins.”

Stephanie opened her mouth, but the look Collin gave her made her clamp it shut again. He wanted to stoke her curiosity without making Gloria feel uncomfortable or causing problems for Great Hikes Hostel.

“We’ll come over to the bar a little later to talk,” Collin said, looking across the table at Gloria.

Stephanie sighed. “I’ll be back with your drinks.” She spun on her heel and strutted away from their table.

Collin moved his chair closer to the table. Gloria’s jaw was set, and she glanced over in Stephanie’s direction a few times.

“I take it the two of you are real besties,” he started sarcastically, with the hope it would lighten the mood.

Gloria shifted in her seat. “We went to high school together. She was the prom queen. I had better things to do with my time than waste money on a dress and prance around the school gymnasium. She’s friendly when it benefits her.” Gloria emphasized the word *friendly*. “She’s currently dating my ex.”

Collin caught something in her tone. Was it jealousy? Stephanie might be a good resource. Sure, she’d come to the

table to dig for information. She'd probably heard more rumors around town than he had. "Is your ex here?"

Gloria glanced around and then shook her head. "No. He's not."

Sensing she wasn't in the mood to talk about her former relationship, he changed the subject. "We'll give our waitress time to let the crowd know they might get a firsthand account of what happened at the hostel. Best way to drum up rumors about the killer and conversation about the trail."

Gloria studied his face, and he could see she didn't care for the idea of rumors flying. She blew out her breath. "I don't want everyone talking about me." Worry tinged the corners of her eyes.

"They won't be talking about you. They'll be talking about the Grapevine Killer." Gloria brought her hand to her forehead. "I have a business to run. It's bad enough what's going on at the trail, but encouraging more rumors only fuels the fire."

"I don't want to cause trouble. I need information."

"I don't want Great Hikes, or my family, caught up in the disaster," Gloria said.

Protective of her family. Collin filed that away in understanding her family dynamic. "You and Lily are pretty close?"

Gloria shrugged. "We're all we have. It's been just us since my parents died five years ago."

Collin had lived with his share of grief over the past year. The closeness of family was a concept that resonated well with him. “I’m sorry. That must make it doubly hard for you to be alone.”

Gloria folded her hands in her lap and lowered her head. “I’m not totally alone. I have Spike.” She let out a quiet burst of laughter. “You know, that sounds a little pathetic. But the truth is, I don’t come into town much. I prefer being at the hostel with Spike.”

He heard something in her tone, and he ran with it. “Why’s that?”

Gloria looked away from him for a long moment. “I thought you were here to find out about the Grapevine Killer, not about me.” She lowered her voice. Not that their conversation could carry far over the noise of the music blaring through the speakers.

“I am, but before we go into that, I’d like to get to know you.” He hated the hurt and mistrust he saw flare in her eyes. What had happened to make her this suspicious? Was it his connection to law enforcement? He knew many members of the trail community didn’t have a good relationship with traditional authority within society, but he always tried to improve that when he could. Did she mistrust men in general?

She cleared her throat and glanced around. “You’re only around for a short time. You shouldn’t waste it getting to know me. Besides, I have four more guests arriving tomorrow, apparently.”

He shifted closer under the guise of hearing her better. He sensed being here was making her uncomfortable. “Do you want to leave? We can go somewhere else. And what do you mean by more guests? Are they aware of the killer?” It was the first time he was putting the case behind other priorities. At the moment, that priority was Gloria’s well-being. He ignored the twinge of guilt. Nothing should come before justice for his family.

He laid his hand on her arm, and she looked from it to him. Something lit in her eyes. Heat? Desire? Distrust? Their eyes locked, and held, and pressure built between them. Under other conditions, he would act on it and drag her into his bed for a single night of distraction. He’d grab her, kiss her, and cart her off to make her scream with pleasure, but not today. He was here to do a job, not find a companion for the night. He tried to ignore the way thinking of a single night with Gloria left him feeling dissatisfied.

Gloria leaned away, and sensing her discomfort, he dropped his hand from her arm.

Stephanie appeared, setting their drinks on the table. “Ready to order?”

Collin hadn’t looked at the menu, but he scanned it before looking at Stephanie pointedly and directing her attention to Gloria. “I know what I’ll have, but let’s get her order first.” Then he smiled at Stephanie until she turned to Gloria.

Gloria’s menu was still sitting in the exact spot it had been originally placed, but she didn’t hesitate before saying, “I’ll

have a patty melt with onion rings.”

Only then did Collin offer his request. “I’ll have the cheesesteak with onions, mayo, tomatoes, and fries on the side, please.”

Stephanie jotted down the order. “Coming right up,” she said, moving to another table and letting her hand brush over Collin’s shoulder as she collected the menus.

Gloria watched her leave. She straightened and pushed her hair over her shoulders. “She doesn’t even care that we might be together. She intends to make it clear she could have you if she wanted.”

“That won’t happen.” It bothered Collin how tired and defeated Gloria sounded.

“She’s dating Doug now,” Gloria said. She shrugged and drew her shoulders in as if trying to take up less space.

“Doug? The town sheriff? He’s your ex?” Talk about adding another layer of complexity to the case.

“Yep.” Gloria popped the *P*.

“He pointed suspicion at Lily,” Collin said, trying to get a sense of the subtleties.

“Yep.” Another popped *P* before Gloria took a sip of her club soda.

Collin just raised his eyebrow and waited for her to explain.

“He and Lily got into it pretty bad.”

“Over her?” Collin tilted his head toward the server station, where Stephanie was punching in their order.

She shrugged. “It had nothing to do with the case and doesn’t matter now.”

She was making it clear that personal questions were a no-go. He went another way. “Tell me about these new guests who will be arriving.”

Gloria visibly relaxed at the shift in subject. “Oh, my gosh. They are nuts. They’re these four older ladies who are supposed to come stay and slack-pack. I called them to ensure they knew about the killer, fully expecting to cancel their reservation, but the woman I spoke with just got more excited. Now they’re driving down all the way from Vermont a full day early.”

Collin’s gut twinged in the way it did when he knew he was onto something. “I don’t suppose the woman’s name happened to be Geri?”

“No, Betty, but I think one of the other ladies is named Geri. Why?”

Collin placed his fingers on his forehead, looked down at his lap, and spent a few minutes swearing under his breath.

“Collin? Do you know them?”

Well, there certainly wouldn’t be any avoiding it. “Yeah. A friend of mine met his wife while hiking the trail up in Vermont. They ran into some trouble and called me to come up and help. By the time I got there, Geri had the back of her

car loaded with an arsenal that would make the military jealous. Betty was plotting their plan of attack, and Joan and Linda were loading the weapons.” He watched Gloria’s eyes get big.

She stared at him blankly for a minute. Then she blinked. “That actually aligns scarily well with what I got from today’s phone conversation.”

“Yeah, they are...” Collin wasn’t sure how to finish that thought. He loved those women, but Gloria had been spot-on when she called them nuts. “Well, let’s just say I never want to stand against them.”

It made Gloria laugh. It also made the situation feel a bit too much like a real date. He needed to remember he was here for a reason.

“We should hang out here for a while after we eat. I want to talk to anyone who loves to gossip.” Deciphering the bull from the truth wasn’t easy, but now and then, he got lucky and caught a good lead.

Gloria accepted his shift back to business and glanced around the bar. “Loves to gossip, huh? Well, that limits our choices to only about 80% of the town. It’s a small community where gossip is about all they’ve got to talk about.”

Then everyone should have plenty to say about the murders. Hang out long enough, and after the last of the dinner crowd left, the drinking crowd would linger. Once the beer and wine had been flowing for a while, turning the subject of the bar



conversation to the murders would be easy. Heck, Stephanie might just do it for him.

They agreed to stay late into the evening and returned to discussing the four little old guerrilla commando ladies who would be arriving the next day while enjoying their dinners.

# CHAPTER 7

## GLORIA

Gloria hated gossip and yet here she was, chilling in the hottest gossip spot in town, waiting for the dinner rush to die down and conversation to pick up. Her engagement to Doug had ended six months ago, and even though he'd begun dating Stephanie even before they officially split, they weren't showing off their new relationship. Or at least, they hadn't been the last time she'd spent any time in town. As Gloria thought about how long ago that had been, she realized things may have changed. Perhaps now, the entire community knew Doug and Stephanie were together.

Gloria knew tongues would wag about her and her sexy stranger, but she didn't feel the intense anxiety or urge to puke that the thought of gossip about her usually inspired. She looked up at him just as she realized she'd thought of him as *her* sexy stranger. Yikes! She needed to calm the hell down. Perhaps she needed a date with her battery-operated boyfriend. It had been a while.

He recounted his run-in with an angry family of raccoons while up in Vermont, and Gloria's laughter bubbled up. It felt good to feel happy again. She'd felt contentment over the past several months, but genuine happiness had eluded her. She liked it, and it came so easily with Collin.

He shifted around their silverware as he directed her attention to Stephanie approaching with the appetizer they had ordered. Both of them were full from dinner but didn't want to

take up a table without continuing to be paying customers. Since neither were drinking alcohol, an order of chips and queso felt like a reasonable compromise.

The sour look on Stephanie's face made Gloria question how much of her dinner had been seasoned with spit. Then again, she'd been known to retrieve and eat food from the dirt while hiking, and the patty melt and onion rings had been delicious, so a little saliva from her ex's current partner probably wasn't that big an issue.

Stephanie plopped the chips down in front of Gloria before turning to Collin and setting down the queso with care. "Would you like some salsa, too?" she asked him.

Collin looked at Gloria and waited for her to shake her head no before he responded, "I think we're good, thanks."

Just as they turned back to each other after watching Stephanie huff away, Gloria heard a familiar voice, "Gloria, what brings you to town?" It was Ranger Todd, her neighbor and friend. They might not talk often, but he was one of the few people she stayed in regular contact with. He'd been friends with Gloria since childhood and had stopped by to check on her and Lily regularly after their parents had passed.

"Just having dinner with a friend," Gloria said with a genuine smile. "Collin, this is Ranger Todd Gilliam with the forestry department. He's about the closest thing to a neighbor I've got. Todd, this is Special Agent Collin... I'm so sorry. I don't remember your last name."

“It’s Warner,” Collin said to Gloria. Then he turned to Todd and added, “But please just call me Collin.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Todd said. “I should leave the two of you to enjoy yourselves. I’ll come by this week for a visit, okay?” he said with a wink to Gloria as he continued past them and toward his own table.

Then she turned back to see Collin glaring daggers in the ranger’s back.

“You can relax, you know. He’s gay. He’s also a great forest ranger and is the volunteer caretaker for Seeley Woodworth,” she explained to Collin and watched his tense form relax.

It didn’t last long, though. They were hit with another blast of chilly air as the door opened and Mike Harrison stepped through. He scanned the crowd and sauntered to where she and Collin were sitting.

“Looks like you two have gotten close.”

His tone left no doubt that he didn’t like what he was seeing. Why did he care so much? What was his grudge against Collin?

“What do you want, Harrison?” Collin asked bluntly.

“I want you to leave town,” Harrison said.

“Not going to happen.” Harrison slipped his thumbs into the waist of his pants. “You may have convinced Ms. Lopez here to help you, but does she know what you’ve done?” The threat in his voice was strong, but Gloria was confused.

She glanced at Collin. He looked unaffected. “She knows everything she needs to.”

Oh, no. Nope. This was not how this was going to go. She glared at Collin for a minute while he used his eyes to plead with her to drop it. But Gloria had been down that path, and she’d not be ignoring shit like this ever again in her life.

She turned to Harrison with her most blank expression and dropped all emotion from her voice as she asked, “What?”

Harrison grabbed a chair from a nearby table and pulled it up to the end of their booth. “Warner and I go way back. You want to tell the story, or should I?”

Collin rolled his eyes and gestured for Harrison to continue. “Tell the story however you’d like. You will anyway.”

“Warner and I were partners for a very, very short time when he first joined the FBI. In an effort to get to know him, I made the mistake of opening up about my personal life and telling him I was about to propose to my girlfriend. The very night I’d told him I was going to pop the question, I caught him sleeping with her.”

Collin’s jaw was clenched tight, and Gloria could see the vein by his temple pulsing. “Are you done airing my dirty laundry?”

“Sure am.” Harrison stood and grinned before snatching a chip from their basket. “Enjoy your evening.” He walked away toward the bar.

“You can ask me about it if you want to know,” Collin said, but he wasn’t looking at her anymore.

As curious as Gloria was, asking him questions would open the door for him to return them, and she didn’t want that. Collin’s past relationships had no bearing on this investigation. For now, she was happy to keep the doors to their personal past shut tight.

She tried to turn her focus back to the case and the information they were here to gather, but the thought of sticking around for another minute, let alone an hour or more, made her want to dump the queso over someone’s head before stomping their face into the grimy floor. She didn’t even care who.

“I think I’d like to go home now,” she told Collin in a deceptively calm and quiet voice.

He studied her for a minute before responding, “It does feel like the night is done. If you don’t mind, I’d just like to get one answer before we go. I promise it’ll only take a minute.”

Gloria sighed. “Fine.” She was surprised when he didn’t stand up and walk away to talk to someone. Instead, he continued to focus on her.

“I get how exhausting dealing with people in situations like this can be for you. I’d just like to know how much of your desire to leave is because of what Harrison said.”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“Fair enough. Sometime later, I’ll tell you my version of what happened with that girl.” Then he stood up and waited for her to lead the way out to the parking lot.

On the way home, Gloria and Collin drove past her favorite overlook. It was a bald spot with an amazing view of the Appalachian Mountains. High green peaks rolled through lush valleys. Clouds dotted the sky and sometimes sank into the gaps and passes like a ski mask that sank around a person’s eyes, nose, and mouth. Gloria used to think of it as peaceful comfort and warm harmony, but now she felt the creepy side of living solo slither to the forefront.

Collin turned up the dirt road toward Great Hikes Hostel, their headlights the only illumination. Gloria had meant to leave an outside light on at her cabin. She had locked Spike inside. Usually, she was happy to let him wander outside, but she wasn’t willing to risk it with a killer on the loose.

Collin parked in front of her cabin and turned to face her. His dark eyes glimmered in the dim lighting. “Thanks for coming with me tonight. I didn’t mean to keep you out so late.” He glanced at the clock on the dash as he rolled down the sleeves of his shirt. He reached for his jacket on the backseat. She couldn’t help admiring the flex of his forearms or the casual way he wore his suit. She couldn’t recall anyone else she knew wearing one to anything other than a funeral. Collin wore his as if it were as comfortable as gray sweatpants. How could something as simple as a man in a suit turn her on so much? She always thought of herself as being attracted to dirt smeared men who smelled of sweat. Collin



smelled more like the fresh forest air at dawn after the first frost. He was crisp and clean, and there was a part of her that wanted to roll around and dirty him up before dancing around her kitchen in his dress shirt.

Sitting in the truck with him, she was unsure what to do. Should she make a run for her cabin while shouting goodnight, so she could lock herself in before doing something stupid? If she hugged him, would she be willing to let go? This was way too soon to jump on him, right? Besides, feelings equaled problems that she didn't have time for.

Then she heard a muffled bark and got her answer from man's best friend. "I need to feed Spike and take him out to walk around. He's been cooped up all evening. Plus, I have a few chores to do around the hostel."

"Let me come with you?" Collin gave her a hopeful look that made her giggle inside. Luckily, she suppressed her outside reaction to a much more socially acceptable smile. At least, she hoped she had.

Gloria unbuckled her seat belt, and they climbed out of the car. The fresh air felt good against her neck. The bar had been too hot and stuffy. "You don't have to do that. I can handle it."

Collin followed her up the steps to her front door. "I want to. Besides, someone has to keep you and Spike safe."

Gloria's back stiffened as she turned around, but then she saw the teasing smirk on his face and tried to relax.

She must not have been completely successful, because Collin's face simmered down, and he expanded on his response.

"I have no doubt you and Spike can, and do, handle yourselves just fine. Heck, from some of the comments I heard at the bar, you may be a better shot than me."

She nodded at him and answered, "I would like the company."

Then she opened her door, patted Spike on the head and apologized to the dog, "Sorry dinner is so late tonight, bud." She retrieved the dog food from the pantry. Spike started chomping on bits as they fell from the bag toward his bowl. Based on the mess of dog chow scattered around the floor, one wouldn't think any had ended up in his belly, but his constant crunching and the crumbs stuck to his jowls suggested he was doing just fine.

"He was hungry," Collin said.

"He's always hungry," was Gloria's dry reply.

Collin settled at her kitchen table. "While we wait for him to finish, do you have any maps lying around? I want a bird's-eye view of the area that extends just beyond the trail."

"I have some topo maps that hikers like to peruse," Gloria said while moving toward her desk and grabbing one. She handed it to Collin and watched him carefully unfold it across the table. It had been well-loved, and Gloria was not one of those individuals gifted with the skill to precisely refold a map

the way it had come. That meant Collin had to navigate a few flimsy creases and an occasional small tear along the edge, but it should be good enough for him to get the information he wanted.

Collin traced his finger along the trails around Great Hikes Hostel. There were quite a few that wove through the forest beyond the Appalachian Trail. Gloria couldn't help wondering what he was thinking about as he examined the area.

“Tell me about places in this area where locals go that aren't well known.” Collin suddenly looked up at her with a serious expression.

Gloria sat beside him and scanned her gaze across the map. Her own love of hiking meant she had most of it memorized, but looking at it laid out before her made it easier to consider all the possibilities. From the time she was a child, she and Lily had explored the forest and had found many places with great views and great hiking that few others knew about. “We have lots of places like that. They're unmarked trails and hidden hunting gems, but they tend to be different places than where the local kids go to party. Which kind of place are you thinking of?”

“The ones that are more difficult to get to. Places that require more than just a walk to access.”

Gloria mentally scrolled through the possibilities. “I can think of a few places. I can mark their general areas on the map and write down some landmarks, but the easiest way to find them is with someone who's been there before.”

She took out a pen and marked several locations with small circles. Collin leaned in and peered over her shoulder, and she had to intentionally refocus on the map to slow her heart rate. If she turned her head, her lips would be close enough for them to kiss.

“Some of those look pretty far from trails,” he observed skeptically.

Gloria nodded her agreement. “You said you were most interested in hard-to-get-to places, and these certainly are. I’m not the only local to know about them, but I don’t recall ever bumping into another person in any of these places. There are trails that lead to them, but they won’t be found on any maps.”

“So, you’ll be my guide?” Collin asked her.

She couldn’t stop herself from smiling at the thought of showing him some of the places she treasured most. “Yeah, I guess I can do that.”

Being in a position where she was alone with him for such long stretches of time made her both anxious and excited. She was already thinking about how it would feel to kiss him and have his strong arms around her. That was dangerous. She wasn’t ready to jump into any kind of romance like that, was she?

Harrison’s words at the lounge came to mind. Why had Collin slept with someone already in a relationship? It shouldn’t factor in, but Gloria wondered if Collin was a man who could be trusted. He wanted to find his cousin’s killer and seemed willing to do anything to accomplish that goal.

Anything, including lying to her? Pretending to be interested in her? Spike's wet nose nudged her hand, giving her a chance to escape the conversation. "He's ready for his walk." Spike didn't have the same apprehension she did about walking through the hostel grounds.

Gloria grabbed the leash off the back of the door and attached it to his collar. Then she grabbed her headlamp from its place, hanging beside the leash. When she was eight years old, she'd been lost in the woods after dark and had been terrified she wouldn't be found. She'd done as her mother had taught her and stood still while blowing the whistle attached to her bracelet. She'd been cold and terrified by the time they'd found her, but ultimately, she'd been fine. It had left her with a fear of hiking through dark woods for a while. Her time spent on the AT had removed that fear as she learned to enjoy night hiking, but she still preferred a full moon and a headlamp with at least 600 lumens, so she always kept one handy.

For tonight, she'd take a short walk around the hostel cabins and bunkhouse and make it up to Spike tomorrow when she took him for a nice long hike.

Ten minutes later, Spike was meandering in front of them, dodging from side to side along the path, stopping to sniff the trees and bushes. As they walked, the sound of their footsteps was dampened by the wet leaves coating the forest floor.

"Normally, I love this quiet, but after last night's chaos, it feels different," she said.

“Hmm, I can still find the peacefulness of it when I breathe in the smell of pine and forest, but I can understand how different it feels for you tonight.”

Gloria hoped that the Grapevine Killer had moved on, farther down the trail, maybe lost himself in the woods or slipped off a cliff. Heck, maybe he gave up looking for victims as the trail got more crowded. “I wonder if the FBI has found the identity of the last victim,” Gloria thought aloud.

“We might have to wait for the press release on that information. Harrison is not eager to share intel with me,” Collin scoffed.

“It’s obvious you two have a lot of history,” Gloria said while thinking that she might be ready to hear his side of things after all.

Collin sighed before explaining, “Harrison and I worked together years ago. He follows the rules to the letter, and I prefer to consider the spirit of the law and do what’s necessary to get the job done.” Collin stopped walking, so Gloria did the same. “He was constantly babbling on about his girlfriend, and I was happy for him. But, at that point in my life, I was much more interested in a fun night than any kind of commitment. When he’d headed out to go spiffy up and propose to Julia, that was her name, I’d headed to the bar hoping to pick someone up for the night. A sweet girl named Jules was pouting into her drink about how much she missed the feeling of a real man. Those were her exact words. It was too good an opening for me to pass up. I introduced myself and asked how

long it had been, and she just told me her recent encounters had been lackluster. We ended up going back to her place. Our travels from the door to the bedroom were a bit entangled and didn't include stopping to browse pictures or discuss the knickknacks she had in her living room. I was shocked when Mike showed up, but he couldn't believe that I didn't see the pictures of them together or the figurines he was always talking about her collecting."

Gloria nodded thoughtfully and resumed their forward progress as Spike began to pull on the leash. He seemed hell bent on going to the location where the body had been found. The trees around the area had been roped off with yellow caution tape, but that wouldn't even slow Spike down. She pulled back on the leash and tried to redirect him, but Spike wasn't having it. He wasn't used to being leashed and didn't appreciate his human trying to tell him which way he could and couldn't go.

Gloria clicked up the beam of her headlamp even brighter to better see the path ahead. "Spike wants to see the location of the body."

"Let him. We'll keep him off the scene, but I wouldn't mind having a look. Unless you want to return to the cabin, and I'll take Spike myself." He watched her carefully. She liked the way he looked so concerned. It had been a long time since anyone bothered to even pretend to care that much about her well-being. Of course, that didn't mean she was willing to let him coddle her.

“I feel no need to run away and hide.” She raised an eyebrow at him, as if daring him to challenge her.

When he just nodded in acceptance, she added, “We should probably all go back. It’s not like we’ll be able to see anything in the dark anyway.”

Collin studied her for a minute more before responding, “Chicken.”

Gloria couldn’t stop a huff of laughter from spewing forth, “What?”

“I’m just saying that the FBI has cleaned up the area, the evidence has been photographed and collected, and it might be nice to see that there’s nothing there to worry about anymore.”

Gloria squinted at him but decided it might be nice to revisit the area without the body there.

“Let’s go.” She let Spike take the lead but pulled him to a stop near the yellow tape around the crime scene. The wind blew, scattering pollen through the beam of her light. Gloria let her flashlight pan over the scene, starting high, giving herself a view of the trees before working her way down to the depression that had been trampled around the body.

The swish of movement through the undergrowth had her swinging her light to the left and further away from the trail. A movement ten yards away caught her eye. She wanted to see more, but the beam of her headlamp created so many shadows. It didn’t help that Spike was twisting, tangled, and had wrapped around her with the leash.



A shadowy figure, looking very much like a human, was lurking near the base of a tree. If the light hadn't given away Gloria and Collin's presence, Spike's barking certainly had. Gloria worked to step free from the leash just as Collin aimed his flashlight beam on the figure to remove some of the shadows. Unfortunately, by then all there was to see was a vague form ducking beneath the crime-scene tape on the opposite side from them, running between the trees, and impossible to track.

Collin drew his gun. "Stop," he shouted.

The intruder didn't break stride and darted behind the next tree before disappearing completely. Collin took off after him to give chase, and Gloria watched as his beam of light bobbed through the woods before also disappearing. Collin was gone. Gloria knew it would have been safer for them to run back to the hostel and call for help. She cursed herself for leaving her phone on the counter back in her cabin. She pictured the figure turning around and killing Collin the same way he'd killed his other victims. Then she pictured him coming back for her. Fear and panic tightened her stomach. It was only the first day. There shouldn't be another body until tomorrow, right? Then Gloria remembered how flimsy the pattern had been and reached for Spike, drawing him against her. She was shaking enough to jostle both of them.

She buried her face in the scruff of his neck just long enough to gather her wits. She needed to hike back and call for help. Suddenly her favorite place didn't feel safe anymore. The forest she'd called home for most of her life was

surrounded by darkness that felt ominous with the beautiful woods being reduced to a place for a murderer to hide.

# CHAPTER 8

## COLLIN

The Grapevine Killer had returned to the scene. Perhaps he was looking for another victim, perhaps he wanted to relive the killing or perhaps it was related to the body not being posed due to being interrupted. It could be a teenager on a dare or the media snooping around, but his gut told him the killer was close.

He had to find and stop him. As Collin chased the figure, it grew more difficult to see. The trees were close together, providing too many places to hide. Collin stopped and shone his light around the area.

Everything was quiet and still.

He'd lost the killer, but what if that had been exactly what the Grapevine Killer had wanted? Had he circled back to Gloria and Spike? He couldn't see the killer managing to take her down, especially with Spike there, but this last victim had been killed right here.

Gloria was smart and familiar with the area. He knew she could hold her own, but he didn't imagine the previous victims had been wilting flowers. If the Grapevine Killer surprised her, he could easily incapacitate her before she could do anything to defend herself. It would mean straying from using poison to kill, but he didn't yet know the cause of death for yesterday's victim. Maybe that pattern had already been broken.

He whirled, calling out to Gloria.

His cousin's face flashed into his mind. Beth had died by this psycho's hands. He wouldn't let him hurt another woman he cared about.

Collin pushed his body to move faster as his brain tripped over that thought. He cared about Gloria. He'd known her a short time, but he had an undeniable connection with her.

"Gloria!"

Spike barked in response. Collin was desperate to hear Gloria's voice. Was he too late? Had he made a critical error leaving her alone? His gun felt heavy in his hand. It did no good to shoot in the dark, but he would shoot to kill if Gloria was in danger.

When he yelled her name again, this time she responded. He moved in the direction of her voice.

When she came into view, relief rushed over him. She and Spike had been heading down the trail back toward the hostel.

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her. Spike growled as if chastising him for his mistake.

"Are you okay?" he asked into her hair.

She pulled back to glare at him. "Except for being abandoned by the only armed individual around after coming face-to-face with a serial killer, I'm fine." Then she snuggled her face back into his neck before asking, "Was it the Grapevine Killer? Did you see them?"

He hadn't seen enough of his face to provide any more details of the man they were pursuing. The glimpse he'd

gotten had been quick. "I think it was the Grapevine Killer."

"We should call Harrison," Gloria sighed, like she wanted him to disagree with her.

A cracking branch had them both standing up straight on high alert. "First, we need to go back to the cabins," Collin said. He didn't want to add more fear to the fire, but they weren't in a great position. With her headlamp still on, they'd be an easy target. It helped that her face was smashed against him, but he knew the glow would still be visible in the darkness.

Collin hated to admit it, but in this position, he was outmatched. They moved back to Gloria's cabin as quickly as possible. When they arrived, Collin took Gloria's keys from her shaking hands. The adrenaline had worn off for her and left her with chattering teeth and full body tremors. Collin was still riding the high and wouldn't crash until he knew everything was taken care of. Heck, he might not fully feel the drop until the case was over. It had happened to him that way before. He guided her to the couch in the living room.

"Sit down. Let me fix you something to drink."

She nodded numbly, and he retrieved a glass of water, setting it in her hand. She took a few small sips.

"I'll call Harrison." As much as he hated to involve the man, he knew it was the professional thing to do. Besides, they'd have his job if he didn't report it. If that had been the killer out in the woods, there could be evidence left behind

that would lead them to him. Collin couldn't risk missing a chance to catch the man over his disdain for another agent.

Collin pulled a throw blanket off the back of the couch and wrapped it around Gloria's shoulders. He took the lighter from the mantel and lit the kindling she already had set up in the wood stove. After he was sure it had caught, he added a few logs, closed the cast iron door, and flipped on the fan above to circulate the hot air.

"I suppose I have to give you credit for not being completely useless," she teased him.

"Hey, I've hiked the whole trail. I was class of '09. I know my way around the woods."

"Really?" she asked.

He sat next to her on the couch and slid an arm around her shoulders, pulling her against his body. He intended the gesture to offer comfort, but it had the unintended side effect of feeling good. Too good. "Yeah, didn't I mention that before?" Collin pulled out his phone and dialed Mike Harrison. Harrison answered on the first ring. After explaining the situation, Collin disconnected the call without waiting for Harrison to bark commands at him.

Spike trotted over and sat next to the growing blaze, soaking in the heat. Gloria shifted next to Collin on the couch, drawing her knees to her chest and leaning into him.

After a time, the cabin grew warmer, and her shivers faded.

The sharp knock on the door had Gloria jumping to her feet. Collin caught her before she raced for the door. “Let’s be cautious, okay?”

Gloria nodded her agreement. Collin peered through the peephole, and seeing a park ranger on the porch, he opened the door.

The man stepped inside, pulling off his hat, revealing bleached blond hair. His goatee was dark and neatly trimmed. “I received a call from Special Agent Mike Harrison to check in and see if everyone is okay.”

Gloria slipped past Collin and hugged the man. “Ranger Todd, thanks for coming out so late. I’m sorry you were pulled into this. You looked like you were ready to enjoy an evening out earlier at Colton’s.”

Collin remembered the man from earlier in the evening. He’d been friendly, but what was he doing in full uniform now? Collin stepped back, allowing Todd farther inside.

Todd threaded the brim of his hat through his fingers. “I was supposed to meet a guy, but he never showed up. I intentionally set it up before my night shift started at 10, so I’d have an excuse to escape if it didn’t go well. Anyway, I have a couple more guys coming to the scene and the FBI should be here soon. If the media hears about this, I’ll try to keep them off your backs.”

Collin lifted a brow. “You think the media already knows about this?” If they did, how?



Todd shrugged. “If the sheriff and the Feds turn on their flashers and start piling up the mountain, someone is bound to notice. There’s nothing much up here, but Great Hikes Hostel, so people will be curious.”

Small towns. Collin was familiar with them.

Gloria wouldn’t like reporters poking around. She could probably turn it around and use the publicity for her hostel, but Collin had yet to encounter a hostel that was looking for much more business. He imagined her place was usually full to bursting, and he thought he remembered her saying something about opening up the field for tents sometimes. In all reality, it would just bring more of the rumors she seemed to hate so much. She hadn’t explained why just yet, but he was hoping that would come with time. It was obvious that she had high walls of self-protection erected around herself. Plus, being away from her land seemed to make her nervous. It might just be social anxiety, but he worried there was more to it.

Then he had another thought. “Harrison said the FBI mobile unit can’t make it across the bridge. They’ve been hauling everything up and down the road in smaller vehicles. Could the news crews make it up here?” The road to Great Hikes was a blend of thin gravel and hard-packed dirt. It was full of ruts and potholes from rains washing away parts of it, but he could tell Gloria worked hard to keep it patched up enough to be passable. It really needed a full layer of fresh slate followed by a thick spread of gravel, but at almost 3 miles long, he doubted Gloria could afford it. Just after turning onto her drive, there was a narrow, low-water bridge that was mostly just a bunch

of old wooden slats that grumbled every time a car drove across them. He wasn't sure it could handle much more than a full-size pickup, let alone a large van or box truck full of heavy and delicate equipment.

Ranger Todd chuckled, "That's the one thing Gloria's got going for her here. I keep tellin' her to fix that bridge and her drive, but she won't do it. I guess it's paying off now. The media crews won't be able to drive their big vehicles up here, but several local stations have small crossovers. They'll show up and share their feed with the bigger stations."

Damn. Collin's hope for some peace crunched beneath his feet like an unwelcome spider. Local reporters didn't tend to be as focused or relentless as the bigger crews, but they were much less predictable and more likely to cross barriers of all kinds.

A few minutes later, another car pulled up the drive. Collin pulled aside the curtain to watch. "Your rangers are here."

"That's my cue. Let's lock this place down for the Feds," Todd said.

He stepped back outside and joined the other rangers, leaving Collin alone with Gloria. She had snuggled in on the couch with a giant fuzzy blanket pulled up around her. He was torn. He wanted to go help with the investigation, but an even bigger part of him wanted to stay with Gloria.

She must have sensed his internal debate, because she pursed her lips and glared at him before pointing out, "You

know Harrison will sideline you the minute he arrives. Just stay here with me. At least for now.”

He looked at her before turning to assess the situation outside again. Maybe he could keep it lowkey and overhear something Harrison was saying?

“Oh, for the love! Are you going to come share this blanket with me or not?”

It would be at least thirty minutes before Harrison arrived. He could spend that time with Gloria and still go do some eavesdropping later.

He joined Gloria on the couch and sat down, pulling her feet onto his lap. He rubbed her feet and tried to relax.

“I get that you need to find your cousin’s killer, and I’ll do everything I can to help with that. Rubbing salt into the wound between you and Harrison isn’t going to help anything. You know that, right?”

Why was she trying to comfort him? Shouldn’t he be the one assuring her she was safe and the killer wasn’t coming back?

“The killer won’t come back here,” he blurted out.

She gave him a quizzical look. “What makes you say that?”

He sighed and started thinking aloud, “He’s never used the same location to kill on two different occasions. He always moves on to a new crime scene.”

Gloria raised an eyebrow at him. “Do you think that’s likely to change?”

“We have no reason to think he returned here to hurt another person.”

Gloria shot him a look. “Do NOT give me public relations bull-shit answers.”

He had to adjust himself. Apparently, Little Collin really liked it when Gloria scolded him. At least, it liked when she reminded him she wasn’t dainty or made of glass.

“Why are you smiling at me?” she asked him. “You shouldn’t be this calm while looking for a serial killer.”

Beth had given him a hard time about the same thing. They’d been the only two grandchildren on that side of the family, so they’d grown up close. Their mothers were twins, so they’d always lived near each other. Beth had been several years younger than Collin and had shocked everyone when she deferred getting a job after college for a year to hike the AT. She also had plans to travel through Europe and visit Peru. The whole family thought Collin’s life would be the interesting one since he spent his days hunting killer humans. Now, he was using the skills he’d developed to figure out who had stopped Beth from living her boring but meaningful life as a teacher just because she wanted to spend one year enjoying some adventures first. His devotion to his job had destroyed every relationship he’d attempted. His exes could never understand why it mattered so much to him. He could never talk about the horrors he saw, and it always destroyed their

trust in each other. “I can’t let the Grapevine Killer kill anyone else,” he finally answered Gloria. “Tell me how you came to own Great Hikes.” He needed a change of subject.

She seemed to understand his need for a change of subject and kept her explanation light and fluffy. She told him about her love for the outdoors and opening the hostel almost five years earlier. It was idle chatter, but he enjoyed the sound of her voice.

The Feds arrived with sirens screaming and lights flashing, so neither Gloria nor Collin could miss it. They weren’t concerned about keeping their presence under wraps, and Collin knew it likely meant the media wouldn’t be far behind.

Gloria drew the blanket closer around her when he mentioned that. He wanted her to have as much warning and preparation as possible before that happened.

She snaked her hand through the folds to reach for his.

The casual touch lit him on fire. His arousal blazed hot, and he was thankful he’d adjusted himself earlier. This wasn’t the time or place. Spending the evening with her, touching her, being alone with her had his arousal at a constant low simmer that occasionally flashed up anytime she tossed fuel in his direction.

Collin drew his hand away. He couldn’t allow this heat between them to roar out of control.

Gloria leaned toward him. “Do you think he’s still here? Watching me?” She stood up, draped the blanket around her

shoulders and walked toward her safe in the corner of the room. She pulled out a shotgun and loaded it before walking around to every window to ensure the curtains were drawn tight.

“This place is going to be FBI central for the next several hours. Unless the killer decides to turn himself in, he’ll be gone.” How long or how far, Collin wasn’t sure.

A knock at the door had Collin rising to his feet. “I’ll get it.”

He pulled open the door and came face-to-face with Mike Harrison, and from his expression, the man was angry.

Harrison let out a string of curses. “I knew having you involved would bring trouble.”

Collin set his feet apart and refused to step back or allow Harrison inside. “How does my being here control what the killer does? Is this the thanks I get for calling you first?”

Harrison swore again and rubbed a tired hand over his face. “You. Are. Too. Close. You need to step back and let us handle this. Tell me what you know, and then take a break.”

Collin had been told that so many times, he expected it from everyone he talked to about this case. “I’m not interfering with the investigation.”

Harrison set his jaw. “You know, I’ll have to speak with you and Ms. Lopez individually about what you saw and heard.”

Collin shrugged. “I’ll be happy to tell you what happened tonight. You can speak to Gloria as well. Why don’t you talk to her first? It’s late, and she’s had a tough day.”

Harrison cocked his head. “She’s standing behind you, holding a shotgun aimed at the floor like she knows exactly how to handle it. I’m not sure she’s as tired as you seem to think. We’re trying to solve a murder here.”

Collin doubted he was able to hide his disbelief, but sure enough, when he turned around, Gloria had left the blanket in a heap and was standing at the edge of the kitchen with both hands on the shotgun she had aimed at the floor. She was standing far enough to the side to have a clear shot at the door if Collin leaned an inch to his right. Spike was sitting statue still beside her. He couldn’t stop the grin that spread across his face as he stepped back and pulled the door open further.

Gloria rested the shotgun in the crook where the wall met the table and rested her hand on Collin’s back. His body reacted to her touch immediately.

“I can talk now or later. I’m fine, but I appreciate that Collin is at least considerate enough to recognize I might need some sleep at some point – even if it’s only to enjoy nightmares about a serial killer.”

Collin couldn’t hold back his grin. She appreciated him. Take that, Harrison. Then he heard his own thoughts and rolled his eyes before refocusing on the case. He was here to catch a killer, not a new love interest.

Harrison looked between Gloria and Collin. “Fine. Let’s talk now. Do you mind talking outside?”

“Not at all.” Gloria stepped onto the porch and followed Harrison over to the corner where the porch swing hung. It

was too far away for him to hear what they were saying, but at least Gloria could sit down and get comfortable.

She didn't though. Her arms were crossed, and she kept glancing over her shoulder at the spotlights the Feds were setting up all around her property. Her face was solemn. It was obvious that she wasn't happy with the situation. The scene was similar to the night before, and he wondered if she was experiencing flashbacks.

Harrison leaned toward her, listening and nodding, asking a few questions.

After about ten minutes, Gloria walked back over to the door and stepped into his embrace before Harrison could follow with a gruff, "You're up, Collin."

This time, Harrison led them down the steps and away from the cabin. Collin told him every detail of their evening, starting with when they left Colton's. He related everything they'd seen in the woods and every action he'd taken. The entire time, he could feel Gloria watching him from the porch. He could tell she was waiting for him.

"What's your relationship with her?" Harrison finally asked with a bluntness that made Collin want to punch him. Granted, it was mostly because he wasn't sure how to answer.

He kept it simple. "I'm renting a cabin from her."

Harrison narrowed his eyes as if he didn't believe Collin. "I saw you two together. You're doing more than renting a cabin."



“We’re working together, too.”

“So, you’re getting a civilian involved in this case, now.”

“She’s lending me her local knowledge.” Collin couldn’t help letting a bit of a smirk show on his face.

Harrison pointed a finger at Collin. “Do not get in the way of my case.”

He didn’t remind Harrison again that he had called him first to let him know about the trespasser. Collin’s priority wasn’t to be top dog on this case. He didn’t care who solved it. He just wanted the killer found and brought to justice. “I don’t plan on it.”

Harrison rocked back on his heels. “You know, you should get back to work and get officially assigned to a case. You’re a good investigator, so it’d be nice of you to put your skills to good use and help others. It might be a nice distraction, too.”

Collin clenched his fists, held his breath, and worked hard to think of three reasons why it would be bad to punch this man in the face. Men who were bigger assholes than Harrison had tried to talk Collin out of investigating this case, but Collin was determined. He wasn’t going to stop his pursuit.

“I’m planning to put my skills to use on this case and help these victims and their families,” he finally replied with a smile that might have looked scarier and threatening instead of happy and friendly, based on the way he had to consciously unclench his teeth afterward.

Harrison shook his head. “You’re being a fool. I have real work to do. Stay away from my crime scene.” Harrison stomped away.

Collin didn’t argue. Poking around the scene wasn’t going to magically produce new information. There might be some evidence there, but it would be recorded and cataloged for him to review later. He’d been there and seen things for himself just a couple hours ago.

Gloria popped up at his side and asked, “How’d that go? Any new information? Did he share any secrets about the scene?”

She was so eager, it hurt him to disappoint her. “They’re processing the scene now. I’m sure they’re looking for the killer. Harrison won’t share information. We’re on our own.”

Gloria surveyed the scene around her. “I don’t get it. Why would the killer come back? What are we missing?”

They were missing a key piece of the puzzle that would form the killer’s psyche. “Maybe he left something behind? Something significant to him? Maybe he didn’t finish the job and wants to complete his ritual?” Collin wasn’t sure any of those felt right to him. Did he return to confirm the body had been found?

Gloria rubbed her arms, and he wished he could wrap himself around her to keep her warm. He wanted to hold her and touch her. Being alone with her made him want to forget all about the case and just roll around in bed together.

“What are you thinking?” she asked while giving him a suspicious side-eye.

He wasn't about to admit to picturing tossing her over his shoulder and carting her off into her cabin to strip her naked and do dirty things with her, so he gave the most nonchalant answer he could, “Just about the case.”

It didn't look like she believed him. “You looked pretty intense.”

“It's an intense situation.” He wasn't lying. Being around her felt just as intense to him as his need to avenge Beth and hunt her killer. Besides, now wasn't the time to think about holding her, kissing her, licking her—nope. His reaction to crime scenes had always been strong and visceral, and while it wasn't his finest trait, he did enjoy releasing the pressure with good company when it was available. He'd go for a long run when he had to, but he much preferred more carnal exercise. But now was not the time.

She rolled her eyes at him but went with it. “I don't understand why someone would do this.”

Collin forced himself to concentrate on her words and not her lips. “Maybe he can't control the urge.”

He stepped closer, but Gloria's phone rang in her pocket, causing her to step back.

# CHAPTER 9

## GLORIA

After not having her phone when she'd needed it earlier, she'd tucked it into her pocket only after contemplating the practicality of duct taping to her hand. She glanced at the number and the time before showing Collin.

“You said something about knowing Betty? Any idea why she'd be calling me at midnight?”

Collin's entire body slumped. “No idea, but you better answer it.” The same man who didn't blink when standing toe-to-toe with Special Agent Mike “Asshole” Harrison was completely cowed by the mere mention of these women.

“Great Hikes Hostel; This is Gloria. How can I help you?” she answered in her chipper, professional voice.

“Oh, Gloria, good. I'm so sorry to be calling this late, but when I told the girls you'd found a third body right there on your property, they decided we had to leave immediately. We're all taking turns driving so we can ride straight through. Except for Linda, of course. Her kids took her keys away after she had a small stroke and hit the gas instead of the brake when parking in her garage. Luckily it was on the side of the house, so now it's just more like a carport instead of a garage –

“

“Betty!” Gloria usually hated to interrupt, but it felt like her only option with this woman. “When will you be arriving?”

Truthfully, she had a million questions and deeply believed the women should not be coming here in the midst of everything, but based on her previous conversation with them, and Collin's reaction, arguing felt like wasting oxygen.

“Well, now, near as we can figure, there'll be another victim tomorrow, so it was important to us to be there before then. We won't quite make it by sunrise, but we should be there between eight and ten depending on how many times we have to stop to pee. None of our bladders are quite what they used to be. You should be thankful for your youth and fully enjoy it while you can.”

“Yes, I completely agree. Thank you, Betty. I look forward to seeing you in eight or ten hours. Drive safe now.” Then Gloria hung up before Betty could start in on another tangent. Yeesh!

She looked up to see Collin's shoulders shaking with silent laughter. Had something funny happened? She looked around the area and saw everyone was wandering around doing whatever work it was they needed to do. Gloria looked back at Collin and realized he was laughing at her.

“I'm sorry. I don't mean to laugh—“

And yet, he couldn't finish his sentence through his giggles.

She pursed her lips, put her hands on her hips and glared at him while he took some deep breaths to pull himself back under control.

“I really am sorry, Gloria. It’s just so nice to see them steamroll over someone other than me. When they put my best friend, Logan, in his place, I figured it was more about him. They’d never do that to an FBI agent like myself; but then they did. Now, I know with certainty they can and will do it to everyone.”

Gloria closed her eyes and brought her shoulders down and away from her ears. “Were you able to hear their side of the conversation?” she finally asked.

“Yep. They’ll be here in the morning, and apparently, women lose control of their bladders as they age.” Collin snickered again at the last part.

“I need to get two cabins ready for them.” At least she wouldn’t have to worry about nightmares anytime soon. It didn’t look like she’d be getting much time for even pseudo sleep tonight.



Gloria’s stomach rolled over when Doug’s cruiser pulled up to the hostel before she’d even made it back up the steps of her porch. His arrival had an ominous feel to it. They hadn’t really spoken since their breakup, and she had no interest in changing that.

Doug climbed out of his car and strode directly toward her. He had grown his beard out, though it was starting to show

some salt mixed in with his pepper-colored dark brown hair. He wasn't tall, but he spent enough time at the gym and gun range to be nicely ripped. Gloria didn't want to confront him, but she had no way to avoid him. Dread and anxiety swept over her as she tried to remind herself that the power not to kill him was completely in her hands.

Doug looked between Gloria and Collin. "Why does it seem like every time there's trouble, a Lopez is involved?"

Gloria was not about to fall prey to his bait. She snarled, "There's a serial killer in this area. We're the closest hostel to this section of the trail. Remove head from ass; then talk." She figured snark was fine so long as she didn't let fists fly or go retrieve her gun.

Doug narrowed his eyes before asking, "Where's your sister?"

Gloria glared at him and wondered if she had to answer him. This wasn't his case. Sure, he was in uniform, but Gloria was aware of the ways he'd used his position as sheriff for his own benefits in the past. "She's over 18. I'm not her keeper," was the only response she was willing to give.

"In other words, you have no idea. How convenient."

Gloria held back any additional angry words and decided to walk away. "Excuse me. It's been a long night, and I think it's time for me to lock myself in my bedroom now. I'll deal with preparing cabins in the morning."



Doug reached for her, but Collin was faster. He stepped between them before Doug could catch her arm. “She said she was leaving,” Collin said.

Doug straightened and flexed to try and puff up to Collin’s level. “Who are you? Gloria’s new lover?” he taunted.

“I’m a friend,” Collin said.

Doug looked between Gloria and Collin and snickered. “Whatever. People who get close to the Lopez family often find themselves struggling. Gloria’s a particularly spectacular piece of work, though she’s not the worst in bed. Good luck with that.”

Doug turned and stalked away, leaving Gloria seething. How could he speak about anyone that way? There was no cause for him to bring up old family trouble. It was a low blow, even coming from an ex-fiancé.

Gloria and Collin went into her cabin and closed the door. The places that felt like safety and home to her were dwindling. What was next, someone breaking into her home and taking away this comfort, too?

After several hours of sitting in her cabin while watching the walls flash red and blue from the swirling lights the officers refused to shut off, she thought she might go nuts. She had curled up on the couch attempting to sleep but hadn’t had any luck. Collin had suggested she go to bed, but being alone in a dark, closed off room was not appealing. The FBI and park rangers were still combing through the woods. Despite

the heat pouring from her woodstove, Gloria pulled her favorite Afghan higher up around her neck.

The FBI wouldn't find the man she and Collin had seen at the crime scene. She was sure of it. He was gone. The only question was, what *kind* of gone? He might still be hunting and looking for a new victim, or he might be long gone, never to be seen again. As much as she hoped for the latter, deep inside, she needed him to be caught. It wouldn't be enough for him to disappear. She'd spend forever wondering if or when he'd show up again. She wanted to see his dead body with no breath left in his lungs. That might make it easier for her to hike and camp with confidence again. Right now, the mere thought of trekking through the woods made her shiver with fear.

“What do we do now? Do we wait for them all to leave and go do our own investigation?” Gloria knew that Doug would spread seeds of misdirection with the FBI. It might not be intentional, but he'd have his own theories about who it was, and as long as they were chasing someone from town, they wouldn't be chasing the killer. She didn't know much, wasn't even sure the killer was a man, but she did know it all came back to the trail. The killer would be caught on the trail, not in town.

Collin leaned back and lolled his head on the back of the couch. “We might see something in the morning, but the FBI isn't going away anytime soon. Even if they leave for a bit, they'll be back at first light.”

Special Agent Harrison wouldn't share any information. They'd have to find all the evidence for themselves to figure out who the killer was. "We need access to their evidence and information." Gloria gave Collin a hopeful look. She knew Harrison wouldn't share, but maybe he had other connections.

Collin nodded. "Unfortunately, I haven't figured out how to get it yet, but I do agree."

Then Gloria thought of Angie. "I might have a way."

Collin lifted his head and turned to bore his eyes into hers. "Oh?"

"Don't look so surprised," Gloria chided him.

"Oh, I have no doubt about your abilities and resources. I'm just surprised you're waiting until now to bring up your idea."

"Well, I didn't really think of it until just now," Gloria explained sheepishly.

"Fair enough." Collin nodded for her to explain.

"I have a friend down at the county records office. They handle all the admin for the medical examiner, among other things. And this friend loves to gossip. I bet she'd be willing to share what she knows."

Collin's lips pulled back into a wide grin. "Uh, yeah. We should explore that option. Do you know if she handles any of the paperwork for the police?"

"I have no idea."

“That’s okay. It’s unlikely she does, but even getting some basics about the victim could be a huge help. We should go see her.”

Gloria nodded. “It’ll have to be sometime tomorrow. This is a small town, remember? Her office is only staffed part time. They’re only open Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday.”

“The county office is closed on Tuesdays and Fridays?” Collin asked with disbelief. “Every week?”

“They’ve moved a lot of stuff online. We’re small enough that most of their time is spent just standing around as it is.”

Aside from being one of the biggest gossips in town, Angie was less of a friend and more just a girl Gloria had gone to school with, but she had been one of the few people who’d actually bothered to ask Gloria about things before just wildly spreading rumors. Gloria figured that should count for something. “I bet she’d love to talk to a sexy FBI agent like yourself,” she pointed out to Collin.

“You think I’m sexy, huh?”

She snorted. She couldn’t help it. That was what he was getting from this conversation. She didn’t suppose she could really blame him. Plus, he really was sexy.

“I made you snort,” Collin commented with unfounded pride. After a moment of silent gloating, he finally asked, “Do you want me to go talk to her? Would she be willing to put her job at risk for this?”

Gloria sighed. She knew there was one tactic that would likely cause Angie to forget all about the concern for her job. “She loves being the center of attention, especially when that attention is coming from an attractive man.”

“Ahh, you want me to turn up the sexy and flirt with her,” Collin said with newfound understanding.

“Yeah,” Gloria hated the thought, but she had no claim on Collin.

“People saw us together at Colton’s earlier tonight. She might not buy it that I’m flirting with her. Especially with you standing right there by me.”

Gloria considered it for a minute. “Actually, I think that’s what will sell it. If you tell her I’m just your local guide helping you with the case, and I don’t react to you flirting with her, she’ll be reassured it’s all good.”

Collin’s eyes squinted. “And is that the truth? Are we really just working together?”

For just a moment, it felt like the entire universe held its breath. All Gloria had to do was admit her attraction to him, but she held back. There was too much standing in the way. “Of course, right?”

She thought she saw his face fall, but she might have been imagining it. Before she could ask him any follow-up questions, he pushed up to his feet and stepped away from her. “I’ll go ahead back to my own cabin. I want to make some

notes about the case, and I'll make a few calls to see if I can learn anything new."

"That's it. You're just leaving?" She hopped up and tossed aside her blanket.

"Yeah, Gloria. I'm going to continue to work on the case, and that's easier to do with my notes and files. Is that not what you want?"

Panic tore through her. She didn't want him to leave. She wanted his files spread out all over her table. And maybe there were some visions of him sweeping them off the table and spreading her out on it, but nothing she envisioned left her sitting alone in her cabin waiting for the boogeyman to come and find her while her lady parts shriveled up like an abandoned raisin. "You could bring your stuff back here. I'll sleep on the couch or whatever. I just like having another person around."

"Any other person?" he asked.

She glared at him. "Fine. You. I like having you around because I enjoy your stupidly sexy company. Now will you stay?"

Collin grinned. "Of course, I'll stay, and I won't even kick you out of the bed. I'll take the couch. Just let me run and grab some things from my cabin. I'll be right back."

Damn overly confident man. Still, Gloria really did enjoy having him in her space, so she cleared her table of the

knickknacks that piled up there and moved her pile of mail to a mostly empty drawer in the kitchen.

Then, she grabbed some fresh sheets from the hall closet and made up the couch for him. She kept an array of blankets in her ottoman, so she pulled those out and stacked the pile on top of it to make them easy to find.

# CHAPTER 10



## COLLIN

**D**oug ran over to Collin as he walked to his cabin. “She’s a real piece of work, huh?” he asked.

Collin glanced at the sheriff. He wasn’t in the mood to get in the middle of their drama. “What do you want, Sheriff?”

“I just think it would be smarter if you knew a bit more about her. Unless you’ve already had your fun and are done?” He asked the last part as a question.

Gloria had been clear about keeping things professional, at least for now. It was obvious that they both wanted to put the case first, and he liked having that boundary. Even when it hurt his feelings just a bit.

“She’s working the case with me. I don’t need to know about the details of her life, and I sure as hell haven’t ‘had my fun.’ Since she deserves so much more than “fun and done” it’s probably good that the two of you parted ways. Not that it’s any of my business since It. Doesn’t. Relate. To. The. Case.” Collin wanted to push past the man and continue on his way, but Doug repositioned himself in front of Collin when he tried to step around.

“You know about the stuff with her sister, right?” he asked while inspecting Collin’s reaction.

“She’s mentioned her.”

“She’s not right in the head, and it makes her dangerous. She’s like their uncle in that way.”

“What’s wrong with their uncle?” Collin hated himself for taking the bait, but the question slipped out before he could stop it. Gloria had made it clear that they didn’t need to share personal stories. It felt like this might be exactly the kind of gossip that seemed to have betrayed Gloria in the past.

“He was a walking PTSD poster after he spent a year in Iraq. The man was nuts. He always thought someone was out to get him. He was obsessed with guns and knives. If he hadn’t been broke as shit, I imagine he’d have become one of those crazy preppers. As it was, he was beatin’ the shit outta his wife regularly. Of course, she wouldn’t press any charges. Eventually, he wandered out into the woods and blew his own brains out. A hiker found him. Gloria’s sister may have only been in elementary school at the time, but she idolized that man. Rumors were, he started teachin’ her to fight as soon as she could walk. That’s likely how she knew how to land the star football player in the hospital her senior year.”

Well, Collin had to admit it was interesting information, but it didn’t really mean anything. Collin had met lots of unusual people in small towns and during his own hike on the Appalachian Trail. “Thanks for the warning. If Lily shows up, I’ll be sure and keep my guard up.”

Doug didn’t seem to catch Collin’s lack of sincerity. “Sleep with one eye open, man,” he suggested.

It made Collin wonder, though, “Why are you telling me this?”

Doug considered him for a moment before answering, “I used to be close with Gloria. Even back when we were kids, we were friends. Lily’d tag along with us, and she was cool. I mean, she was always a badass tomboy, but then she changed. Decided she liked girls and other weirdo nonsense. Anytime someone tried to help her out, she got all worked up. When she started hurting herself and talking suicide, well, lots of us could see she probably needed help. Her parents weren’t into the woo-woo stuff, though. I know serial killers are usually men, but I’m tellin’ you, this looks exactly like the kind of thing Lily would do.”

“And you told Gloria that?” Collin tried to imagine how that conversation would go.

“Oh, hell no. I don’t have a death wish. She doesn’t listen to me, anyway. When it comes to her family, she has on blinders. The way our relationship ended just makes it worse.”

“Hmm,” Collin considered. “I’ll keep it in mind.” She had been evasive about her family. Could she be hiding something? He thought about it the entire time he was in his cabin collecting his bags to take back to Gloria’s.

Collin knocked on the door to Gloria’s cabin before opening the door and announcing himself. He’d seen the look in her eyes when she’d held that shotgun and was confident, she’d use it on an unidentified intruder. “Gloria, it’s me, Collin.”

She poked her head out from the kitchen area and waved at him.

He carried in his duffle bag on his shoulder and his messenger bag in his hands. When he first started his career, he'd tried carrying a briefcase but quickly realized it was nowhere near big enough to cart around everything he liked to have handy. As he set his bag down by the couch and carried his work bag to the dining room table, Gloria walked out carrying a mug with the string of a tea bag hanging over the side. "I won't keep you up if I do some work, will I?" he asked her. She'd changed into fuzzy, flannel sleep pants and a plain t-shirt and looked like she was ready to snuggle into bed.

"No, it won't bother me at all. I'm going to sit and drink my tea and read for a bit, anyway."

"Sounds good." He started unloading things from his bag onto the table and making neat piles of the different information he'd collected. "I like your jammies." He glanced up long enough to wink at her.

She frowned back at him.

"Did I say something wrong?" he asked. He'd meant the comment to be flirty and light, not upsetting. When she didn't respond right away, he stopped what he was doing and walked over to where she was staring down into her mug. He tucked a finger under her chin and gently nudged her face up to look at him. He wanted to know what she was thinking. He wanted to know what, if anything, she was holding back from him. And if he was completely honest with himself, he wanted to know who she would go so far to protect and why.

She cocked her head to the side. “Are you teasing me? I know you’re probably more used to fancy women in lingerie, but that’s not me.”

He stifled his chuckle. “I don’t think I spend nearly as much time with women as you’re envisioning. I’m so focused on work that the only women I’m used to seeing are wearing pants suits and sensible shoes that make it easy to chase people down back alleys.” Of course, now that she’d said something, he was picturing her in lingerie and trying to remind Little Collin that now was not the time. Gloria had a special talent for distracting him.

He realized he’d completely forgotten about trying to learn more about her relationship with her sister.

An hour later, Gloria had gone to bed, and Collin had given up for the night and was stretched out on the couch. He had the sheets and blankets pulled up to his waist and was sweating from the heat from the wood stove. He knew they’d wake up to a cold cabin even when they started the night with it roaring hot, but right now, it just made him feel sticky.

It wasn’t just the stove, though. He couldn’t stop thinking about Gloria sleeping in the other room.

He rolled and flopped around trying to get comfortable but couldn’t. It was crazy. He’d slept in so many worse places. Heck, he’d slept in his car on numerous occasions while working a case. Here, he was between clean sheets, protected from the elements, and safe. No one was going to walk up and startle him.

He heard a door creak open and a shadow step through the doorway. Gloria tiptoed across the cabin, her feet causing the floor to occasionally let out a short creak. It was only a matter of seconds before she appeared just above him with her hair falling around her shoulders.

“Are you still awake?” she asked.

Since his eyes were open, he didn’t feel like he really needed to answer her. “I was just laying here thinking and wondering if you’d been able to fall asleep.”

She knelt on the floor next to the couch. “I keep seeing it in my head. The body shows up behind my eyelids every time I close my eyes.”

Collin rolled onto his side and pushed himself up to sit. “I know. I’ve had that happen with some cases. I promise, though, you’re safe here.” He wanted to tell her the killer wouldn’t be back, but he hesitated. He didn’t want to lie to Gloria. He had a feeling if he did, she’d shut him out completely and there’d be no going back. He didn’t think the Grapevine Killer would return, but he’d been wrong about that once before. Deep inside, he knew that had been who they saw out in the woods earlier. Trying to fall asleep was always the worst. The silence, darkness, and idle mind allowed thoughts to drift and replay scenes. He imagined she was reliving finding the victim gutted and surrounded by scavengers along with when they’d seen the man lurking nearby. Collin understood how difficult it could be to erase those images from your mind. Sometimes weeks after a crime he’d find his

mind replaying the most horrible images without giving him any warning.

He reached for her hands and tried to comfort her. Her hand was warm and soft. He studied her face in the shadows. She shifted to lean into the couch closer to him. He wanted to pull her even closer. Her sleep shirt was thin. It was a black tank top with lace around the bottom edge. The neckline was cut into a V that put her cleavage on perfect display. He suspected it was sexier than any lingerie she could wear.

Stop that! He chided himself.

He needed to find the killer. He had promised his family he would do this. Besides, Gloria was his partner. She was here to help him solve the case, but only if he didn't fuck it up between them. She'd found one of the Grapevine Killer's victims. He couldn't have a relationship with her. It would make everything messy and muddy. He'd lose his focus and concentration. Collin had questions about her family, and he'd struggle to remain objective even more than he already was if he got involved with her.

Before he could remove his hand from hers, she looked down at their hands and started stroking his rough knuckles gently. Her hair fell across his arm and tickled the inside of his elbow. A log in the stove popped and broke their silence.

"I worry he won't stop. I feel like he isn't done here, yet," she confessed in a whisper that echoed his own fears.

The Grapevine Killer wouldn't stop looking for victims until he, or she, was caught. It was just one more reminder that

he needed to focus on the case and work as fast as possible before more bodies piled up.

His skin burned with the touch of hers. She leaned her head further toward him. The hand he still had tucked in beside him fisted the bottom sheet into a tightly clenched fist as he fought to hold back and not kiss her. He wanted nothing more than to pull her onto the couch with him and tuck her safely against his own body.

Then she spoke.

“My bed’s a lot more comfortable than this couch, you know.”

“Gloria. We need to focus on the case.” Fuck! He was being an idiot to turn this down. Ha, who was he kidding? If she pushed even a little, he’d fold like a t-shirt in a department store.

“I know. I’m not saying we should do anything. I’m just – I don’t know what I’m saying. It’s stupid.”

She started to pull away from him, and he couldn’t do it. He didn’t want to let her go.

“Wait.”

She finished standing up but didn’t turn away.

“Why don’t I come sleep in there, but just sleep. Maybe we’ll both sleep better with someone else nearby. Besides,” he wanted to lighten her mood and smooth the sting he could tell she’d felt, “I know you and your shotgun will keep me safe.” Then he smirked up at her as he sat up.



Her soft laugh was exactly the response he'd been hoping for. She reached her hand back out to pull him up from the couch, but she didn't let go or keep him at a distance. Instead, she kept pulling until he was wrapping his other arm around her waist so she could tuck her face against his chest.

When she dropped the hand she'd used to pull him up to standing, he raised to her face and gently brushed her cheek. He felt the dampness of a single tear. "Tell me what you need?" he implored in a whisper so soft he wasn't even sure he'd really spoken aloud.

She gave a hiccupped huff that was half snort of sardonic laughter and half-stifled sob. "I don't even know, but I really want to kiss you. Just kiss. And then curl up together. I want to hear your heartbeat and know that you're alive, and I'm alive."

Yeah, there was no way in hell he was turning that down. He shifted his hand to cup the base of her skull and pulled their lips together.

The kiss was furious and hungry. She nipped at his lips and licked at his tongue. He returned the kiss with the same passion, and intermixed slow and gentle kisses between the deeper, more demanding invasion of her mouth.

Her lips were soft and pliant, her hands planted on his hips with her fingers digging in around his waist.

The kiss was rooted in that need for comfort and reassurance that the world was still there. It hadn't ended and not everyone was dead. They both fought to erase the horrible night and replace it with a few moments of closeness and

warmth. He understood her need, but he wasn't sure they'd stop the way she'd intended.

Then the kiss shifted. Her teeth stopped nipping. She became compliant and malleable in his arms.

He broke the kiss and took a moment to study her. He had to ask her, "What's going on inside this beautiful head of yours? I lost you there at the end."

"I'm sorry--"

"No, don't do that. Don't ever apologize for your thoughts. I'm just asking if you'd be willing to share them with me. That's all."

"I just couldn't help thinking about the case. I know that's not what I'm supposed to be thinking about now, but the last victim had been dead long enough for animals to pick at her before I got there."

"Uh huh."

"We're missing something."

Collin pulled back, and his brain shifted gears. The information Sheriff Riley shared had been pecking at the back of his brain. He needed to ask Gloria about Lily and their aunt and uncle. He hated to do it. He knew it would make her angry, but he had to know. He dropped his arms to his sides and asked in the softest voice he could muster, "Will you tell me about Lily's relationship with your aunt and uncle?"

Gloria inhaled sharply. "Why are you asking about them?"

“Doug said a few things that make me wonder.”

“I’m sorry, *Doug said*, huh? Did Doug say that he’s a fucking cheating asshole bastard? Or did he just share my family’s mental health struggles?”

She’d pulled way back from him. He held his hands in front of himself in a placating gesture. “I don’t mean anything by it, but I’ve met guys with PTSD and seen how bad it can get. It sounds like your sister had her own issues, too.”

Gloria’s eyes flashed with anger, and she stepped back as if he’d slapped her.

“This was a mistake. I should go back to bed. I’m sorry for disturbing you.” With that, Gloria turned around and walked away.

Collin debated going after her, but something stopped him. There was too much happening. He didn’t know where anyone stood or what was going to happen. And it was well past midnight, so exhaustion wasn’t making anything easier. He curled back up on the couch and forced himself to stare at the back of his eyelids until his brain gave up the fight and let him doze.

# CHAPTER 11

## GLORIA

No matter how late she went to bed or how tired she was, Gloria woke up promptly at six. Today, that meant she'd had about four hours of sleep. Coffee was her friend. She stumbled out to the main living area in her cabin to find the blankets neatly folded and tucked back into the ottoman. Collins duffle bag was still there but fully packed and placed by the door. His work things were still strewn across the dining table. In the fresh light of day, Gloria realized she'd overreacted the night before.

Once she got the coffee pot running, she grabbed Spike's leash and took him out for a quick piddle. She'd take him for a longer walk later. First, she needed coffee and to check that two cabins were both ready for Betty and her friends to arrive.

As she went about her morning chores, Gloria found her thoughts straying toward Collin. She hadn't really been surprised to find him gone in the morning, but she hadn't seen him as she darted from cabin to cabin, nor did she see him moving around in his own cabin. She had to keep reminding herself that it wasn't even eight am. By the time the Subaru with Vermont plates was pulling up to the hostel, she was reminding herself the man could be asleep in his own cabin, and she wouldn't likely know it.

She pasted a smile on her face and waved as four old ladies piled out of the car. Two were tall and lean with formerly brown hair that had faded mostly to gray. One was stockier

with wild, red curls, and the last was tiny in every sense of the world with white hair that left no indication of any previous color.

One of the brown-haired ladies walked up to Gloria with her hand outstretched, “Hello and good morning! You must be Gloria. I’m Betty, and these are my friends. Geri’s the red-head, Joan’s the tiny one, and Linda’s deaf, so be sure to scream at her.”

Gloria introduced herself to each of them and showed them around the property. She helped them carry their bags to their cabins. Apparently, Betty snored rather loudly, so Linda got to bunk with her while Joan and Geri shared the other cabin. Betty hadn’t been kidding about Linda’s hearing loss, either. After her third try, Gloria gave up and focused on speaking with the other three women.

Once their sleeping arrangements had been sorted and bags delivered, Geri clapped her hands and declared it nap time. “We all need to be well-rested to prepare for finding the next body, ladies. Straight to sleep, now! We’ll reconvene around lunchtime.”

Given that they’d driven straight through the night, Gloria encouraged their plan. She assured them she’d be back from hiking with Spike before noon.

Gloria’s legs moved slower as they neared the crime scene. Her body wanted her to run away, even though logic told her the space was clean and free of any remaining evidence.

Spike bounded ahead, and when she heard Collin's voice greet the dog, she considered calling him back and redirecting them down a different path. But that would mean Collin knowing she was avoiding him.

"Good morning," he called out as she turned a corner on the trail.

"Hi." She was so aggravated that she'd spent the early morning hours worrying about him while he'd been off gallivanting through the woods. She hated that he'd dug into her personal life, but mostly she was mad that she'd even bothered to think he might be different. Then again, she'd been thinking about the case while kissing him. Part of her thought she might have played a part in the whole issue, too. She probably should have talked through it with Collin instead of kicking him out.

While she was still debating how, and if, she should apologize, he cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. I crossed a line last night. You made it very clear that your personal life was out-of-bounds, and I should have respected that."

Gloria sighed. "I overreacted, too. I would like to keep my family out of this. Please respect that I have my reasons."

"Fair enough," he said.

She glanced at the crime scene, needing to look at the space, needing to see it in the light of day to replace her memories with less violent ones.

The sight was a shock to her senses. After seeing bodies and shadows there, she struggled to believe what was in front of her. No people or animals were near the tree. Nothing hung from any of the branches. There was some trampled ground, but all other evidence of what had occurred was gone. In a few weeks, the area would be completely back to normal. The entire incident would be erased from the forest entirely.

It would only live in her memories.

“I’m planning to hike a chunk of the trail today. You can join me if you’d like.” She offered as a sign of her peace.

Collin smiled at her with approval. She tried hard not to like the way it made her feel.

“I’d love to join you.”

She smiled back at him. She was glad to see he already had on hiking boots and trail clothes. Thank goodness he’d had the sense to avoid a suit today. She loved that she could see the thinness around the knees of his pants and worn spots around the edges of his pockets. She loved that he was comfortable enough to already have hiking pants that were clearly well-loved. Of course, his t-shirt said FBI across the back, but it was a technical shirt that would wick away his sweat and dry quickly if they got rained on.

The weather on the trail could change quickly and forecasts were only kind of accurate. Today, she could see the sky was already darkening to the east and blowing northwest. She was confident the morning fog would stick around and turn into morning showers. Meteorologists had been predicting they’d



get hit with the tropical remains of a category two hurricanes that had hit the Outer Banks earlier in the week. It was looking like they were right and would get solidly walloped by the storm.

“I don’t suppose you have a rain jacket?” she asked him. It looks like that tropical system is heading this way. We may end up rushing back to the cabins as the rain starts to fall.”

Collin unzipped one of his cargo pockets to pull out a pouch that Gloria knew was a Patagonia Houdini rain jacket. She had one just like it, but purple instead of green.

“I’m good, though I agree. Wet shoes suck.”

Gloria didn’t need a map to find her way around. She knew her way around this part of the Appalachian Trail as well as she knew her way around her own home. She considered bringing Spike with them, but he’d been a bit skittish with all the recent chaos. She couldn’t guarantee he’d heed her commands. She wouldn’t risk scaring another hiker or having him take off after a bear or deer.

She and Collin both trekked back to the hostel long enough for her to lock Spike in the house. Collin refilled his water bottle, and they headed back out. Gloria already had her day pack on her back and was ready to go. The nice thing about starting her day at six was that it was still only nine. They had plenty of time to do some hiking.

As she led them through the woods, Gloria reflected on the past two days of chaos. There had been the violence and terror

of finding a victim in the woods along with the heat and bliss of that kiss with Collin.

She wouldn't spend the day obsessing over either one, but she much preferred thinking about the kiss rather than contemplating the murder. Her mind settled into contemplation as they moved up the blue blaze trail and toward the AT. It was one of the things she loved most about hiking. She could let the world slip away, plant one foot in front of the other, and give her mind free rein to roam. Today was different, though. She refused to let her thoughts wander to the scene of violence. She forced herself to focus on more productive thoughts. Her sister Lily's safety were first among them. Was she okay? Why hadn't she called recently to let her know how she was doing? If she had decided to get off trail and come home, she would have called. At least, she thought she would have. Letting Collin into her thoughts about Lily made her feel as if she were betraying her sister.

As they came to the scene of the crime, she stepped off the trail and began to consider her surroundings.

"You're a quiet hiker, I see," Collin interrupted her.

"I'm looking for tracks to follow." She circled around the outside of the crime scene tape and tried to sort through the footprints that were clearly stamped in the mud. There were a lot of them, and she was well aware this would be their only chance. Once the storm came, the muddy tracks would disappear completely. She hated that she couldn't see this

before the police came and added their footprints to the mess. It would have been so much easier then.

Collin walked alongside her, his long strides matching two of her own. “We saw the direction he ran. We can try to follow them and see if that narrows down the number of prints.” She looked at him, hoping that he’d agree.

“Ok.” He sounded skeptical but didn’t dismiss her ideas.

“Give me one of your shoes.” She held out her hand.

“Um, no. I kind of like them on my feet. You get that it’s muddy and rocky out here, right?”

“Fine. Then let me *see* your shoe,” she amended to appease him while giving him a teasing smirk. In all honesty, she hadn’t thought about him having to walk around sock-footed and figured he had a good point.

When he held onto the tree beside him and lifted his leg, she studied the bottoms of his hiking shoes before checking, “These are the same ones you wore last night, right?”

“Yep, so they should match my tracks from when I followed him.”

She was happy to hear that Collin was following her line of thinking.

She moved further from the scene in the direction she knew he’d run the night before and scanned the ground for footprints. The further they got from the oak tree, the easier it was to separate Collin’s tracks from those of all the agents and officers who’d been through the area. Soon, Gloria was able to

speed up as she followed them. His trail shoes had left deep ruts where they'd gripped into the mud exactly as they'd been designed to do. Many of the leaves had started decomposing over the winter and melting snow combined with spring rains left the perfect canvas of mud for tracking.

As she carefully judged direction, they both stayed quiet. She imagined Collin was likely contemplating the entire case. She was wondering where they'd end up. They were currently running parallel to the Appalachian Trail, but on the west side of it.

Eventually the tracks intersected with the trail. Based on the direction they'd been traveling, she figured they would. But now, the footprints stopped. She'd been able to pick out the trespasser's prints and follow them far beyond where Collin had turned around, but with no more tracks to follow she had to consider if he'd turned onto the trail or continued bushwhacking. Her gut told her the killer would be camping in the backcountry, but even if he did use the trail to move faster, there was no way to tell if he'd turned north or south.

She looked over at Collin, who was regarding her thoughtfully.

Finally, he prompted her, "North, south, or bushwhacking?"

"I don't know," she admitted

"But you have a feeling. I can see it in your eyes. What's your gut tell you?"

“I think he stuck to the backcountry. The trail is too well-traveled through this area. It’d be too easy to find evidence of him passing through.”

Collin grinned at her with pride. “Let’s go then. Lead the way.”

Why did it send a thrill down her spine to think about Collin following her lead? Her entire life had been spent with hikers, and many of them had asked her for advice or directions. Why did this feel different?

With Doug, a huge part of their relationship had been founded on their mutual love of the forest. They’d hiked together, covered entire sections of the trail, and enjoyed exploring unmarked, lesser-known trails together too.

Unfortunately, that was both the beginning and the end for them. She had not been impressed by his skills in the bedroom, though he seemed fully satisfied. It wasn’t something she’d felt like she could bring up. He’d get so defensive and hurt, and sometimes that hurt would transform into anger. It hadn’t helped that Doug was so quick to throw her lack of previous relationships in her face. Since Doug had a long line of previous bed partners, she’d accepted that the problem was more her than him.

“What’s with the lemon face?” Collin asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, I was thinking about personal stuff.”

“I told you before, there’s never a need to apologize for your thoughts. Want to tell me about the personal things? I’m trying not to push.”

Gloria started to balk at the idea of confessing her sexual problems to a practical stranger, but then she stopped herself. Maybe this was part of developing trust. Maybe she needed to open up and share just a little, and this was inconsequential. If anything, it’d make it clear to Collin that they should keep things professional. She could do this.

Gloria huffed a sigh of frustration with herself and explained, “I was thinking about how much Doug and I had enjoyed hiking and backpacking together.” She totally chickened out about sharing the bedroom issues.

“It has to suck to lose that. Especially with your sister gone, too.”

It was, but she was reluctant to admit that.

Collin sounded sincere, but Gloria wasn’t going to get emotional about it. Especially not here and now. Besides, Doug had been quick to move on and didn’t seem to miss her at all. If she were honest, she didn’t really miss him, either. It was more that she missed the idea of him. The comfort of companionship. “Doug and I weren’t right together.”

“That doesn’t make it easier to readjust to being alone.”

Gloria turned a glare toward Collin. “I have no problem being alone. I can take care of myself.”

Collin sighed but spoke before she could further correct him. “I know you can. That’s obvious by the life you’ve built here. For heaven’s sake you run your own business, welcome and direct hikers from all over the world, and maintain multiple buildings across a large property. None of that is small or easy, so the fact that you do it alone and take all the responsibility on yourself is not lost on me. I’m just saying that there’s a difference between having someone beside you who you can count on, vent to, and relax with, versus doing it all yourself. The adjustment to not having that person anymore must be hard. It doesn’t mean you should have stayed with him.”

“That’s one hell of a speech.” Gloria raised her eyebrows at him as he turned a bit pink in the cheeks.

“I just learned a long time ago that exciting relationships don’t always make lasting relationships,” he answered her.

Hmm. Exciting wasn’t a word she would have ever used to describe her relationship with Doug. She’d been on a few other dates, but none of those had been exciting either. Now that she thought about it, it really sucked. She wanted excitement. She wanted stars and hearts and flowers and fireworks. She looked back up at Collin. Could she have that with him? He wasn’t exactly an open book, but maybe that was for the best. He wouldn’t expect her to reveal all her secrets. It would be a short affair while he was in the area with no expectations for the future. Based on the kiss they had shared, she had to believe sex with him would be completely different from the lackluster experience she’d had with Doug.

Gloria refocused on the trail and forest around her. She took in a deep breath before exhaling. Hikers often ended up with excess carbon dioxide sitting in the bottom of their lungs. It was why you'd see them sighing, laughing, or following weird breathing patterns occasionally. Gloria loved the fresh inhale that came after she took the time to intentionally empty her lungs completely. She could smell the earth and trees around her as if they were new. Usually, she would also be able to hear sounds carrying up from the hostel, or she'd spot an occasional hiker as they passed her, but today the trail was empty. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen it this bare. Even when COVID had officially closed the trail, there'd been a whole sect of hikers who rebelled against authority and took a walk in the woods, anyway. Now there was no one. Every shuttle driver and hostel owner in the area was rerouting hikers around this section. They were jumping up to Shenandoah National Park to continue north from Waynesboro.

That thought led her to consider who was still on the trail. Somewhere in the area was the killer.

“My sister and I grew up running up and down these trails with our friends. My parent's only rule was that we had to be back by dark.” She smiled at the fond memories. This forest felt like home, and every plant, tree, and fern were friends. She pointed to a nearby bush with small, round, red berries. “Those are poisonous nightshade berries. But these,” she walked over to a thorny bush with light green leaves and long shoots draping almost like vines. She pulled bright red berries shaped



like raspberries or blackberries but too bright to be either one. “These are a wild hybrid raspberry that grows up and down this section of the trail. They’re a bit tart, so I always think of them as being brighter in both color and flavor.”

Then she handed some to Collin to try before popping the rest in her own mouth.

“I loved snacking on these and wild blueberries during my hike. I swear it was some of the only fruit I ate for the six months I was on-trail. Otherwise, it was peanut butter, tortillas, and Ramen bombs.” Collin laughed as he added the last item to his list.

Gloria loved the sound of his laugh but couldn’t stomach the thought of the combination of Ramen noodles, mashed potatoes, and whatever else hikers had in their pack. Having spent her own time on the trail, she understood how many calories they could burn in a day and was personally familiar with the endless hiker hunger that would turn a person’s stomach into a garbage disposal that couldn’t eat enough to keep going. She just wasn’t willing to get all those calories from cheap nastiness. Call her spoiled or dainty, but she was willing to splurge on dehydrated meals. Most of the time, she made her own combinations of dehydrated vegetables and beans. Never did they include ramen.

“Sounds like you enjoyed your hike,” she pointed out.

“I did. It was one of my favorite times of life. It looks like you are not a fan of Ramen bombs,” he added, a teasing lilt to his voice with his last comment.

“Yeah, I spent enough time on-trail to get good at throwing bear bag lines, skidding down the steep sections, and develop a serious appreciation for a good meal. I pack my own dehydrated meals when I go out for longer stretches and buy prepackaged if it’s a short trip.” She smiled as she remembered the fun she’d had crawling through these very bushes to hide from her sister.

As she and Collin snacked on a few more berries, she told him about their games of hide-and-go-seek and how they often led to bleeding limbs and torn clothes.

“Did your parents get upset about the damage?” Collin asked.

“Yes, and no. They encouraged us to play and enjoy the outdoors, but they also refused to sew up holes. Both of us had to learn to sew them up ourselves at a young age.”

“Sounds to me like you had good parents.”

“Yeah. They spoiled us when they felt guilty about living so far out in the middle of nowhere, but they also taught us what we needed to know to take care of ourselves. Since we didn’t have much money, the spoiling was in the form of time and freedom, so it was a bit different.”

Collin hummed and smiled softly before continuing to survey the area.

In the vacuum of silence, Gloria found more words pouring out. “When Lily first started high school, she got into a bit of trouble hanging out with a rough group. That was when our

father implemented rules and jobs. He was trying to force Lily to spend more time here and less time just hanging out in town getting into trouble.”

“My parents lived their dream out here. It wasn’t a hostel back then, but they grew and hunted most of what we needed. My dad did small engine repairs to earn enough cash to keep us going, but their goal was just to live in the woods.” Gloria had thought she’d continue that tradition, but when her parents had passed away, it had been too hard. Without her dad’s income, they needed some way to earn money, so she’d turned their property into Great Hike’s Hostel. She’d hoped her sister would help with the maintenance, but...

She shook herself back to the present to find Collin staring at her.

“Are you happy here?” he asked.

It had changed recently. With so few guests, she wasn’t surrounded by people the way she liked. She was starting to feel true loneliness. “Usually, yes,” she told him. “I don’t like it empty like this, but I can’t imagine ever living in a city or anywhere other than the woods.”

“I get that. There were two days during my hike when I didn’t see anyone else on the trail and spent the night alone. I hadn’t realized Trail Days was happening and everyone else had taken a break to enjoy the festivities. It felt like maybe the rest of the world had disappeared. It was spooky.”

Gloria wondered if that was part of her attraction to Collin. Did he chase away the uneasy spookiness of an empty hostel

beside an abandoned trail? In some ways it felt like he'd cast a spell on her that caused her to let down her guard and open up to him. She wasn't sure how she felt about that.

She stopped and pointed to a flat, chair-shaped rock with a tree growing up at the back of it, thereby turning it into a rock and wood throne. "That's the landmark we'll use to find our way back to the trail. It's big enough we should be able to see it from far off. "

Gloria stepped off the AT and into the bush. There was a path here, but without regular maintenance, it had become little more than a deer trail. It was heavy with rotting leaves and undergrowth. "Watch your step. There's likely to be loose rocks under the leaves. It would be easy to slip and turn an ankle." She was hoping this trail would make it possible for her to spot the broken branches and smooshed underbrush that would show the killer had traipsed along this way. If not, she'd take them back to the AT and try a different route.

"Yeah, I feel no need to add a bum ankle to the list of challenges that come with this case. Plus, I hate getting my pants all muddy from a slip this time of year," Collin said.

Gloria stopped to turn around and look at the pants he was wearing. They were good trail pants, and they looked good on him. They were slightly tighter in the thighs than she would expect from a hiker, but that was a difference that only came with covering fifteen or more miles of trail day after day. Collin's thighs had the lean muscle of a runner, and his pants still hung around them comfortably. They just didn't have the

saggy, baggy, floppy look she'd gotten used to. "I'm sure you'll be fine. You can always jump in a creek to wash away the dirt. Those are quick-dry pants, right?" she teased him.

"Yeah, I've got no interest in jumping into a creek in this weather." Collin's response was deadpan, but she could see his eyes crinkle with the hint of amusement.

She turned back around and continued forward.

"Any sign of his trail?" Collin asked.

"Not yet. Let me know if you need a break." She knew Collin was a runner, but hiking was different. It required stabilizing muscles people didn't often use when walking around the world of flat concrete and asphalt.

"I'm good for now. We'll stop for water in a bit. I try to do some of my runs on trails whenever possible, so this isn't too far from normal for me."

Good, Gloria thought. He should be able to keep up with her then. He was right that they would need to stop for water. She knew that waiting until she was thirsty wasn't the best plan, but she was also very intent on finding some trace to follow.

Gloria paused and scanned the area around her. She watched one squirrel chase after another while a bird flitted from branch to branch. She let her eyes lose focus on the details and shift to consider the bigger picture, and that was when she spotted it. There was an indentation that felt abrupt and unnatural. Excitement forced everything back into focus. "The

leaves are smashed there.” The depressions formed a pattern of footprints along the path.

Collin moved closer to where she’d pointed. “Yeah, these are too big to be an animal. Unless, could it be a bear?” Collin didn’t look like he doubted her. It felt like he just wanted to be sure they considered all options.

“No, see how oblong they are. If it were a bear, they’d be more circular. Only human shoes make that oblong shape.”

“Just the one set?” Collin asked.

She circled wide around the tracks to get a view from a different angle without disrupting them. “It’s only one set of tracks,” she said. “It could be two people with one stepping exactly in the other’s footprints, but with this terrain, it’s unlikely. It’s hard to do that and keep your balance. I would expect there to be an occasional odd print outside the tracks where they lost their footing.”

She looked back up to find Collin grinning at her like a lunatic. “You’re really good at this,” he said with admiration and pride.

It embarrassed her a bit. She loved feeling like she was one with nature and able to interpret what she saw around her, but she’d never considered it would be useful for something like this.

“I don’t suppose you can figure out which way they’re going?” Collin looked skeptically hopeful, and she was glad to

see he seemed to understand how unlikely it was to be able to figure that out based on rough depressions in leaves.

She did survey the prints again, but the closer she looked, the more confident she was that any answer she gave would be pure speculation. Heck, they could be leading out and back again for all she knew.

Maybe they had stumbled onto the trail the killer was using to get back and forth to the hostel. Gloria froze in terror at that thought.

Collin stilled and silently pulled his gun from its holster as he scanned his eyes around the area. “What’s going on, Gloria? What am I missing?” he had no idea, but he was trusting her instincts and watching her closely enough to realize when she went on high alert. Somehow, that made her feel better.

Gloria still didn’t move and kept her voice quiet as she explained, “The killer hiked to the hostel to kill and display the body. Then, he or she, hiked away again. He repeated that to come back to the scene and retreat when we ran into him. Look at the path ahead of us. It’s normal to see the depression where the leaves rest on the trail but look at how stirred up they are. That happens when someone walks through them. The leaves in this stretch are already packed down, which is why we can see the footprints. This could be his path back and forth to Great Hikes.”

“So, you’re saying we’re standing right in the middle of his main lane of passage, and he might still be in the area.” Collin

stiffened further and carefully made his way toward her while keeping his eyes roaming around them.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m saying,” Gloria confirmed for him. Then she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She realized the entire forest had gone silent. The squirrels had disappeared and there were no more birds in sight. It was like the entire area was holding its breath. “He’s here.” Gloria kept her voice to a whisper.

Collin matched her volume but didn’t stop his visual scan to look at her. “How do you know? What do you see?”

Gloria loved that he was asking her for more information in a tone that made it clear he didn’t doubt her. She also felt a bit silly when the only answer she had was a simple, “I can feel it.”

“You should go back to the hostel. I can handle this and make it back on my own.”

Much to Gloria’s displeasure, he didn’t see the death stare she gave him. “The fuck you will. You don’t know the way back, and we’re sure as hell not separating.” Her voice remained quiet, but the determination and venom were unmistakable.

It was enough to capture Collin’s full attention. “You—“ he stopped when he saw her face. “Right. You are right. Good point.” At least the man knew how to backpedal when he realized he was being stupid. “I don’t suppose you have that shotgun tucked into your pack, do you?”



Well, crap. He was right. She hadn't thought to bring a gun with her. She was generally against firearms on the trail and hadn't even thought about it.

"Yeah, it's okay. I would have been surprised if you did have it. Of course, you've surprised me enough that I didn't want to discount the possibility out of hand. Just stay close to me."

"Okay. The trail gets rougher ahead. It's hard to get past Rock Valley," Gloria responded while thinking about the possibilities for someone to find shelter in the area. Sure, there were a billion of them, but some were better than others.

"Rock Valley? I don't remember that from my hike." Collin questioned thoughtfully.

"You wouldn't have come across it. It sits to the east of the trail. It's not even an official name or anything. It's just what Lily and I have always called it. It's a giant field of sharp rocks. We used to make up alien landing and bomb blast stories, but really, it's probably scrap from an old quarry or something equally boring. You can scramble across it, but it's slow going and not for the faint of heart."

"Nope. We're going back." Collin shook his head.

Gloria glared at him. This could be their prime opportunity to catch the killer. She didn't want to give up and turn back, not when they'd come so far, found so much, and were so close. When she'd said she could feel the Grapevine Killer watching her, she hadn't been exaggerating, and she knew if they missed him now, he'd find a different hiding spot. He

might move territories and start a fresh hunt, or he might just relocate within this general area. Either way, Gloria couldn't stomach the thought of him continuing to roam free while she worried about it.

Gloria had always been a bit headstrong, but it was based on the belief that one person shouldn't force or pressure another into doing something they didn't want to. She quietly hissed at him, "You can go back if you want, but I'm not giving up this chance to find the guy. If we don't get him now, he's only going to be harder to find later."

"Damn it. This is a terrible decision. You know that, right?" he waited for her to nod at him in agreement. "This could be a trap. We've never found any evidence to lead us to the guy, but today we're able to just stumble onto his trail. Doesn't that sound a bit odd?"

"I hear what you're saying, but the trail has been cleared of hikers, and we're on the opposite side of the trail from the hostel and the city. No one else would be stupid enough to wander around out here looking for a trail like we did. Besides, I have some ideas about where he could be. No one else has spent as much time in these woods as I have."

Collin thought for a moment before resigning himself to his fate. "Fine, but you stay close enough to touch me and follow what I say immediately and without question."

"I will," Gloria agreed.

"I mean it, Gloria. If I say drop, you fucking land on your belly in the dirt immediately."

Gloria took a deep breath and made sure her tone conveyed how seriously she was taking this. “I hear you, Collin. I will. I just can’t keep wondering where this guy is, and I’m aware that you’re the only one of us who’s armed.”

“Okay. Lead the way.” He kept his gun out and ready but stepped aside to let her take the lead.

She nodded. Spotting the footprints had involved a considerable amount of luck. The undergrowth made it tough to spot tracks in the woods. There were so many possibilities, but Gloria wasn’t going to give up.

# CHAPTER 12

## COLLIN

It would be easy to get lost in the mountains. After a time, everything began to look the same. A tree was a tree, was a tree. The rocks were the same color and similar enough in size and shape to blur together. Everything was brown or green or gray. Even the smell rarely changed. Pine sap oozed through the pores of the trees creating a perpetual evergreen scent.

Collin was following at Gloria's right hip since he was right-handed. He scanned the trail around them as they made steady forward progress. They didn't exchange any more words, but Collin knew Gloria was watching for signs and tracks of the killer while he remained alert to any presence that didn't belong.

Eventually, she pulled to a stop and motioned at him to stay quiet. Her description of Rock Valley had been spot-on. There were light-colored stones ranging from grays and whites to shades of pinks. It stretched far to their left and right, but he could see the opposite side where the field of rocks ended in a field of high grasses, thistle, and shrubs. There were four adult deer and two fawns standing in the grasses.

Gloria began motioning to him. He guessed that in her mind, she was giving him clear signals and communication, but all he saw was her waving her hands around like she was trying to make finger puppets or throw gang signs. When he

just cocked his head and raised an eyebrow at her, she huffed with exasperation but stopped flailing her arms around.

Then she began mouthing things at him. Her lips pulled back and smooshed forward while her jaw opened and closed dramatically, in no particular pattern that he could discern. He did think they were nice lips, and he enjoyed watching them move. When they stopped moving, and he refocused up on her eyes, he felt a bit like a chastised child—which wasn't terribly inaccurate considering he'd been distracted by her lips while they were hunting for a killer.

He had to commend her persistence, though. Gloria tried again. This third attempt put her lips up against his ear as her hot breath whispered down across his cheek. Fuck, now was not the time for a boner. He needed to focus on what she was saying.

“—cave where he could be. We just can't see it from here.”

Right, cave, at least he hadn't missed the important parts. He nodded at her that he understood, and she led them into the field of stones.

Collin tried to stay right up against her, but the terrain made it impossible. They had to have room to shift from one step to another without losing their balance or snapping an ankle. He kept his gun out but double checked that the safety was on. There was no way in hell he'd be able to shoot while they were moving through here.

He regretted that choice when Gloria yanked him to the side just in time for him to see a rattler slithering its way right

along the rock he'd been about to step on. If he didn't have the safety on, he could shoot the damn thing. Of course, it was more likely he'd have shot himself in the foot when Gloria pulled him off balance, but he chose not to dwell on that. They made eye contact for a moment to confirm they were both okay and continued on.

It wasn't far to loop down and around to spot the cave they'd been essentially standing above and behind. It wasn't a big opening, but Collin could imagine it making a great hiding spot for the killer.

Collin motioned for Gloria to shift to one side of the cave, and he followed her. He'd poke his head in carefully but had no intentions of letting Gloria enter the cave. It wouldn't serve any purpose, anyway. He stepped toward the cave. As his eyes adjusted to peering into darkness after staring at pale rocks, he realized there were two glaring eyes staring back at him. Before he could process what he was seeing, the eyes flew at him with an open mouth and yowling snarl.

He felt Gloria pull him back and away from the cave opening as he fired off a shot, but the eyes didn't stop.

“MOVE!” Gloria screamed at him.

She had darted away toward the edge of Rock Valley where she was picking up smaller stones and throwing them at him. “*Duck, you dumbass!!*”

Oh, not at him. She was throwing rocks at the creature behind him. He darted to the side to give her a clear shot and watched as a bobcat not much bigger than a Maine Coon

growled and snarled before prowling back into the cave and away from the rocks raining down on him... or her. Collin didn't have the first clue how to tell the difference between a male and female bobcat.

As his pulse returned to a more normal rate, he moved back closer to Gloria. "Well, that wasn't what I expected."

"Yeah, and she's got kittens, so we're going to have to find a different way back."

"What?"

"She ran back into the cave. Normally, she'd run away into the woods where she wouldn't be trapped, but she didn't. She must have kittens tucked away in the cave, so she's staying to defend them. She'll be on even more high alert now. There's no way we can cross back in front of that cave again. We could swing wide across and around the boulder field, but..."

"The sky's getting dark quickly." Based on how slowly they had to move through the rocks, it would take them forever to go far enough around the cave to avoid further tussles with the mama cat.

"And there's no good or easy way to get back to the trail we came in on."

Collin studied the terrain on the other side of the cave. "Are you sure there's no way we could climb up there?" It was steep, and he could tell the loose rocks would be hell, but they could make it work, couldn't they?



Then Gloria took a few steps toward him, and he realized she was favoring one leg over the other. Shit, she was hurt.

“Is it your knee or your ankle?” he asked her.

“My knee. I twisted it rushing over here to get the rocks to throw.”

“You shouldn’t have done that. I was working on shooting her.” “But then there’d be a bunch of bob kittens with no mama.”

Collin kind of loved that she cared so much, but what should they do now? She must have noticed his hesitation, and hastened to assure him, “No, it’s fine. I can walk it off.”

He had a feeling it wasn’t as minor as she made it sound, but he decided not to push the issue just yet. “Fine, but I get to carry the pack.”

She set her jaw and shook her head. “We’ll need to cut directly across the rocks. There’s another trail we can take to circle back around and connect with the AT just north of the hostel.”

They both stiffened to attention when they heard a branch snap not too far off in the forest. Collin couldn’t see the source, and Gloria didn’t say anything. They just looked at each other, and then Gloria led them off across the rocky terrain.

He watched her flinch with every step, but she made it across the boulder field. By the time she hobbled over to a

good-sized sitting rock, he saw the sparkle of tears she refused to let fall.

“Gloria,” he started, but she stopped him.

“No, I’m okay. I just need to rest for a minute. I have a general direction we need to go. I’m just not sure exactly how far we are from the trail. I don’t usually bushwhack like this.”

Of course, she didn’t. Bushwhacking was terrible for the environment, especially in heavily populated areas like this.

“Do you know how far we are from the hostel?” he asked her. He was afraid her knee wouldn’t let them go much further.

“It’s not that far. I’ll be fine. Besides, I’ll let you carry the pack. That will make it easier.”

Collin wasn’t falling for her sneaky attempt at placating him.

“Let me take a look at it.”

The nod she gave him made it even more clear just how badly she was hurting. Luckily, her pant leg was loose enough to let him roll it up above the knee. He didn’t see anything visibly wrong, and he could wiggle it without it feeling *loose*, but anytime he shifted her foot even slightly to the right, she’d flinch in pain.

He hated seeing her in pain.

“You have a first aid kit in the pack, right?” Collin would be shocked if she didn’t.

“Yeah,” she responded through gritted teeth.

He dug around to find the pouch and was immediately grateful to see it was no ultralight backpacking kit. She had a full-on CVS pharmacy in her pack, complete with an ace bandage.

“This isn’t going to fix it, but it should help some.” Before he started wrapping, he also pulled out her Ibuprofen and handed her a small pack with two pills.

Then he wound the bandage around and around until he could clip the ends in place.

“How’s this?” he asked. “Too tight?”

“Hmm, no, I think it’s about right.” Gloria flexed and pointed her toes to check the feeling in her foot.

Collin pulled her pant leg back down over her knee before setting her foot on the ground. He gave her his hand and helped her to her feet. The feel of her skin against his sent an electric jolt of awareness and pleasure through him. He pulled the pack onto his own back as she found her balance and then stepped up to her side.

“Put your hands on my shoulder and use me as a crutch.”

“That’s a terrible idea. We’ve got at least a couple of miles to cover. You’ll end up with an injured shoulder.” Gloria shifted her weight back and forth as if she were testing her knee.

“And what’s the other option? My hip gives me issues that will stop me from carrying you for any long distance.”

Gloria laughed at him. What the hell?

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be insulting, but I’m not exactly a twig of a woman. There’s little chance of you picking me up in the first place, let alone carrying me off through the woods. I’ll be ok. We’ll just go slow. Hopefully, the weather will hold.”

“You are not hiking on that knee if it starts to rain. Even the smallest slip will make it worse. I saw your emergency tarp. If the storm hits, we’ll be chilling under cover until it clears.” Collin didn’t want to think about how vulnerable they’d be if the Grapevine Killer knew where they were. He’d deal with that later if he had to.

“Hopefully, it won’t come to that.” Gloria turned and headed off through the woods.

While he followed her, Collin looked for a stick that she could brace herself on but wasn’t spotting much. In a forest full of wood, it was amazingly difficult to find a stick that was tall enough, strong enough, and not rotted through.

As they pushed aside branches and swept away spider webs, the sky continued to darken. Eventually, they were surrounded by a light mist that floated onto them more than fell. With the cover of the trees, the mist didn’t have a chance to collect and make anything wet. It was just enough to make them feel cold and damp.

Collin thought about stopping, but he knew the safest place would be home. He’d only have them take shelter if he had no better choice, and the ground was still dry enough that Gloria wasn’t having any trouble with her footing. If this was the

beginning of the tropical system hitting them, they'd be in for more than twenty-four solid hours of heavy downpours. It wasn't a hurricane since it had made landfall and lost its power, but it wasn't a gentle spring shower either. The coastline had been caught completely off guard by the pre-season storm. Collin was doing his best not to let the same thing happen to them.

They were moving slowly, but eventually, they spotted the telltale blue blaze of a side trail that would connect with the Appalachian Trail. They didn't need to speak before turning right. They both knew which way they needed to go.

Gloria broke the silence as they passed an overgrown clearing. "I'm familiar with this trail. Let's pause here for a minute, so I can check my map now that I know pretty much where we are. We can take a moment to put on our rain jackets, too."

"Sounds good to me." Collin figured that would give him the information he needed to decide how or if they should continue on. Gloria was smart enough to have a large, ultralight hammocking tarp in her pack instead of the just the flimsy foil tarps most hikers carried. She also had a Costco quilt tucked in there. The semi-famous trail blankets didn't always come from the large club store. Most hikers ordered them from Amazon, but Costco had made them famous, so everyone just called them Costco quilts. It would barely be big enough to cover one of them, but it was down and would keep in their warmth as long as they kept it dry, and temperatures didn't drop below freezing.

“Hold this.” Gloria had taken the pack from him and was handing him things as she dug for the map. “Oh, we should have a snack, too,” she commented absently as she passed him a bag full of Clif bars. “Ah, here it is.”

“I’ll repack while you take a look.” Collin could tell Gloria was fully focused on figuring out how far they had to hike. It looked like the pain was making it hard for her to spread out her focus.

It didn’t take him long to get things tucked neatly back into the bag, so he was surprised to look up and see Gloria smiling back at him. “It’s what I thought. We’re less than half a mile from the intersection with the AT. If memory serves, it’s even less than that. From there, the hostel is just under a mile from the intersection, and it’s easy terrain. I maintain most of that mile, so I know it’s clear and easily passable.”

“Well, that’s good news.” Collin took a moment to look around and feel grateful they wouldn’t need to take shelter here.

Now that they were following a clear trail, the hiking became mundane, so Collin did his best to distract Gloria with tales of his childhood. He told her about the adventures he’d had with his friends and the trips they gone on. He confessed to the pranks they’d pulled and the close calls they’d had with death.

She hmm-ed and chuckled and continued to hobble along step after step.

She had been right about them being close to the intersection of trails. Even at their slow pace, they'd turned onto the AT after less than 20 minutes of hiking and were now making progress toward the hostel.

As he paused to consider what story he could share with her next, he heard her heave a deep sigh.

"How's your knee?" he asked.

"It fucking hurts like fire, but I'm doing okay. I was just thinking about how different it is without the normal traffic out here on the trail."

"Is it usually busy this time of year? I didn't even start until late March the year I hiked it, so I don't think I'd even made it into Virginia yet at this point."

"It's too early for it to be steady, but we get sporadic bubbles of hikers coming through around this time."

"That's what I thought. Things will return to normal as soon as we catch the killer."

She stopped and turned to look back at him before she responded. "I was thinking I kind of like how peaceful and quiet the trail is. We never see it this empty, and it's kind of nice."

She looked embarrassed to admit that. Collin realized that Gloria was letting him in to hear some of her private thinking. He wanted to know more. He wanted to learn about her, what made her tick, and what mattered to her. "What's your vision for the ideal future?" he asked. Her life seemed to revolve

around her hostel and the AT. From what he could tell, she didn't leave Great Hikes unless she had to. Was she hoping to spend more time with other people, or less?

"I'd like to be able to talk to my sister," she said. "We were close when we were younger, before my uncle died. But Lily took his death hard, and then she hit puberty and realized she wasn't *normal*. She wanted to be out, open, and accepted, but when my parents told her it was just a phase, she understood what they weren't saying. They wouldn't have her flaunting her gayness around town. I tried to talk to her about it, but I didn't understand what it was like for her. After they died, she immediately announced she was dating a girl named Nicole and brought her to the funeral like it was her way of flipping them off even after death." Collin could feel Gloria's sadness.

Collin felt a stab of disappointment. He hadn't realized just how much part of him had been hoping to hear her say that she wanted to find more company. He didn't like thinking about her running the hostel all by her lonesome. Then again, maybe getting back into contact with her sister was a start in that direction. "Maybe if you let her know you support her, she'll start to come around."

Gloria shrugged. "I've spent the last five years trying to do exactly that. My family isn't known for being flexible or open-minded, but I keep trying."



# CHAPTER 13

## GLORIA

“Let’s put some ice on your knee,” Collin said, helping Gloria up the steps to her cabin.

Gloria unlocked the door and Spike bounded out to greet them with his tail wagging in excitement. Locking the door wasn’t something she usually did, but she was trying to get into the habit. She had always thought of Spike as her guard dog who rendered locks useless, but she didn’t want anything to happen to him. She was locking doors as much to protect him as anything else.

“Go sit on the couch. I’ll grab a pillow to tuck under your propped up knee and get you some ice.”

Gloria grabbed her cell and her laptop and flopped onto the couch. She lifted her foot up onto the ottoman and started wiggling up her pant leg, but she was in so much pain, and the bandage created a large speed bump, so she couldn’t get her pant leg up. She considered standing up and pulling her pants off, but the thought of standing made her want to cry. Instead, she just sat there and waited for Collin. She’d been able to make it back, so she figured it couldn’t be hurt that bad. It was probably a sprain or a strain that would heal on its own. If it got worse or didn’t appear to be getting better, she’d have to get it looked at, but she wanted to avoid that if possible.

Collin delivered her pillow and gently placed it under her knee while studying her leg. “You should probably take your pants off, and it kills me to say that without an ounce of

innuendo or flirting. Do you have shorts somewhere you want me to grab for you?”

She looked up at him, and their eyes met. “I don’t want to stand back up again.” She confessed in a whisper. She hated to admit it, but she was confident standing would involve crying. “Maybe just grab the scissors and cut off the pant leg,” she suggested hopefully.

“It was only mist, but it was enough for both of us to be uncomfortably cold and wet. Can you wiggle your pants past your hips without standing? Then I can pull them off and we can use a blanket to keep you covered and warm.”

She could do that. At this point, she didn’t even care that it meant him seeing her ratty cotton underwear. It only took a minute to unsnap, unzip and shift her weight from side to side to clear the pants down to her thighs. Collin handed her a blanket to cover her lap and quickly pulled the pant leg from her good leg before slowly removing the other side from her injured one.

He tossed her pants off to the side and went to the door to let Spike back in. They’d agreed to just let him roam long enough to do his thing while she got settled. There was no way she would be able to walk him right now, and she got the feeling Collin didn’t want to leave her alone.

Spike plopped beside her on the couch with his tail thumping against the arm of it. Collin was in the kitchen popping ice out of trays and onto a towel for her.

She faced the woodstove and closed her eyes. She slowed her breathing and focused on letting her muscles relax their tension one at a time. Collin returned and unwrapped her knee before applying the ice. Then he added wood to the embers in the stove to keep the room warm. She'd usually wait until later in the evening and relight the whole thing, but without much sunlight it was staying chillier today. She figured the extra warmth would be nice for both of them.

Once that task was taken care of Collin turned a dining room chair to face her and grabbed a file from the table.

Gloria decided to ignore him for now and focus on continuing to relax. Collin had been wonderful through their entire adventure. As she relaxed, she felt the prickly sensation of being watched again, but instead of feeling creepy, this time it felt warm. She opened her eyes to find Collin smiling at her. He was handsome. She didn't normally go for men in suits, but they looked good on him. And she loved the way he looked in his hiking clothes – which he was still wearing.

“You should change, too.” She commented.

“Yeah, I probably should. I guess it's a good thing I left my bag here. Do you mind if I use your bedroom?”

His sense of modesty struck her as funny, or maybe she was just losing her sanity. It had certainly been the week for it. She nodded at him to go ahead and tried to convince herself to check her email while he changed. She dreaded reading what she knew would be a list of cancellations. Normally, she'd be trying to shuffle things around to fit in as many people as

possible, but now, her reservation book was empty. If this continued on much longer, she'd struggle to pay her bills.

Sometimes she wished she hadn't remodeled all the cabins at once. At the time, taking out the mortgage to make it happen hadn't felt risky. No one had anticipated the pandemic, nor had anyone suggested she plan and prepare for the financial ramifications of having a serial killer running loose along the trail. She'd expected to pay off the fifteen-year mortgage in ten years, but after the way the past few years had gone, it wasn't looking like that was going to happen.

She gave herself a quick mental pep talk and opened her browser. Sure enough, there were three cancellations. Just as she was updating her calendar, her phone rang.

"Why isn't Warner answering his phone?" a voice that sounded like Agent Harrison demanded.

"I don't know—"

She'd barely gotten that short sentence out before the agent was insisting that she have Collin call him the second she could find him. She didn't mention that he was in the other room changing, because Harrison didn't give her a chance to say anything. Based on how panicky he sounded, she figured it must be important and tried to remind herself to cut him some slack.

She was rolling her eyes about it as Collin stepped back into the living room. She passed along Harrison's message and made it clear that it sounded urgent. Collin dug out his own phone and called the man back right away. The look on his

face told Gloria that he agreed Harrison wouldn't be this demanding unless it was bad news.

She shoved her financials to the back of her mind as she listened to the ringing of Harrison's phone through Collin's. When Harrison answered, Collin listened for a few minutes while making humming and grunting noises of acknowledgement. When he ended the call, his face was pulled tight and looked defeated. "Harrison wanted me to know they have a positive identification for this recent victim. Her name was Nicole Smith. They'll be releasing her name to the press as soon as her family has been notified."

Nicole Smith? Oh shit. Should she tell Collin that she had ties to her? Could she trust him that much? Would he recognize the name from their earlier conversation? Once her name was released, Doug would make sure everyone knew the connection anyway, so she might as well. "Nicole dated Lily toward the end of high school. That's the girl she brought to our parent's funeral," she said.

Gloria felt a ball of lead appear in her stomach. It wouldn't take long for the FBI to connect her sister to Nicole. Once they did, it was another piece of evidence that pointed at Lily.

Collin plowed his fingers through his unruly hair, "Tell me about their relationship."

Gloria felt her head begin to pound. "It was a typical high school relationship. They broke up and got back together countless times, and the drama was never-ending. Nicole's family blamed Lily for making her gay."

It was how Nicole's family and friends would remember things, and Gloria had no doubt they'd be quick to share that information with anyone and everyone who came asking.

"Did Harrison say anything else?" Gloria asked. Had they gone so far as to issue a warrant? She knew they were going after Lily, and she hated it. She just felt powerless to do anything to stop it.

"No, he only told me about the ID because it was about to show up on the news, and we'd hear about it, anyway. He wants to come back here to Great Hikes to talk to you more."

Gloria had to find something, anything to point the whole investigation away from Lily, and she needed to find it before Mike Harrison showed back up on their doorstep. She wouldn't lie to him, but there was no way in hell she'd provide him with more ammunition to use against her sister. She'd been around long enough to have clear eyesight when it came to how law enforcement worked. They were great individuals with the best of intentions, but when they got together to solve a case, they found a trail and followed it without bothering to check the undergrowth around them. "This afternoon, we'll head into town to talk to Angie and see what she knows."

Collin looked at her with disbelief, "No, tonight we'll rest and let your knee recover a bit. We can go see her on Monday. No one wants to be out in this storm."

Gloria frowned as her thoughts returned to her sister. Why hadn't she called? She could be anywhere from Roanoke to

Harpers Ferry. She didn't even know if Lily was still on the trail.

Collin sighed, "We'll find this guy. He'll make a mistake, and we'll be ready for him. It'll be okay."

Gloria flopped to her side and stretched across the couch to hook her finger on the hoodie that was tossed there.

"Um, you could have just asked, and I'd have been happy to hand that to you."

It had been closer to him than her, but she was feeling untethered and needed to remember she could do things for herself. "I'm not dependent on others." Part of her felt stupid for being so stubborn, but she knew it wasn't really about the sweatshirt. She had to remember that Collin would leave, and she'd be back to running her own life and business on her own. She liked it that way. There was no sense considering fantasies that were never going to happen.

"You know, you aren't the only person I've met who hates asking for help, but you might be the most stubborn."

Gloria pulled on the hoodie and readjusted her blanket. "I have no problem asking for help when I want it, but I'm used to taking care of things myself. I like to keep my self-sufficiency skills current." She tried to keep the last bit light and teasing, but the grain of truth to it ran deep.

"You don't get many people here beyond the hikers who come for the trail, do you?"



“I was putting together a campaign to advertise to honeymooners, but Covid hit just as I was about to launch it.”

“I was thinking more about friends coming up to visit and have a girl’s night or whatever,” Collin clarified.

“Not really my thing.”

Collin gave her a look of silent judgment.

“I know you think I’m just some crazy cat lady minus the cats, but that’s not how it is. Heck, look at how we went out to dinner the other night.”

“I wasn’t thinking you’re a crazy cat lady. I was just thinking that you prefer to be on your own territory. When we went out, you were looking forward to coming back here, even though we were only gone for a few hours.” Collin wasn’t being hostile or accusatory. It was a simply stated observation.

What he didn’t realize was that it wasn’t entirely true. He’d missed a few things. Sure, she’d been reluctant to go into town with Collin, but she’d ended up having a great time. It had been nice to be out with someone like that. It didn’t matter. There was no point to this conversation, and she intended to end it. “I had fun, and everything was fine.” She tried to use her imaginary laser eyeballs to tell him to drop it.

He laughed at her. The fucker. “I’m glad to hear you enjoyed it, but you realize that *fine* isn’t going to make our fake relationship convincing, especially not if you’re being hostile to me.” His eyes traveled down to where she’d crossed her arms over her chest, and she supposed he had a point.

“There’s no one else here. This isn’t public, and besides, aren’t couples supposed to fight?” She was being difficult, and she knew it, but she couldn’t seem to stop it.

Gloria closed her eyes and took a deep breath to recenter herself. The thought of Collin flirting with Angie made her want to punch things, and that wouldn’t do either of them any good.

Once she was ready, she looked back over at Collin and asked, “How do you want to approach this?”

Collin rolled his shoulders. “We’ll go in together. I can convince her to talk to us.”

“It might not be that easy.” Gloria looked at the clock and did some mental math. If they didn’t lollygag, they should be able to make it into town, talk to Angie, and get back to the hostel before the weather got too fierce.

He smirked at her. “I convinced you to help me, didn’t I? I even convinced you to go out with me.”

He stood up, pushed Spike off the couch and moved to sit beside Gloria. His eyes rested on the blanket covering her lap. The suggestion was clear, and it made her tingly all over.

“You do have a certain way about you.” But Gloria wasn’t about to make it easy for him. “I just haven’t decided if that way makes me want to punch you or sleep with you.”

Collin chuckled before leaning closer and whispering, “Let’s start with kissing and go from there.”

He waited for her to close the distance between them. When his lips touched hers, she melted into him, and gripped her hands into fists clutching at his shirt. His kiss was the perfect combination of lusty, hungry, and neat. He didn't slobber all over her or try to eat her face, but he did fully explore her mouth and run his tongue over each of her teeth. He tasted good, and she couldn't resist sucking on his tongue.

The moan he let out in response told her that it had been the right thing to do, but he didn't push beyond the kiss. She unclenched her fists and rubbed her hands across his chest and shoulders while he nibbled at her lip between tangling their tongues together.

Eventually, he pulled back from the kiss. She didn't follow him but spent a moment with her eyes closed, just reveling in the sensation of being so thoroughly appreciated.

Then Gloria's phone rang. She scrambled to grab it from the ottoman beside where her leg was propped and was breathless as she answered, "Great Hikes Hostel. This is Gloria."

"Gloria?" The whisper was a voice she hadn't heard in a very long time. For just a moment, she dared to hope the caller wasn't who she thought it was.

"Who is this?" she asked. Maybe she had it wrong.

"It's your Aunt Kim. I just arrived. May I come in?"

Her aunt hadn't come to her parent's funeral. In fact, Gloria hadn't seen or heard from her in more than seventeen years. She couldn't help feeling like Aunt Kim's departure had been

the harbinger of doom for her family. Uncle Gavin had tried to keep going after she left, but then she sent a letter. No one knew what was in the letter. Gloria remembered watching Uncle Gavin read it and tuck it away. She didn't think her parents even knew what he'd done with the letter. He'd taken his own life barely more than a month later. Things had spiraled from there. Lily had taken it hard. Uncle Gavin had been her person. At first, it had just been small struggles at school. She'd only been seven when Uncle Gavin had died, but by the time she turned into a teenager, she'd been cutting herself and drinking. She'd outright told Gloria she'd be taking off on her own the minute she turned eighteen. Then, a month before Lily's seventeenth birthday, their parents had died in the accident. Gloria had convinced the authorities and a judge to let her take responsibility for Lily, and they'd made it through Lily's last year of high school. If Aunt Kim had been around for any of that, it could have gone completely differently. Uncle Gavin would still be alive; Lily would have had someone to talk to; Gloria wouldn't have needed to take on adult responsibilities when she was twenty-two. Anger surged inside Gloria. "What do you want?" She heard the hostility in her own voice and knew her aunt must have heard it too.

"I read in the news about the death at Great Hikes. I needed to come back to check on you and Lily and make sure you're okay."

Did she care? Her aunt hadn't been around for the toughest part of her life, so why show up now?

“Gloria?”

“I’m here,” she said, still not making up her mind about how to handle her aunt. Could it be a trick? Some mistake?

There was a knock on the door.

“Should I answer it?” Collin asked as he stood up and moved his hand to the gun still clipped to his hip.

“I don’t know,” she whispered while clutching at the phone.

“Gloria, it’s wet and chilly out here, and I’ve had a terrible time getting here. Can I please come in?”

Collin took the phone from Gloria. “Who is this?”

And that was all it took for Gloria to breathe a sigh of relief. She could handle it herself, but she didn’t want to, and with Collin here, she didn’t have to. Why was she so against that? The thought of letting him take care of just this one thing slowed her heart rate and unclenched the muscles that had frozen.

Not being able to hear her aunt’s voice also allowed the fog of her mind to clear enough for her brain to start working again.

“I don’t know if she wants to see you or not.” Collin paused to listen. “You should have thought of that before just showing up. Wait on the porch. I’ll be out when she’s decided.”

Collin clicked the end button to disconnect the call.

“Gloria? Are you okay? I don’t know what’s going on with your aunt or why she’s just showing up here like this, but if

you want me to kick her out, I will. You don't even have to see her.”

Gloria shook her head. How many times had she wished for her aunt to show back up and help? How many nights had she wished her aunt would come back to guide her through opening the hostel and ensuring Lily would graduate. Gloria wasn't sure why her aunt was here now, but decided it was important to find out. “It's okay. Let her in. I've got a knee brace tucked in the back of my closet. I'm going to go put that on, along with some pants.”

Collin stepped out the door and closed it behind him after helping her up from the couch. Gloria hobbled over to her bedroom to brace herself—in several senses of the word.

When Gloria stepped back into the living room, she had to steel herself against a host of emotions. Her aunt had been a force in her childhood, and as much as she was angry with the woman, she also missed her. Gloria had been ten when Aunt Kim had disappeared. She was different from the rest of them. She was a go-with-the-flow hippie who never appeared stressed out or nervous. She'd become slightly more high-strung toward the end, but in hindsight, Gloria could tell it was because of the deterioration of her marriage to Uncle Gavin. Aunt Kim looked older than Gloria remembered, but otherwise, she was the same.

Gloria couldn't decide how to feel. Part of her wanted to run over and hug the woman. She was the only family Gloria had left besides Lily, and who the fuck knew where she was.

Another part of her wanted to grab for Collin's gun and shoot the women in the face over and over again until she ran out of bullets. Waking up to find Aunt Kim gone and the ensuing worry had been the first seriously bad event in Gloria's life, and while she didn't know what had been in the letter that prompted Uncle Gavin's suicide, she knew it had come from Aunt Kim.

"Gloria, there's something really important I need to tell you about," her aunt started.

Gloria narrowed her eyes. "That's it? No, *hi, how have you been? No, I'm sorry I missed three funerals and left you to get your sister through her final year of high school all by yourself when you were just twenty-two?*"

No matter what the woman had said, Gloria wouldn't have liked it, but this greeting cut deeper than Gloria had prepared for.

Her aunt twisted the hem of her loose shirt around her fingers. "I told you. I want to be here for you and Lily. I can only imagine how tough this is, but I also need to explain some things that I don't think your parents shared with you."

Bitterness tore through Gloria. "You don't get to show up now and pretend to care. You didn't care when Mom and Dad died. You didn't care when Uncle Gavin died, and you didn't care when I was left to handle everything by myself before I'd even finished college. But you think you get to care now?" The rage inside Gloria boiled up into tears which she refused to let fall.

The woman lifted her chin and firmed her jaw. “I know I’ve made mistakes, but there were reasons I did what I did.”

Oh, fuck that. “I don’t care to hear them,” Gloria said flatly.

It might have been a bit of a lie. Gloria was desperately curious but couldn’t imagine anything that would change her mind about the situation.

“You need to hear them. I’ve wanted to get in touch with you. I thought I might hear from your family after I sent that letter, but eventually I realized how wrong that was. I should have come back when your parents passed, but the timing wasn’t great.”

“That sounds like an explanation.”

“It’s not the whole explanation. There are important details I’m realizing you don’t know. There are things in your family history that you need to understand. Especially now.”

“I do not need you to lecture me about what I do and do not need to understand,” Gloria said.

“These murders made it clear that I had to come and see you now.”

Gloria snorted. Collin was standing nearby, watching silently. She could feel his support even though he was quiet. He wouldn’t disagree with anything she said, nor would he ever try telling her to *calm down* the way Doug always had. She wasn’t sure where her confidence about that came from, but it was there, nonetheless. “I don’t believe in signs. I believe in people taking responsibility for their lives and their



choices. I believe in people dealing with the consequences of their actions. Once someone's trust is broken, it's unlikely you'll get it back. Bells can't be unrung, and past choices are usually a pretty good indicator of future behavior."

"I'm sorry to hear that, and you don't have to trust me, but I do need to talk to you and Lily." Gloria's aunt looked like she pitied Gloria. "Is she here?"

"No." Gloria gritted out through clenched teeth. "She's out hiking."

"Now?" Aunt Kim's widened with disbelief.

"The killer wasn't in her plans, but I have no doubt she's aware of the danger. Besides, I'm sure she's keeping herself safe. She and I have both gotten good at that over the last few years."

Gloria's aunt looked between her and Collin. She had introduced herself as Kim Lopez, her married name, and Gloria had introduced Collin by name, but not why he was there or that he was an FBI agent.

Gloria wasn't sure where to take the conversation next. "You should go. Collin and I need to head out."

"Gloria, you have to tell Lily to come home right away. She's not safe out there. I promise, I can explain everything." She glanced back toward Collin before returning her focus to Gloria and lowering her voice. "Meet me for dinner tonight?" she asked.

Gloria wasn't willing to commit to that just yet. "I'll let you know." Her aunt reached into the pocket of her long, flowy, paisley skirt, and pulled out a scrap of paper with a phone number on it. "Please call me. We have a lot that we need to talk about."

Gloria tossed the paper onto the end table beside the couch. "I'll see if I have any time available for you."

Kim nodded and swallowed hard while casting another glance toward Collin. Then she headed out the door and left. Though the initial rage had passed, Gloria still felt a simmering disdain that stopped her from feeling any regret over her rude behavior. Her aunt had abandoned their family. Gloria knew she was right to be suspicious of her sudden reappearance.

# CHAPTER 14

## COLLIN

Collin left Gloria comfortably set up on the couch with her computer while he ran over to check on the women in the other cabins. He figured he and Gloria could pick up any supplies they needed while they were in town visiting Angie.

“Why hello there, Collin! We didn’t expect to see you on this trip, but I must say, it’s a nice surprise.” Geri was sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of one of the cabins, so he jogged up the steps and sat next to her.

“It’s always good to see you ladies as well. How is everyone?”

“Old and arthritic, but we don’t let that stop us. It looks like that tropical system is heading this way with a vengeance. Who’d have thought we’d ever have to worry about hurricanes in April?” Geri shook her head in disapproval.

“Yeah, that’s part of what brings me over here. Gloria and I are going to pop into town quick before the weather gets worse. There’s a clerk at the county office who might have some helpful information, and we can gather any supplies we might need. I figure we can grab stuff for you all as well.”

“That’s a damn fine idea. I think we’ll join you. Betty said Linda’s enjoying a good book, and Joan’s still sleeping, but Betty and I can be ready to go shortly. We can pick up stuff for lunch.”

That wasn't what Collin had been thinking. It would be much harder to get Angie to open up with Betty and Geri there. Then again, maybe they could do some snooping of their own. "Hm, could I actually ask a favor?"

"Of course. You know we love to stick our noses into the action. It's even better when we can claim we're helping."

Collin couldn't stop himself from laughing. Geri wasn't wrong, but she'd proven to him that when push came to shove, she knew what she was doing and could hold her own in any situation.

"Could you and Betty maybe stop in a local store or two while we're in the county offices? I'd love some more information."

Geri got a sly grin on her face. "That sounds like the perfect assignment for us. What do you want to know?"

Collin wasn't sure how to explain that. He was hoping she'd understand when he said, "Nothing specific but anything interesting."

This time Geri was the one to laugh. "Alright. We'll be two busybody old ladies poking our noses into everyone's business to see what floats to the surface."

"That'd be perfect. Could you be ready to go in ten minutes? The office closes at two."

Instead of answering him, Geri turned away from him and bellowed, "Hey Betty, we're leaving in ten minutes."

Betty's head popped out the door of the other cabin long enough to give them a thumbs up before she disappeared back inside. They could hear Betty shouting an explanation to Linda, who stepped onto the porch to ask, "Should I come, too?"

"Nah, enjoy your book and stick around to let Joan know where we are when she gets up. We're just going to grab some supplies," Geri told her.

"I'm up thanks to your incessant screaming," Joan grumbled from inside the cabin.

"Perfect. You can keep Linda company while we're gone." Geri had a solution for every problem, and Collin loved her for it.

"On that note, I'm going to grab Gloria and get ready to go. We'll meet you in the car in just a few minutes." He slapped his thighs and stood up.

"Sounds good," Geri said as he walked away.



Collin pulled into the gravel parking lot of the county courthouse. It housed everything from county records to the county morgue and medical examiner's office. Gloria was trying to hide it, but her face was too expressive for him to miss the way she kept replaying the interaction with her aunt.

He was waiting to see if she'd share her thoughts and feelings or tuck them deep inside where no one could touch them.

Betty seemed to understand what was happening and nudged Geri before announcing, "We're going to browse some of the local shops on this block. There's that outfitter store that looks nice. Just text us when you're ready to head to the store."

Collin turned to the back seat to thank them and remind them to stay safe before turning his full attention back to Gloria.

Before they entered the building, he needed them both to be on the same page. He also needed Gloria to relax a bit. If they met Angie like this, he'd never get anything out of her through her digging to find out more about what was going on with Gloria. Still, he knew that was a big ask right now. She was processing a lot.

Before she could open her door, he reached out for her arm. "Gloria, hold up a sec. You okay? I could hear your brain spinning the entire drive here."

Gloria looked away, but Collin caught the shimmer of tears in her eyes first. He gave her a minute while she huffed and reined it back in. When she turned back to him, she was clear-eyed and calm. Her voice was steady as she pointed out, "There is nothing okay about any of it, but there's also not much to be done about it. So let's go deal with Angie now. We'll figure out my aunt, my sister, and the serial killer later."

He wanted to let it go. He wanted to accept her statement and follow her lead. He couldn't do it. He'd done that once before, and now he'd regret it for the rest of his life. He just wasn't sure exactly how to start without causing her to punch him in the face.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply for a moment. "My cousin and I had a falling out before she died. I told her she was stupid for turning down the teaching position she was offered just to hike the trail. To me, it seemed more logical that she should do two big lashes and take two years to cover the trail during her summer breaks while still starting her career."

Then Collin opened his eyes to find her giving him the same stare his mother used to give when she couldn't believe he was that stupid, and he froze.

"Please tell me you're joking. I mean, it's not a funny joke, but that's a really fucking ignorant thing to say."

"Yeah, no. I mean, it's not a joke. I did say it; she got mad; I continued to be an ass; she went anyway; we didn't talk; and then she died. Now I'll live the rest of my life regretting it."

Gloria thought for a moment before responding, "I'm sorry you didn't have an opportunity to reconnect with Beth. It's been seventeen years and three funerals since my aunt disappeared. There's still a part of me that wants to let her back in, but it's been such a long time and so much has happened."

"I get that," Collin agreed. "I'm not saying you should jump right back into treating her like family. Just don't make



decisions you could end up regretting.”

“Yeah, that’s probably good advice.” Then Gloria relaxed her entire body before looking back up at him. “I’m not saying I’m not open to what she might have to say. I’m just saying that the timing adds an extra level of suspicion.”

“That’s a fair point. And I will back you up. You’re my partner right now. That means we have each other’s back, no matter what. I look out for you, and you look out for me.” He raised his eyebrows as he wondered if she could really understand that. He was beginning to suspect she’d not had that support since before her parents died and maybe even longer.

She stared at him for a minute before nodding that she understood, and he couldn’t hold back.

“I’d like to kiss you, please.”

“You sure can be polite when you want something,” Gloria sounded amused, so he figured it was okay.

They grinned at each other as Collin slid his hand along the side of her jaw to cradle the back of her neck and pull her toward him. Their lips met, and he immediately swept his tongue through her mouth. She tasted like chocolate and coffee. She grabbed his shoulders and a quiet moan escaped from the back of her throat. Collin pulled away before he could beg her to move the party to the back seat right there in the middle of town.

“You do get points for being a good kisser,” Gloria told him as she finger-combed her hair. “Can I ask what inspired you?”

“Do I need a reason?”

Gloria froze. He knew he could not let her doubt him. Not now, when she’d just started to open up to him.

He explained, “I like being your partner. I get the feeling there aren’t many people you feel like you can count on, so I’m incredibly proud that I’m one of those few. I want to be there for you.”

“—for as long as the case keeps you here, you mean? Once the killer moves on, so will you, right?”

That stopped him. He had to find his cousin’s killer, but the thought of leaving Gloria felt wrong. He said the only acceptable solution he was willing to consider: “We’ll find him together before he moves on. That’s why we’re going to go talk to Angie.”

# CHAPTER 15

## GLORIA

Gloria didn't necessarily believe him, but she could tell that he didn't like the idea of leaving her. At least she didn't think he did. When she walked down the hall and toward the glass door that led to Angie's desk, Angie sat up a bit straighter and straightened up the piles littering her desk. She barely even glanced at Gloria as her eyes focused beyond Gloria's shoulder to where Collin must be standing.

He did have that effect on women. Gloria hated it. She didn't want anyone looking at him but her. That wasn't how it was, though. He didn't belong to her, nor did they have any real relationship. The fact that it was Angie made the situation worse. She was a huge flirt and prided herself on her ability to attract men. Collin didn't stand a chance. That meant Gloria was also hopeless.

Gloria introduced the two of them as Angie slid off her stool and stepped out from behind her counter. She presented Collin with the back of her hand as she greeted him. "What a pleasure it is to meet you. I'm sure I can guess why you and Gloria stopped by here, and I hate to disappoint, but I'm not allowed to share any of the reports about that poor woman. It's such a tragedy."

Oh, she was laying it on thick today.

She was happy to see that Collin didn't trip over himself, nor did he have any drool running down his chin. He seemed nonplussed as he responded, "We know you have to protect

the victim's privacy. Gloria was worried that Nicole suffered, and I just thought maybe you could reassure her?" He turned to look at Gloria and had to step on her toe to remind her to act upset.

"Oh, yeah. I am really worried about that." She couldn't imagine it was believable, but Angie hadn't even looked at her, so it didn't matter.

Instead, she was giving Collin a suspicious look. "How did you know the victim's name? That wasn't made public yet." Then Angie gave Gloria an accusatory look.

"I'm working the case and Mike Harrison let us know they'd identified the victim." Collin leaned on the desk, putting Angie closer to him. Gloria wanted to sweep her hand away when Angie reached to her blouse and undid another button at the top.

"You're working the case with the FBI? You're a Special Agent?" Angie asked.

Gloria rolled her eyes. They lived in a small town, and she knew Angie didn't get out much, but damn. This was too much.

"I am a special agent with the FBI," Collin said.

"Oh, well, let me see here. I don't know how to tell if she suffered," Angie said, returning to her stool and flipping through the file in front of her.

Collin waited, and when Angie held up a paper, he smiled at her. Angie almost melted onto the counter. "Do you think I

could take a look? I can read it and interpret all the jargon.” Angie waved the paper at him, “Sure, honey. This is a spare copy. I’m sure you know more about this than I do.”

“Why thank you, Angie. I’m happy to see you are so cooperative,” he said.

“Of course, she replied. “If you’re interested, I’d be happy to show you around town while you’re here, too. I know all the best spots.”

“Unfortunately, the case currently requires all my attention, but I do appreciate the offer.”

With a final round of smiles, Collin turned to walk out the door with Gloria right behind him.

“Do women always fall at your feet?” she asked.

“She didn’t fall at my feet. She wanted to help,” Collin corrected.

“I would say I’m surprised she handed over the file, but I think she was too taken in by you to retain any sense,” Gloria said.

“People have a thing for authority. They’re taught to listen and obey us. This case has upset everyone. The killer needs to be caught and everyone is willing to help as much as they can.”

They spotted Geri and Betty stepping out of the outfitters, so their timing had been perfect. Everyone climbed back into Collins SUV, and he started the engine. “Will you read the report while I drive?”

Gloria did, disappointed that Angie had only given them the summary sheet. It was labeled page one of forty-seven, so there were a lot of details they would be missing.

Once she started reading, she changed her mind. This would be plenty of information for them to go on. “It says they found muscarine in her system and the official cause of death was cardiac arrest. They also found headphones in her ears and her cell wrapped up with the vines and leaves around her face. It looks like she was gutted using the same field dressing skills used by deer hunters.” Gloria wasn’t sure what to make of that. It didn’t help that she had no idea what *muscarine* was. “Do you think she died quickly?” Gloria asked.

Collin hummed at her and didn’t really respond.

The women in the back seat were having a quiet disagreement while poking at each other, but stopped with a sudden, “There, see? I told you we didn’t need Wi-Fi on and just had to wait it out.” Betty sounded concerningly proud of herself.

Collin’s eyes shifted to the rearview mirror to glance at them before he asked, “What were you two looking up?”

“Muscarine, of course.” Geri replied as if Collin and Gloria were idiots not to have thought to look it up themselves. “Looks like it’s found in some kinds of poisonous mushrooms, several varieties of which grow in this area. Most mushrooms don’t have enough to kill a person, but there’s at least one variety that will cause a person’s heartrate to slow enough to drop them into a coma and cause death.”

Geri looked up from reading off her phone just as Betty answered Gloria's earlier question, "No, she didn't suffer. She slipped into a coma and died."

"Ok, so if Nicole was already dead, why wrap her in leaves? And what was with the headphones?" Collin asked before Gloria could. He was pulling into a parking spot in front of the store, so Gloria suggested they pause the conversation long enough to pick up what they needed. The rain was getting heavier, and the wind was starting to pick up. She wanted them to get back to the hostel before things got worse. They made quick work of their shopping, piled back into the vehicle, and headed back to Great Hikes Hostel. "The killer has a reason, and we need to get in her head, so we get a lead on finding her," Collin said. "She's in tune with her surroundings, and she has some special relationship with long distance hiking trails or nature, someone who has spent considerable time outdoors."

Gloria thought the killer didn't have the same respect she and her sister had been taught. Nature included humans. "What about the vines? Why the wrappings around her body? And why suddenly switch to thinking the killer's female?" She couldn't help asking aloud.

"Poison is almost always used by women killers. At first, I thought it might just be a matter of convenience or maybe even related to the choice of victim, but it's one of the few consistent details between all the victims, so it's part of the modus operandi. She's letting them die by fading away before gutting them and posing them. The vines and leaves are her



signature. It has some significance to her.” Collin sounded like he was thinking. She could see a variety of theories flitting across his mind.

The steady flow of small raindrops was turning into blustery, big drops. They weren't seeing the worst of the storm yet, but it was coming. It was easy for a hard rain to cause serious flooding in the area. Gloria would need to keep an eye on the nearby creeks. The end of her private road included a bridge that frequently flooded and became impassable. The low water bridge across that creek was in terrible shape. She had planned to replace it right after finishing the cabin renovations, but nothing had gone to plan, and there was no money left.

She mentioned as much to Collin, who then asked, “Do you think your bridge will survive the rain?”

“Who knows? I thought it would be washed out by a few earlier rainstorms, but it held strong. This will be the worst storm it has faced, but we won't know how it fares until after the storm has passed. No matter what, I think we'll be in for flooding.”

It took another 15 minutes for Collin to make it up the road and park in front of the cabins. As he turned off the engine, he turned around to Geri and Betty. “I still want to hear what you ladies learned. Why don't you give us a call once the four of you finish lunch?”

Betty gave him a skeptical look. “We'll see how the weather's doing. If it's less than a hurricane out here, could we

just come up to Gloria's? I don't mean to intrude, but these old bones can't be cooped up for too long or rigor mortis will start to set in."

Gloria laughed, "Of course you can." Then she climbed out of the vehicle and up the porch to open the front door. Spike bounded out. As soon as he'd taken care of his needs, he darted over to greet Betty and Geri on their way to their own cabins before following Gloria and Collin into the house.

Collin sat at the dining room table with the page from Angie. Gloria was cleaning up from their quick lunch of sandwiches when the dog went on alert and began to bark with excitement. Collin laughed as a knock sounded on the door.

"I'm guessing that's Geri's crew," Collin said as he rose to his feet. "But, let me get it just in case." Collin unclipped his holster and pulled out his gun while he waited for Gloria to nod her approval.

Her heartbeat quickened. The Grapevine Killer wouldn't knock. Her style was much stealthier. If it was one of the investigators, they'd have called first, right?

Sure enough, she soon heard the voices of older ladies all shouting over each other about who thought hiking in the rain would be fun and whose arthritis was acting up too much to enjoy hiking today.

Collin ushered them all into the cabin as Spike danced around them, happily accepting petting from all of them before becoming overwhelmed by the level of activity and noise and coming to sit on Gloria's foot.

Geri and Betty were clearly focused on telling Collin all about what they learned while in town, but Linda appeared as overwhelmed as Spike.

“That silly woman—” Betty started.

“That’s not the important part we know Gloria’s not—” Geri interrupted.

“—Of course, she’s not,”

“What did she say?” Collin interjected.

“Did either of you bring Advil?” Joan tossed in.

Collin appeared perfectly happy to referee the chaos while Joan slithered through it unscathed. Geri and Betty combined their voices to share information in the most non-linear, overlapping, discombobulated version of storytelling Gloria had ever heard.

She needed to escape, and based on Spike’s whine, he agreed.

“I should get another cabin ready in case other hikers need shelter,” she shouted above the cacophony. As soon as her eyes connected with Collin, she got an acknowledging smile and head bob, so she grabbed one of her ready-made supply bags to stock the spare cabin and took off out the front door.

She ignored the twinge in her knee and made a note to ice it later. Then she heard more footsteps behind her and turned around to see Linda following her. Gloria couldn’t handle anymore shouting, so she simply raised her eyebrows to ask Linda what was up.

Luckily, Linda understood and started speaking softly as Gloria led them and Spike toward her last available cabin.

“Most people assume that my hearing loss makes everything sound quieter, but really, it’s more like my hearing got blurry. It’s like my ears have astigmatism. The noise is all there, but I can’t make sense of any of it. When people shout at me, it raises their noise above the rest to make it easier to focus on. The biggest help, though, is when they slow down and break apart their words as they shout at me. Part of my love of being outdoors is the quiet environment. Situations like this,” Linda gestured between herself and Gloria, “tend to be the best way for me to have an almost normal conversation.”

Gloria smiled and nodded her head at Linda. She understood exactly what the woman was saying, even though she didn’t have any hearing issues. The peace and quiet of nature allowed her thoughts to settle to a gentle simmer that made it easier to pull one problem to the foreground at a time.

She led them to the final available cabin. It was the cabin that was furthest from hers and closest to the tree line. If someone came down from the trail, wet, muddy, and cold, they might just stop there and pay later. Most hikers were good and honest people, so she was happy to make things as comfortable and convenient for them as possible. Each cabin had a note on the bed that clearly stated the rates and provided her phone number.

Gloria unlocked the door and reached inside to flip on the light. The cabin was cool to the point of chilly inside, but it

was dry and would warm up quickly if anyone came in and turned on the heater. The first thing Gloria noticed were footprints leading inside. They were muddy, and Gloria's first thought was to be irritated that someone had borrowed her cabin without pay *and* left her with a mess to clean up. Then she thought about it and came to a different conclusion. One that was terrifying instead of annoying. She'd cleaned and locked this cabin less than a week ago when they'd started shuttling hikers around this section of the trail.

Her bag dropped to the ground, the food spilling across the floor. "Someone was here. Is here." Fear and panic gripped at her throat and her legs tensed, anticipating the need to run.

"That's not good," Linda said as she peered around Gloria to see the mess for herself.

"I didn't bring my shotgun with me." Gloria didn't usually walk around armed, but there wasn't usually a serial killer stalking hikers and using her cabins, either.

Linda looked confused for just a moment as she appeared to parse through Gloria's comment. Then she reached down to her ankle, lifted her pant leg, and pulled out a palm-sized revolver. "It's okay; you can borrow mine."

After a minute of staring in disbelief, Gloria decided maybe it would be a good idea to bring in a trained professional. "Let's call Collin and make him check it out instead," she suggested.

Collin picked up on the first ring and was at Gloria's side in less than three minutes. Of course, Betty, Joan, and Geri were

right behind him.

“Wait here,” he directed all of them with his authoritative ‘*I have handcuffs if necessary*’ voice once they’d all piled onto the porch. Then he stalked through the cabin, turning on lights, checking every possible hiding place. “It’s empty. There’s no one here right now.”

Gloria swallowed hard. “Sometimes hikers break in and stay without paying.” It had been her first thought, but now the tremor in her voice shook her words. She always chalked it up to someone who was desperate and in need of the shelter, but this felt different. An uneasy sensation rolled down her spine.

Her gaze returned to the muddy boot prints. Dark mud. Almost red... like blood. As she scanned her eyes across a particularly thin smear, her fear was confirmed. She clamped her hand over her mouth to muffle the scream that was trying to escape. Collin swept around to face her and followed her pointed finger to the floor. His gaze canvassed the room again.

“She was here,” she whispered. “It’s not mud.”

“Could have been an injured hiker,” Collin said. “I’m calling Harrison. The entire team needs to see this.”

Gloria wanted to look more closely for herself. She wanted to know if the killer had used her bathroom. Slept on the bed. Lit a fire in the hearth. Sure, it was a space she rented out, but it still felt like a violation of her privacy and her sense of security was shot. She wasn’t safe. Her space had been invaded by a killer.

# CHAPTER 16

## COLLIN

The killer had been closer than he had known.

Had she taken shelter in the cabin after killing Nicole on the trail? Was the substance on the ground wet mud or dried blood? If the blood was human, it might provide a lead and a possible DNA match if the killer was already in the system.

The FBI hadn't checked the cabins the night Gloria had found the body, and Collin cursed the oversight. He should have searched everywhere the moment it had happened.

Collin called Harrison and left him a message. He composed his next steps. He needed a cotton swab and a sterile bag to collect a sample. He'd send it to an independent lab and—

He froze when he saw Gloria's face. She was deathly pale, and her arms were wrapped around her midsection as if trying to hold herself together. The four older ladies had retreated to their own cabins to avoid contaminating any evidence. In two long strides he stepped up against Gloria. He gathered her in his arms and held her against his body. He stroked her hair. "It's okay. You're safe."

She trembled in his arms and burrowed closer. "I don't feel safe. The killer was inside one of my cabins." The words came as a whisper. She'd been maintaining an amazing level of calm since finding the body, and he hadn't stopped to consider how this would make her feel, how this could overwhelm her. Each



incident weighed more and more on her until she would eventually break down. He'd seen it happen to every agent he'd worked with over the years.

Collin ushered her back to her own cabin and sat her on the couch. He stoked the fire in the wood stove, but she continued to shiver.

"I'll make you a cup of hot tea." He pulled the blanket off the back of the couch and wrapped it around her shoulders, tucking the ends underneath her thighs. Spike trotted over and lay across her feet.

In the kitchen, Collin turned on the electric kettle of water and waited impatiently for it to boil. While he watched the pot, his mind churned over the latest developments.

Keeping Gloria under watch and safe was an even higher priority now. The killer hadn't been sloppy at any other scene and left evidence of her presence. If the boot prints in the cabin belonged to her, they had been left there on purpose. Just as with laying out the victim on her property for Gloria to find, the killer wanted Gloria to know how close she was.

Buy why? What connection did Gloria have to the killer? Was Collin crazy not to be considering her sister more closely?

Collin felt like a traitor for that thought, but it would be irresponsible for him not to consider it. Though Gloria seemed convinced Lily had nothing to do with the murders, the more they found, the more the evidence pointed to Lily.

Collin struggled to think of who else could be a suspect. Maybe someone with a relationship to Great Hikes? Perhaps someone Gloria knew through her time on the trail or a guest who had stayed here?

Collin's protective instinct flared. He wouldn't let the killer get close to her. Whatever games the Grapevine Killer had planned to toy with her, Collin owed it to Beth to prevent the killer from taking another victim.

The tea kettle boiled and clicked off. The killer fixating on Gloria and Great Hikes was a dangerous matter. Collin poured the hot water into a mug with a tea bag he found in a box in the cabinet. Decaf. She did not need any extra stimulants to make her mind run faster tonight.

The killer had been this close, left her mark and hadn't approached Gloria that Collin knew about. Had she talked to Gloria in a seemingly innocent way? Perhaps even in a public place? Had they seen the killer together when they had dinner in town? Collin had once worked a case where the killer had intentionally bumped into his future victims to taunt them before he killed them. At this point, Collin was confident this killer was a female, but he didn't think Harrison was convinced of that yet, which meant he was sending his team in the wrong direction. Sheriff Riley was onboard with a female killer but refused to look beyond Lily for suspects.

Collin knew that everything was revolving around Gloria. He'd checked with his aunt and confirmed that Beth had stayed here the night before she was killed. Jacob didn't have

any obvious ties to Great Hikes, but Hog Camp Gap wasn't more than a couple miles away. Nicole was a local. Now, they'd found evidence the killer had broken into one of Gloria's cabins. Did the case all revolve around the trail, the hostel, or Gloria? Would the killer target Gloria next? The thought strengthened Collins' resolve even more. There would be no opportunity. He wouldn't allow it.

Just then Gloria's phone rang, and Collin grabbed it before it she could. Gloria was watching him with wide, fearful eyes.

He answered the call, and Mike Harrison's voice came on the line, "I'm surprised you called."

Collin wasn't willing to play power games right now. While he had no intention of backing away from the case, he wasn't planning to shut anyone out, either. His mission was to see the case solved. Unlike Harrison, he didn't give a shit who or what it took to make that happen. They didn't see eye-to-eye on things, but Collin would offer him professional respect and courtesy, and if he happened to use that to help solve the case and catch the killer... well, that was even better.

"We've had a development in the case I thought you should be aware of."

Harrison grumped at him, before sighing and confessing, "We have problems here." Based on the background noises, he was in the middle of chaos. "When I got your message, we hopped in vehicles to come right up, but the bridge at the end of the road is gone. A tree fell on it, taking it out completely, and as the water is rising, it's all being washed away. There's

no way to clear or rebuild a temporary bridge until the storm passes and the water level drops.

Collin moved to the window and peered outside. It was raining hard enough he could barely see the trees through the gray blur. “Is everyone okay?”

“Yeah, I’m more concerned about all of you. We’ll be there as soon as we can, but it’s going to be a day or two. I’m hoping you have supplies and are prepared to be stranded out there.” Then the asshole couldn’t help but add. “Try not to compromise the scene before we can get there.”

Frustration with the situation was evident in Harrison’s voice. He was trying to provoke him, but Collin was ignoring it. He had other concerns. He and Gloria were trapped up here with four little old ladies with no idea where the killer was lurking.

A pregnant pause filled the line. Then Harrison’s voice returned with a layer of concern. “How desperate is the situation? Can you handle this, or do you need me to hike up there?”

Collin appreciated that Harrison was taking it seriously. Hiking through rain and mud like this would surely lead to more problems than it would solve, but he appreciated the offer none the less. “We’ll be fine. Gloria’s got plenty of supplies here and commented earlier that she’s been expecting that bridge to go out in each storm that rolls through.” Collin had his gun. It took only one bullet to stop a killer. “We’ve got

four others up here. They're down from Vermont and refused to cancel their reservation."

A siren sounded in the background. "Give me their names and descriptions. I'll run background checks to ensure you won't be met with any ugly surprises from them," Harrison said.

He didn't need to say he was also considering the guests could be the Grapevine Killer. It was less common, but serial killings were sometimes committed by a group. Collin's laugh burst forward at the thought. "I'm sure they'll surprise us regularly, but it won't be in the way you're referring to. None of them are under the age of 60, I don't think. Plus, I've met these ladies before. They're nuts, armed, and happily violent, but never aggressive. They're good people."

"Give me their information anyway. It won't hurt anything, and it's good for me to know who is stuck up there."

"Fair enough." Collin gave the basic description of the women, including their names. "Will you forward what you find out to me? I'm not worried about it, but I would be curious to learn more about their backgrounds. Geri, in particular, is very hush-hush about her history."

"We'll see what I turn up." Harrison refused to commit to sharing anything with Collin. "I'll see what I can do about getting you support from the police or park rangers to process the scene," Harrison continued. "They may be able to use old access or fire roads to get there faster than I can."

“I’ll wait to hear from you.” Collin said with a sigh of resignation before he disconnected the call. He sat next to Gloria by the fire. She watched him, her eyes filled with questions her mouth didn’t seem able to form. “Your bridge got taken out by a tree. The FBI can’t get here until the storm passes and the water level drops enough for them to rebuild something to cross that creek. Harrison is checking with the police and the park rangers to see if anyone else can get here sooner.”

Gloria moved closer to him, laying her head against his shoulder. “If the FBI can’t get here, it’s no easier for anyone else. There is fire road access to the boulder field where we saw the bobcat, but it’s on the opposite side, and that’s as close as they can get using anything but the main road. Besides, if the water levels are already up, the fire road isn’t likely to be passable.”

The scent of her hair wafted to his nose, and he fought the surge in his libido. Now wasn’t the time to make a move on her or panic her with the worst-case scenario. He needed to keep her calm and thinking. “We’ll see. It might be a day or two.”

She sighed and rested her arm across her stomach. Comfort. She needed comfort. Collin searched for words that would make her feel better. Coming up empty, he put his arm around her and pulled her close to him.

“At least this means I can put off seeing my aunt for a couple of days,” Gloria said.

“Do you want to call her or anything?” Collin asked.

Gloria closed her eyes. “I should, but I don’t want to. I figure she does whatever she wants on a whim with no regard for others, so there’s no reason for me to show her any more consideration than she would show me.”

Collin found it hard to believe Gloria could really disregard anyone that way.

Sure enough, it was only a few seconds before she pulled away from him and stood up to find the number her aunt left behind.

When she came back from making the call, she didn’t say a single word about the conversation she’d had, but she did comment about how she should have installed alarm systems on the cabins.

Collin pulled her back into his side, trying to infuse some relaxation into her tense body. “You couldn’t have known you’d need it. Especially out here. And a cabin with an alarm system? May as well turn this place into a resort and be finished with the entire façade of an outdoor experience.”

His teasing earned him a smile, the corners of her mouth lifting a few centimeters. “My dad said the same thing when I used to ask him about renovating this place and turning it into a B&B or a hostel or something more friendly than the rundown cabin rentals he had available. He couldn’t understand why I’d want to tear up counters that were a splinter waiting to happen and install polished oak.”

Collin hadn't seen it before, but he knew how nice the current conditions were. "I think it's beautiful here now. You've got a nice balance of natural elements while keeping it modern enough to feel functional and happy."

She lifted her head from his shoulder. "You really like it?"

"Well, I do work in the violent crime division of the FBI. So many of my cases send me into some difficult situations. It's a bit like when you spend weeks and weeks on the trail. Simple things, like hot showers, feel luxurious." He'd leave it at that. He wouldn't haunt her with details about some of the things he'd dealt with or places he'd stayed. "I made you tea," he said, realizing that he'd completely forgotten the mug and left it in the kitchen. He started to shift her weight so he could stand, but she stopped him.

"I don't want tea right now. I'd much prefer to just sit here and relax for a bit, if you don't mind."

His heartbeat sped up. "I don't mind that at all." He let her nestle into the crook of his arm.

She inhaled and let out a heavy breath. The crackle of the fire and Spike's heavy breathing remained the only sounds in the room.

"What will we do about being trapped here?" he asked. "Is there anything we need to worry about?"

"You mean beyond the killer stalking the area?" she asked in a teasing voice.



Collin was relieved to hear that she could joke about it at least a little. “Yeah, beyond that.”

“No, we just wait it out. I’m used to it and have everything we need. Even if we lose power, and there’s a good chance we will, I’m prepared for it.”

“I would have been more surprised if you weren’t. I just wasn’t sure if we needed to do anything.”

“Nope.” Gloria paused but held herself stiff enough that Collin could tell she had more to say. “Do you think the Grapevine Killer is out there just waiting for an opportunity like this?”

Collin was certain the killer wasn’t far. But she wasn’t invincible and would need shelter. “It might not be winter, but it’s cold enough for her to end up hypothermic if she’s wet and without shelter. She’ll need to hole up somewhere just like the rest of us.” With any luck, the killer’s shelter was far away from Great Hikes, and she would stay gone long enough for Collin to come up with a plan to nab her.

They sat on the couch, watching the fire. The warmth of the room and the slow letdown of adrenaline made Collin’s eyes heavy. He couldn’t sleep now. Not until Gloria had fallen asleep, and he’d checked the outside of the cabin. He wanted to be sure the other guests were safe, and everything was fully secured for the night.

Gloria shifted beside him, and he glanced down at her. Her eyes were closed, her breathing even. Standing carefully, he laid her on the couch, draping a blanket across her body.

His phone rang, and he hurried to grab it before the noise could wake Gloria. It was Harrison. “You were mostly right about the women. Three of them come back clean. Betty and Linda both have concealed carry permits and own several firearms. Joan looks like a boring, retired grandmother. Between the three of them, there are a couple arrests from participating in protests back in the ‘70s, but that’s about it.”

“What about Geri?” Collin thought it was odd Harrison had left her out so far.

“That’s where it gets interesting. Everything related to her is classified. I can pull her driver’s license, but that’s it. When I tried to look into other records, I got a notification that I’m not authorized to access them. I called the Sheriff up in Vermont to confirm if she’d been up there at the start of the week. Apparently, he was just sworn in after a special election and is still getting a feel for things. He knew who she was, and said he’d ask around to confirm there’s no way she was down here during the time of the murders, but that’s about all I can do for now.”

Collin chuckled to himself before responding, “Why does that not surprise me? I doubt she’s our killer. Thanks for sharing the information, though.” Could they be turning a corner in the ability to work together? Collin doubted it, but he wouldn’t slam the door in Harrison’s face, either.

As soon as they hung up, Collin called over to Betty and the other ladies. He let them know about the washed-out bridge, updated them on Gloria, and reminded them to check that their

door was locked. They were to call him if they heard or saw anything strange. Hoping they heeded his advice and didn't try to use Geri's arsenal to take matters into their own hands, he ended the call and returned to the living room.

Gloria's eyes were open, but she hadn't moved from the spot where he had placed her on the couch.

"Why don't I take you to bed?" he asked, hearing the double entendre in his words, but refusing to let it elevate his lust. The investigator in him wanted to gauge her reaction, wanted to know how she would respond to his question. He'd been drawn to her from the beginning, and that connection urged him to test the water.

"Bed is good," she said, without giving away if she'd thought of his question as anything more than an innocent query. She came to her feet and tossed the throw over the back of the couch.

Collin walked her to the bed and peeled away the blankets. She looked at the bed and then to him. The sleep was gone from her eyes. Instead, they flashed with fiery provocation.

"Where will you sleep tonight?" she asked before taking a step back toward him.

An invitation? He wasn't imagining this, was he? "I was thinking here with you might be safer and more comfortable than on the couch, but only if your amenable to the idea." He raised an eyebrow, hoping he wasn't about to be punched in the face or kicked in the nuts.

She looked from him to the bed to the couch and back to him. “I need to forget about everything else for a while and just be.”

He nodded his understanding but waited for her to initiate contact.

She grabbed his shirt and pulled him to her, fusing her mouth to his. She let her body fall against the mattress, taking him with her. Her ravenous kisses destroyed every shred of his control, and he let himself tumble with her, bracing himself on his arms over her, absorbing the impact.

There was something about Gloria, her confidence and independence, her wild spirit and fiery attitude. It all just drew him irresistibly close to her and made him want to orbit around her world. It may have helped that she lived in the woods along the trail where he felt most at home.

Outside her door lay a mess needing to be fixed, but the rain put it on pause. In his arms was a woman who wanted him. She wasn't shy about her desire and made her needs and boundaries clear.

He tilted his hips against hers, drawing a moan from her lips. She held him close, their kisses taking on a mindless intensity. He reached his thumbs under the waistband of her pants and underwear before pulling his lips back from hers to make eye contact. “Is this okay?”

“Faster is better.” She pulled him back down for another kiss before pushing him up and off of her. “You take off yours, and I'll take off mine. It'll be faster that way.”

Yeah, this was a woman who knew exactly what she wanted and wouldn't be shy about getting it.

Once they'd both stripped and returned to the bed, her fingers forked into his hair and held his mouth to her chest. She let out a low moan, and he teased one nipple with his mouth and the other with his fingers. She wrapped her legs around his waist, but he stopped her when he noticed the wince as she flexed her knee.

“How about we let your leg relax while I explore?” The thought of her laid out for his pleasure was almost enough for him to fire off right then. Lust enveloped his entire being. He had to think boring thoughts to avoid making a mess on her hip like an uncontrolled teenager, but it would be worth it.

He loved the flash of intensity that came with a one-night stand, but this felt different. He couldn't imagine walking away from Gloria when the sun came up. She was complex, smart, beautiful, and so easy to be around. It never felt like work with her, and he felt himself dropping masks and façades he usually wore without even thinking about them.

They had all night, so he wasn't going to rush this, but there were a few details to get out of the way now, so he wouldn't have to think about them later.

“I don't suppose you keep condoms in your nightstand drawer?” he asked. He always had some tucked in his bag, but that was all the way out in the living room, and the thought of leaving her in bed, naked, for long enough to go get them made him want to weep.

She grinned at him before pulling open the drawer. “In fact, I do.”

He felt his face harden at that. Why did she already have condoms? Was she sleeping with someone else, too? Was this a common thing for her?

She interrupted his thoughts, “Oh my gosh, are you jealous?”

“No. I mean, it’s good that you have them. I just... this is... it’s not like...” he huffed in frustration.

Gloria laughed. “I got them just before Doug and I broke up. The box isn’t even opened yet.” Then her face turned serious, and Collin shifted his weight to rest more fully on top of her. “This doesn’t feel like a one-night stand for me, and I’m kind of hoping the same is true for you.”

Collin breathed a sigh of relief. “Yeah, I’m looking forward to doing this more than just once. I was kind of thinking it might even become a thing between us.”

“A thing, huh?”

He nibbled on her neck to avoid eye contact as he explained. “I kind of like you and don’t have a great track record with relationships, but I was thinking it might be nice to try one with you.”

“I like that thought. Now put this on.” And she grabbed a foil packet from the box she had just opened and shoved it under his nose.

He covered himself and shifted his hips between hers. He wanted to make this amazing enough for her that she'd be willing to put up with his floundering, fucked-up attempt at building a relationship.

“Collin!” He felt Gloria’s fist pound his back and got the impression she’d lost patience with his exploration and teasing.

She had already clearly stated exactly what she wanted from him, but he wanted to ensure her body was also ready. Her swollen pussy engulfed his fingers the second they got near her center. That was the last bit of conscious thought he had to give to anything. As he guided himself into her, he gave up all rationality and enjoyed the sensations. He loved hearing her sharp inhale when he hit a sensitive spot inside her and bent to lick and nip at the perspiration gathering around her neck as her hips shifted left and right, allowing him to sink even further into her. His back felt cool compared to the heat of her body against his chest, so the warmth of her hands traveling across his skin left a trail of goosebumps in their wake.

He felt her fingers spread wide just before her nails dug into his ass and pulled him closer to her. He stopped there to spend a moment thoroughly enjoying everything he was feeling. Not just her body under his, but everything else, as well.

Then he heard her whimper and felt her wiggle beneath him. She was ready for him, and he wasn't about to deny either one of them. He pulled back until he was resting at her entrance and then waited. He might not be willing to deny them, but he did enjoy a bit of teasing.

When she opened her eyes enough to glare at him, he grinned just before sliding all the way back into and pulling right back out again to establish a steady rhythm.

As soon as he felt her hips begin to move in time with his, he used his tip to tease her again. The condom gave him an endurance advantage, and he wasn't willing to let it go to waste.

When they awoke the next morning with the rain beating down on the cabin roof, it felt as if they were the only people on the mountain. The women hadn't bothered them, likely holed up in their own cabins.

The steady sounds of the constant rainfall created a sense of peace and tranquility. He and Gloria stayed in her cabin, mostly in her bed, the heat roaring from her wood stove. He kept his gun within arm's reach, and her shotgun was leaning against the headboard. The killer wouldn't catch them unaware, but as the hours ticked by, the peacefulness of the spring storm made him relax into a feeling of safety.

For the entire day, they only got out of bed for food, showers, stoking the stove, and to meet their other basic needs. Neither of them mentioned the case or any of the unsettling events that had occurred. It was an unspoken rule they had set. Discussing it would taint the time they had together now. For the first time in his career, Collin let himself become thoroughly derailed from an investigation. He reasoned protecting Gloria was most important now, and she was safest in his arms.



Like all good things, though, it had to end. He knew she understood that as well. When the rains let up and the roads drained enough to become passable, he had to turn his attention back to the case. He would continue to protect her and even love her (though he tried not to think that word because it scared the shit out of him), but he couldn't afford a distraction or the drama that relationships seemed to shower down on him.

Gloria shifted onto her back, her hair brushing her across his chest, her fingertips sweeping across his side. She'd showered a few hours ago, and her hair smelled of lavender. It was a scent he was starting to associate with her. "What are you thinking about?" she asked.

His thoughts hadn't varied much over the past day. "Just you."

She rolled over, pressing against him. Her hair was everywhere, and her smile was bright. She propped herself up on her elbow. "Oh, really? You get that you don't have to try to woo me anymore, right? You've already got me naked and in bed."

He shook his head. Despite how enchanting he found her, she seemed to carry around threads of self-doubt. Collin would wager the ex-boyfriend had something to do with it. It was one more strike against him. "It wasn't a line. Of course, I was thinking about you. How could I possibly think about anything else when you're right here looking like that and naked?"

Her face pulled down into a frown.

“You don’t even realize how beautiful you are, do you?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“I appreciate the compliment, but I’m well aware of my weight and squishiness.”

Uh oh, she didn’t sound happy anymore, and her smile had completely disappeared.

“Hey,” he captured her chin between his thumb and forefinger to ensure he had her full attention. “Stop. I think you are beautiful because of the way you move and the way you think and the way you treat people. I think you’re beautiful because of how you make me feel. When I look at your body, I see an amazing woman who runs her own life and her own business. I see how strong you are, and I also see that you understand the value of sharing a meal with people and keeping priorities real.”

She didn’t look convinced, but she wasn’t frowning and avoiding eye contact anymore.

“Fine then. What were you thinking about me?” she goaded him.

He pretended to think hard, bringing his finger to his lips. “Just that I wasn’t sure if I’d had you in every way possible and was debating trying to pull up the Kama Sutra online so we could be sure to cover all the positions.” He smirked at her and reveled in her returning grin and chuckle. “Seriously, though, I was hoping I could convince you to join me in the shower.”

“A shower, huh?”

“Yep. You. Me. Hot water. Soap suds.” He wagged his eyebrows at her and rubbed her arm.

She slapped him playfully on the chest, threw back the covers and sprang out of bed. “Race you.”

She made it to the shower first, and he rewarded her by making her the subject of his absolute concentration. He washed every inch of her body and massaged shampoo through her scalp until she was a figurative puddle of goo. Then he sank to his knees and used his tongue to worship her center until her leg muscles gave out, and he had to help support her weight.

# CHAPTER 17

## GLORIA

**G**loria's skin was slick with sweat. The heat pouring from the wood stove and Collin's body had chased away the last of the cold from her soul.

Hadn't that been the point of their time together? They'd both needed to forget about the killer and get lost in the moment. Being given the gift of time to recharge and refresh their perspective wasn't meant to be wasted. She had been curious to see if she had it in her to be passionate and seductive. Collin was leaving, so sleeping with him hadn't felt like a big risk. If it had turned into a disaster, she'd have been able to move on from it quickly, but it hadn't been a disaster. The two of them set off fireworks when they connected. The sex had been the best of her life, but it was even more than that.

More than twenty-four hours of making love, eating in bed, and cuddling ended shortly after dawn with a very abrupt knock on the door.

Collin had peeled himself away from her, his posture changing abruptly. He didn't kiss her or sweep his lips across her collarbone before he stood to answer the door. Instead, he pulled on his pants, grabbed his gun, and shot her a look that made it very clear he expected her to stay right where she was. It was a shift she might not have noticed just a day before, but after spending so much time at the center of his attention, she'd gotten to know him well. He had just shifted from being

her amazing lover to being Special Agent Collin Warner of the FBI. She just wasn't sure if the FBI agent hell bent on finding his cousin's killer still had room for her.

She'd bet her role had changed as well. She could imagine he wasn't thinking of her naked anymore but had returned to focusing on how to protect her and maybe even shelter her. Of course, she sure as fuck wouldn't let him forget that she'd been taking care of herself just fine for a very long time, but she was also a bit sad to lose the comfort of his focused company.

As he stepped toward the bedroom door, she hopped out of bed, pulled on her own pants and shirt, and grabbed her shotgun.

He turned to glare at her, but she just brushed past him and tossed his pillow and a spare blanket onto the couch to cover where he'd really been spending his time.

He rolled his eyes but continued to the door.

As soon as it opened, Gloria could hear Harrison's voice, and felt a blast of chilly wet air sweep into the cabin. The time she'd spent with Collin hadn't even come close to the amount of time she'd been trapped inside through snowstorms and being stuck on the property through spring storms, which was completely normal to her, but somehow this felt different. Their day together felt more like an entire lifetime that was going partially unlived. He'd made her feel free and uninhibited in a way that she'd only previously experienced when out hiking and backpacking along the trail.

“Gloria, Harrison needs the keys to the cabin,” Collin called to her. For all the warmth in his voice, he could have been placing a takeout order.

“Good morning, Special Agent Harrison,” she said and flashed him a quick smile.

“There’s nothing good about it. The roads are a mess with down trees and fallen branches. And your drive is more like a ride through a rutted canyon than driving on anything that resembles a road. I don’t suppose you’ve ever thought about getting it paved?” he grumbled back at her.

She knew the drive would be rough. It’d take about a week to get everything cleaned up. She was honestly surprised they’d managed to rig a temporary bridge as fast as they had. Typically, clearing all the roads would be done just in time for the next storm to blow through, but that was how spring went. As for paving, that was a hell no. It made the runoff a million times worse and would further pollute the local waterways with silt as the ground alongside the asphalt eroded. She had, however, been meaning to get a new layer of gravel added to prevent erosion. She should have done it last month, but things always came up and got in the way.

“I’m sorry to hear you aren’t enjoying our beautiful natural surroundings, Agent Harrison. Though I am glad to see you made it here all in one piece.” Gloria had no doubt her tone conveyed exactly what she really thought about his whining.

Gloria grabbed the keys off the hook where she kept them and handed them to Harrison. She couldn’t decide how she felt

about Collin's shift in attitude, but she sure as hell wasn't going to let Harrison know anything was going on.

Part of her wanted to shove Collin out the door with Harrison to give her time alone to process everything that was happening, and part of her wanted to slam the door in Harrison's face and drag Collin back into bed.

Ultimately, she figured it didn't matter nearly as much as catching the killer. She shouldn't be surprised his talk about making it a thing between them just meant sleeping together for as long as it was convenient. She'd survived a broken heart before, so she knew she could do it again.

Gloria's mental swirling came to a screeching halt as she realized what she'd just thought. Had she given Collin enough of her heart for him to break it?

He had made her feel different than any man before. He made her feel more like herself instead of feeling like she had to wear a mask to force her puzzle pieces to align with his. Was that love? Did it even matter?

It was done. They were back to working on the case, and she knew she should simply enjoy the sexy memories and move on.

Just then, Collin pulled her from her thoughts by touching her arm. She shook her head to find both men staring at her with sympathy, like the whole killer on the loose and stopping by her property might be getting to her. Then again, they might be right. "I'm sorry. What did you ask me?"



“I was just saying you should point out who is staying in which cabins, so Harrison doesn’t accidentally surprise Geri and her friends.” Collin twisted his face in a way that made her think he was picturing what would happen if an FBI agent burst in on the crazy old women.

As entertaining as it might be, they didn’t need any more bodies hitting the floor. “You should maybe warn him about them.” She commented to Collin, who chuckled.

He turned back to Harrison. “She’s right. Those women should come with a warning stamped across their foreheads. I’ve been in touch with them a few times since the storm picked up, and they keep promising to stay put. That said, the last time we spoke, Betty mentioned Geri getting bored. That’s about as much of a warning as they’ll give us before taking to the woods with a full arsenal of weapons and trying to hunt down the killer themselves. It was only about two hours ago, so if they aren’t in their cabin, they probably haven’t gotten far. Just be sure to be loud and wear lots of FBI identification. They tend to travel well-armed.”

“Aren’t they a group of little old ladies?” Harrison asked.

“Yep.”

Having met them herself, Gloria understood Collin’s inability to adequately describe them to Harrison.

“I’ll talk to them and see if I can knock some sense into them and convince them to go home,” Mike Harrison said.

“I’ll let them know to expect the authorities. I don’t know that they’ll take me seriously, but perhaps you’ll have better luck.” Collin said, his voice deep and hard. He grabbed his jacket, pulled it on, and walked out the cabin door without a backward glance.

Gloria struggled to hide her flinch. She wasn’t sure what she expected from him, but a polite goodbye wouldn’t have gone awry. Instead, he’d gone a step beyond business as usual. He’d shown no emotion, let alone any warmth. Gloria wasn’t sure what to make of it.

She wasn’t one to get hung up on a man who didn’t return her interest. She wasn’t even sure how deep her interest in him ran, but she was feeling... things, and it would be nice to know he had feelings, too.

For now, she opened the shoebox she kept buried deep in her soul and stuffed everything Collin related inside before locking it shut so she could focus on the more important things. With her sister still unheard from, Gloria needed to work faster to ensure her safety. She really wanted to find Lily herself, but she would settle for removing the killer from the equation.

# CHAPTER 18

## COLLIN

After stopping by to say good morning and warn Betty and her friends to expect a visit from Agent Harrison, and remind them not to shoot him, he trudged through the mud from one cabin to the next. He cleared branches from the trails when he could, but some of them were too big for him to move himself.

The Grapevine Killer was toying with Gloria and the investigators. She was leaving clues and lurking and taunting them to find her. She didn't want to be caught, but it was her game to prove that she was smarter. She started north of Great Hikes before moving south of the hostel and then killing right here on the property. It was like circling a bull's eye and getting closer and closer to the center.

A gust of air tore through Collin's jacket. He had the oddest sensation of being watched. He turned slowly, scanning the area, and peering through the trees. The wind had kicked up, sending a cold, wet chill through the air. He shook off the sensation, refusing to allow the killer's head games to affect him.

Collin was sure the Grapevine Killer was watching them and taking great pleasure in staying one step ahead.

Collin stopped at the steps of the empty cabin, waiting for Harrison to look up from the notebook in which he was writing. He was completely unprepared for Harrison's question.

“Something going on with you and Gloria?” Harrison stopping his note-taking to inspect Collin’s reaction to the question.

Talking about him and Gloria and how they’d spent their time together wasn’t an option. His sex life was none of Mike Harrison’s business.

Would Gloria forget the whole interaction had happened and move on? It would be the best plan. He considered it himself, but when he thought about her doing the same, it upset him. It had to be over, but he didn’t want it to mean nothing. “We’re just working the case together.”

Harrison sniffed. “Do not compromise my investigation.” He pointed his pen toward Collin.

“I’m not compromising anything. I’ve been investigating and tossing leads your way whenever I get them.”

Harrison narrowed his eyes. “Uncle Sam thanks you. But I’ve told you before, you’re too close to this case. You’re not thinking objectively.”

Harrison was right about him not thinking objectively. Collin was a rational, logical man, but in this case, sleeping with Gloria had crossed a line. His relationship with her had moved to a different level.

“I will find this guy,” Collin said, keeping his tone neutral, shoving thoughts of Gloria away.

Harrison patted Collin’s shoulder. “I do admire your persistence, but only to a point.”

“Nothing has changed, Harrison. I’m not planning on backing away from this. I will find Beth’s killer.”

Harrison shook his head, as if Collin was a lost cause.

After showing Harrison what they’d found in the cabin, Collin returned to Gloria’s and knocked once before entering. Gloria was curled into the corner of the couch with a book on her lap. It was open, but she was staring off into space rather than focusing on the pages in front of her.

She looked over when he came in and closed the book. “Did you find out anything from Harrison?” Her eyes looked hopeful. Her plump, red lips were swollen from where she’d been chewing on the bottom one, as she thought. His attention moved from her lips to her chest, rising and falling. The urge to gather her in his arms, nuzzle into her neck, and rub his hands all over her body was overwhelming.

He strode to the recliner and sat facing her. He wouldn’t fuck this up by confusing her about the relationship. Not when it could risk their case. “Harrison’s still trying to keep me out.”

Gloria raised an eyebrow at him. “He does understand we told him about the footprints, right? We’ve been looping him in on everything we’ve been learning. Is he such a dick he won’t share his own information and make it a two-way street?”

Though it irritated him, Collin did understand Harrison’s perspective. Working for the FBI at this level made it impossible to avoid politics. Missteps, even perceived ones, would land Harrison and his team in hot water. Giving away

information to civilians counted as a misstep, even when one of those civilians was an agent. Since he wasn't officially on the case, he didn't hold any rank, nor was he owed any more information than what would normally be shared with Gloria. "He doesn't have a choice."

Gloria sighed. "So, what's our plan?"

He didn't have one. That was the real problem with how they'd spent their time together. He'd been so busy enjoying being with her that he hadn't been thinking about the case. He could have laid everything out with plans to set a trap to catch the killer. Instead, well, he had nothing but a sensation that the Grapevine Killer was close. "She's watching us. I can feel it. She's likely hiding out, but it must be nearby. Any ideas where she might take shelter?"

The color drained from her face. "Do you think she's staying at Seeley-Woodworth Shelter? It's only a couple miles up the trail. There are a few stealth camping spots even closer, too."

It was possible. "She's not done here. She's not moving on yet." Collin could feel it in his gut. One interrupted murder wasn't enough to sate her. Not really.

Gloria looked away and closed her eyes. She took several deep breaths and turned her gaze back to him. Her chin was tilted up and she'd pulled her shoulders back. "Spring storms wash out a lot of the backcountry trails that aren't well maintained. It will limit how she could move and find shelter.

It limits the list of places she could be and makes it more likely she'd stay closer to the AT.”

“Can you point out the most likely possibilities on a map?”

She paused for a while. “Some of the places are difficult to locate on a map. Even Guthook or FarOut or whatever they're calling the AT app these days struggles to give clear indications of where some of the stealth sites are. They're right up against the trail, but if you don't know where to look, they're easy to miss.”

Collin's mind jumped from the trail to Great Hikes Hostel and to Gloria. She was comfortable in the woods and skilled at hiking through the mountains, but the Grapevine Killer had proven to also be stealthy, strong, and quick. She wouldn't stick to places other hikers publicly shared directions to. She'd be more likely to hide out at one of the places that wouldn't be well known, and definitely not somewhere mentioned on a popular app. Gloria was their best hope for finding her, but the thought of her in danger made his stomach revolt. “I think you should stay in town until we find her.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I'm sorry. What did you say? I must have heard you wrong, because I *thought* I just heard you tell me to tuck my dainty vulnerable ass into the safety of town, but that can't be right.”

“It would be safer if you took a step back.” He felt the emotionless void open as he spoke. Collin couldn't bring himself to say that she was becoming a distraction. He didn't want to admit that if he was forced to choose between keeping



her safe and catching the killer, he was afraid he might choose her safety. It was better to be cold and callous to push her away, so he could focus.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest and locked her jaw. “You just asked me to tell you about places where she could be hiding and now you want me to leave? I can keep myself safe here just fine, thank you. I’ve been handling that for a few years now.” Her voice was thick with sarcasm. “Is your plan to go alone into the forest to look for her by yourself?”

“I can do this alone.” He couldn’t shake the mental image of the Grapevine Killer doing to Gloria what he’d done to the other women. He wouldn’t let that happen.

She glowered at him. “Alone, huh? You want to go alone? Just you, a shitty-ass map and your gun to search for a killer in the national forest along a 2000-mile-long trail? My sister is out there somewhere. She could need me, and I won’t sit by while you, Lily, or some other hiker ends up dead, too.”

What did she want him to say? That he had come to care about her, and the idea of her involved in the case terrified him to a distracting point? That he wanted to put distance between her and the killer, regardless of how uncomfortable it made her? They hadn’t addressed how their relationship had changed, and Collin didn’t think they needed to say more on the matter except that it had.

A knock sounded on the door saving him from trying to guess how best to respond to Gloria. Collin stood, but Gloria

held up her hand to stop him. “I’ll answer my own door, thank-you-very-much.” He had a feeling she was talking about a lot more than just answering the door.

He heard Harrison’s voice. “We’ve got another victim close by. It’s just off the trail.”

Shit, could it be Lily? Had the killer taken Gloria’s only remaining family member? Collin leapt to his feet and rushed to the door.

# CHAPTER 19

## GLORIA

**T**he room tilted, and Gloria swayed on her feet. “Is it Lily?” Why else would Harrison be willing to tell her this, unless he thought the victim was related to her? Until this point, he’d been refusing to share anything with them.

Collin’s arm went around her waist, and she sagged against him.

Harrison clasped his hands behind his back. “No identity yet. Been dead about twenty-four hours and maybe a bit longer. The M.E. is struggling to pinpoint the exact time of death because of the rain and the condition of the body.

“What color hair?”

“Brown,” Harrison said as he rubbed his hand across his forehead and studied his shoes. “The body was gutted like the others.” He glanced up at them before returning his eyes to the ground. “The animals had more time before we found the body, so there’s less left than usual.”

Blood roared in her ears, and her heart hammered so loudly she could barely hear Harrison speaking, though his lips were moving. Lily had brown hair. “Can you get a picture?”

“I’m going out there now. I got one of the forest rangers to keep an eye on it. He found it on his way out to check out the shelter near here. I can bring a picture back to you, but I didn’t want you to hear it from anyone else.” Harrison sounded softer

than usual. He'd finally dropped the hostility and brusqueness from his voice.

Gloria closed her eyes for a moment, absorbing the impact of the news. It could be Lily who was dead beside the trail. She had to see it for herself, and there was no way she was waiting for Harrison to come back with a picture. "I'm coming with you."

Shoving away the horrific thoughts of Lily as the latest victim, she grabbed her backpack and strode around the cabin to grab what she needed to restock it after their last ill-fated hike.

"Gloria." Collin stepped into her path, but she didn't answer him.

He would try to talk her out of going or try to convince her it wasn't her sister who was lying dead out in the woods in the rain.

Her mind already fired denials at the idea of Lily being a victim. It couldn't be her. She had to be safe. She was the only family Gloria had left.

"Gloria." This time, Collin reached out to place his hand on her forearm. "You don't know it's her. It probably isn't. Lily may not even be this far north yet, or she could be up near Harpers Ferry."

Gloria froze and looked him square in the eye as she bit out her response, "So you'd just accept that and wait around for

news. If it was your cousin, would you be fine to stay here and let others handle it?" She watched his face flinch. "Exactly."

"Fine, but I'm going with you."

She stopped to look at him again.

"You're right." Collin admitted. "You need to see for yourself, but I'm going too. There's no reason for you to do it alone."

She raised an eyebrow as she thought back to their previous conversation.

Collin eyes rolled as he added, "And yes, I do hear the hypocrisy in that statement. For now, let's just go."

Gloria's posture relaxed. "Thanks," she said before turning back to finish grabbing the supplies she needed.

As she locked the cabin behind her, Gloria was surprised to find Harrison leading them toward his vehicle instead. He explained that the body was closer to an access road off the Blue Ridge Parkway. They'd still have to hike out to it, but it wouldn't be as long.

They headed south down the parkway. Last time she'd heard from Lily, she'd been heading for Daleville. Maybe she'd already jumped north to Shenandoah.

Gloria had to believe that Lily was still alive. She was reckless, but not stupid. She'd have heard about the killer and taken precautions. Lily would have gotten off the trail or at least avoided that stretch, right? Being familiar with the area, she sure as hell wouldn't have stayed on-trail through the

massive spring storm they'd just been hit with. Lily had a strong sense about nature and always seemed to know when it was most dangerous.

As much as she tried to convince herself that Lily knew better, a voice in her head still taunted her. If she'd been worried for her safety, would she have tried to hike back to the hostel? Is that when the killer could have gotten her?

Gloria squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to let tears spill down her cheeks. Keeping it together and staying strong would get her through – just like it always did.

Collin reached across and rested his hand on her thigh. “It’ll be okay. We’ll figure it out together. You aren’t alone in this.”

She could scarcely draw a full breath through the emotions pressing on her chest. Anxiety and fear tore through her. She pulled strength through her connection to Collin. He was right. She wasn’t completely alone in this. He might be leaving once the case was done, but he wasn’t going anywhere yet.

Harrison turned into the parking area. The trailhead was locked down, and they had to show ID to be allowed onto the trail. Harrison turned them toward the north and let them know it was about a mile up the trail. A cold shiver ran down Gloria’s spine.

Was the Grapevine Killer watching them? Had she been taking another life just as she and Collin had taken a moment to enjoy theirs? The thought that she’d been so close caused guilt to flash through her.

They all hopped out and pulled their backpacks from the back of Harrison's vehicle. Gloria tossed hers onto her shoulders. The hiker couldn't be Lily. She repeated that over and over like a mantra that would save her sanity.

"Gloria," Collin snapped her attention back to the world around them. "Are you sure you want to do this?" He gently wrapped his hand around her upper arm and studied her face.

A big part of her wanted to step forward into his embrace, tuck her face into his chest, and pretend reality didn't exist, but that's not how it worked.

"I need to see the body, and my knowledge of the area can help. I can do this."

Collin didn't argue with her.

Forty minutes later, she was waiting with Collin behind yellow tape surrounding the scene. The tape was wrapped around tree trunks to mark the area. A small green awning had been put up over where she knew the body was.

A helicopter flew overhead, searching the area for the killer, but she wouldn't be found. She was either long gone or blending into the terrain, undetectable from the air.

As she watched the agents process the scene, her muscles twitched. She was anxious to look at the victim, desperate to know if it was her sister. She shifted back and forth on her feet, trying to burn off the nervous energy that hummed through her blood.



“A couple more minutes,” Collin said, his voice low and soothing.

Her stomach was churning, her mouth dry and the thumping in her head deafening. “Why are they making us wait?” She couldn’t help asking.

“They don’t want us to compromise the scene. They have to make sure they’ve secured the evidence they need before we go over there.”

Gloria had half a mind to rip through the yellow tape like the hulk and storm over to the body. This was making her nuts.

Finally, a man lifted the tape near where she was standing so she could duck under it. Her nerves tightened. “Please stay on the path, ma’am,” was all he said.

Gloria walked toward the green cover, aware of Collin behind her. He was staying close, his hand on her shoulder, lending his support. Having Collin helped take the edge off her terror. If the worst came, she had somewhere to turn.

As she got closer to the awning, she saw a brown tarp covering the body. No mistaking the form. She stopped abruptly and turned to shove her face into Collin’s chest for just a second. She just needed one minute to gather herself. His arms went around her, and he pulled her closer and dropped his mouth down beside her ear.

“You don’t have to do this. You can wait until they move the body to the morgue or look at pictures,” he whispered to her.

She knew that. There was no way around how awful seeing this would be. Maybe the most horrifying thing she'd see in her entire life. She'd seen what the killer did to her victims.

One thought shored up her strength and prevented her from having a complete breakdown. If it was Lily, she didn't want her to be a nameless, faceless hiker on the trail. She wanted to take Lily home with her. She'd scatter her ashes along the trail, so she'd always enjoy the place she loved. The thought was so heartbreaking, she had to fight not to collapse under it.

Deep breath in and out. She could do this.

Gloria gripped the front of Collin's jacket in her hands, needing the security of him. "I need to know, now."

"Okay." His breath was hot against her ear and heavy with understanding. Had Collin identified his cousin's body? What had that been like for him?

She turned, and his hands remained on her waist. He provided support, his strength the only thing keeping her standing.

Ten more steps.

She took each one with a growing sense of dread. Bile coiled deep in her stomach and threatened to boil up. A rush of fear sat like a knot in her throat. Everyone on the scene had gone quiet and was watching her.

Then she was standing over the tarp, swallowing hard to keep from tossing her cookies. How had her life shifted so much in just a few hours, a few days, a few weeks? It hadn't

been long since she'd been looking at full summer bookings and preparing for a normal hiking season. Just this morning, she'd woken up naked and in Collin's arms. Now, she was standing over a dead body terrified it'd turn out to be her sister.

"You ready, ma'am?" a ranger asked as he gripped a corner of the tarp.

She leaned back into Collin and nodded dumbly.

Disjointed shreds of the human carcass remained. The sight was nauseating. Her muscles tightened. The victim's eyes were covered in leaves and bound with vines. Was it Lily? High, strong cheekbones. The cheekbones were wrong. Not Lily's nose. The mouth was also covered by leaves, but Gloria could tell the chin wasn't Lily's. Relief poured over her, and she let her body collapse against Collin.

"Stop. Stop. It's not her." She couldn't look anymore, didn't want to see the injuries inflicted. Relief mixed with guilt. Another person had been killed. Someone else's family member was dead. Someone else's daughter. Someone else's wife. They might not even know she was missing yet. They might be waiting at home for her to return. But the next time they saw her, it would be at the morgue.

The sadness was so pervasive, it cut her to the quick.

"It's not Lily?" Collin asked, taking her face in his hands and forcing her to look up at him.

She shook her head. "No. It's not her." A tear slipped from her eye, outpouring the chaos of emotions churning inside her.

The relief on Collin's face was plain, and it caught her off guard. She'd expected the same stoicism he'd given her all morning. "Let's get you out of here."

He took her hand as they walked; him leading the way. Why had he allowed the intimacy of their clasped hands? Was he working on autopilot, dragging her as quickly as possible to the truck? She didn't want to linger at the scene. The entire situation was eerie and unsettling.

"Was this what it was like for you?" Gloria asked.

She knew he'd caught her meaning immediately by the stiffening of his shoulders. "It was worse because it *was* her."

"That must have been terrible for you. I'm sorry," Gloria said.

"You don't have to be sorry. I want the Grapevine Killer caught. I don't want anyone else to go through this. Everything she does is unnecessary. It's some sick ritual she loves and craves," Collin said, darkness entering his voice. "She won't stop until someone makes her."

They made it just outside the yellow tape.

"Warner!"

Collin drew to a stop and pivoted, releasing her hand but staying up against her side. "Special Agent Harrison." His voice held the same coolness as Harrison's.

A muscle in Harrison's jaw jumped. "Could she ID the body? Look like anyone you know?"

Gloria shook her head. “It wasn’t my sister, and I didn’t recognize the victim.”

Harrison swore under his breath. “Are you sure about that?”

She nodded that she was. “I’m sorry. I’m grateful you let me come see for myself.”

Harrison rubbed a hand across his jawline. “We’ve got to find this guy before he strikes again. I have people posted everywhere along the trail. How is he getting by us?”

He didn’t wait for a response but walked in the opposite direction of where they were standing.

Collin’s arm went around her shoulders and steered them toward the trailhead. Sharp pleasure from being tucked against his body charged through her.

“What will you do?” Gloria asked, trying to ignore the pulse of heat where his arm lay across her shoulders. “Why does he still believe the killer is a man?”

“Mike Harrison is smart. He’s excellent at reading and research. He’s good at following the rules to solve the puzzle the right way. In most cases, it makes him an excellent investigator. This killer isn’t following our rule book, though. I have no idea what it would take to convince Mike to think beyond the statistics, profiles, and rules the FBI has given him. Whatever it would be, it would likely need to come from someone other than me. For now, I’ll put together what evidence and clues I can until I find something concrete.”

Collin kissed her temple. “I will find her. If I have to chase her up and down the trail for the next decade, I won’t stop.”

# CHAPTER 20

## GLORIA

Collin took a step back from her and looked away. “There’s a command center at the ranger station a short drive from here. I want to stop in and talk to the rangers who found the victim.”

Collin kissed her temple again. It was such a casual gesture, but it had a huge impact on her. Did the kiss imply an intimacy? Was he attempting to recapture the closeness they had lost when the FBI showed up that morning?

“Gloria?”

Oh, the command center. The rangers. She was familiar with the station, having worked a number of shifts there as a volunteer during the busiest times in the season. “Harrison told us to back off. What makes you think the rangers will talk to us?” she asked.

Collin smiled at her. “I doubt they would talk to me, but I bet they’d talk to their old buddy, the trail volunteer who’s helped them out a few times in the past.”

How had he known about that? She supposed she had to give him points for doing his homework about her. “Which rangers found the body?” Gloria asked, thinking of Todd.

“I don’t know yet,” Collin said.

Putting the rangers in a difficult position, a position where they had to choose between friendship and duty, didn’t seem fair, but then it wasn’t fair to her either. “If they were told not



to discuss the case, I can't ask them to disobey a direct order. I won't be the cause of them losing their jobs."

Collin stopped on the path and faced her, taking her hands in his. His dark eyes penetrated hers as if he could see straight to her soul, and his thumbs rubbed her palms in slow, soothing circles. "I wouldn't ask this of you, of them, if it wasn't a matter of life and death."

Gloria swallowed hard as the image of the latest victim sprang to mind. She saw the victim as she might have been in real life. With a family, and friends, and a job. "Fine. What is it you need to know?" She pulled her hand away, confused by the message he was sending.

"I need information to catch the killer before she strikes again. I need the details of what they saw before they found the body. Was the area disturbed in any way? Did they have a clue a body was waiting for them?"

"Okay." Gloria needed to blot out the reality of seeing that last victim to do anything productive.

They walked the rest of the way to Harrison's car in silence and climbed in. Harrison might be an ass, but at least he was willing to catch a ride with someone else so Gloria could get away from that scene. After throwing their packs in the backseat, she and Collin fastened their safety belts, and he pulled out of the spot.

The ranger station, a faded green trailer with wooden stairs leading inside, was a ten-minute drive away. A small, crooked sign on the front of the building labeled it as number 403.

Gloria knew the combination to the door. She doubted it ever changed. They didn't keep anything of value inside. One personal car she recognized as Todd's and one ranger vehicle was parked on the stony lot that served as a parking area. They took the creaking wooden stairs to the door and Collin pulled it open.

Todd and another ranger she didn't know as well, Mark, looked up from their desks and a modicum of relief washed over Gloria. They weren't sticklers for the rules, and both were decent guys.

They had been working hard, and the fatigue was showing plainly on their faces. The ranger station was filled with more boxes and papers than normal.

"Hey, Mark. Hi, Todd," she said.

The men stood, and Todd crossed the room to hug Gloria. His goatee tickled her cheek. "Long time since we've seen you here. Friendly visit, or is this business?"

"Little of both, I suppose," she answered. "Todd, you remember Collin. Collin, this is Mark. Collin and I are working on the Grapevine Killer case."

Todd and Mark exchanged glances. Todd spoke first. "We're not supposed to talk about the case without permission from the FBI agent-in-charge, Mike Harrison."

Gloria wouldn't push them to lose their jobs, but she also wasn't one to give up and walk away quickly. "How about we talk? If you feel the need to add anything, cool. We just want

this lunatic found. If you feel there are bits, you can add or responses you have to our theories that might help with that, it'd be great and could be critical. But I won't ask you to do or say anything you aren't comfortable with."

Todd grinned and looked at Mark over his shoulder. Mark shrugged.

"I mean," Todd started. "If you two just want to hang out here and talk, we're both fine with that."

Gloria hoped once they started talking, the rangers' reactions and responses would help them fill in some gaps and align some pieces they had floating around.

She turned to Collin and got them started by simply pointing out, "The killer has only been striking victims along the Appalachian Trail."

Collin corrected her. "Except for the victim found on your property."

"Yeah, but the trail runs right past it," Gloria pointed out.

"She's jumping around, though. The first victim was north of your place; the second one was south of Great Hikes; the third was on your property; and now this one is just south again." Collin walked to the edge of an unmanned desk and propped his hip on it looking relaxed and friendly. Gloria had no doubt it was intentional.

"The killer considered the trail to be hers, and she doesn't like anyone on it who doesn't follow her rules." Collin rubbed his jaw. "Maybe her victims don't stay to the trail or maybe

they disrupt the peace and quiet of nature. She feels as though she needs to rid the trail of people who break the rules. Why is she circling your property, though?”

Gloria’s chest felt heavy. Collin hadn’t mentioned that theory to her before, nor could she imagine anyone thinking they owned a piece of nature. It belonged to no one.

Collin continued as the men listened and nodded their agreement. “She dominates this section of the trail. If someone gets in her way, if they do anything to disturb what she considers her perfect paradise, she kills them.”

“And she hides their eyes, ears, and mouth in a *hear no evil; speak no evil; see no evil* kind of way.” The words popped out of her mouth before she could fully think them.

Collin nodded. “That’s pretty much what I was thinking.”

Todd shifted in his chair and looked at the ground. “I found that poor hiker.” He rubbed his forehead, as if trying to summon the words, and closed his eyes for a brief moment.

Gloria didn’t hold back. She slipped her arm around his shoulder and hugged him to show her support.

“Toward the end of the storm, I thought I saw some smoke from a campfire. I was worried a hiker was out on the trail and might need help. The shelter felt like the most obvious place to check, so I called Mark to tell him where I was going, gave him my GPS coordinates, and started hiking.

“The body had been smeared with peanut butter and tied down with trash under and around her.” Todd closed his eyes

and a tear slipped down his cheek. “I didn’t expect to find what I did. I figured there’d be a fire in the pit by the shelter and a cold, wet hiker who might need some extra food.” He shook his head in dismay. Park rangers weren’t accustomed to dealing with death. There were occasional instances of someone falling to their death or dying in their tent of a heart attack, but it was never a homicide. It was never brutal murder like this. This was different.

“I should have hiked the trail in the storm to check that no one was stuck or needed help. I shouldn’t have waited until daybreak to hike out to the shelter.”

“Stop.” Collin’s deep voice cut through the room with his full authority. “That’s wrong. You should not have been out hiking in that storm. I know damn good and well you have been checking this trail and clearing it of hikers for the past week. The Grapevine Killer is the only one responsible for the death of that person. No one else played a role. No one could have, or should have, stopped it. No one has a magic eight ball to divine the future and predict what was going to happen.”

“He’s right, you know,” Gloria said more gently.

“I know. I do. I just don’t always feel it.” Todd pulled himself back together and looked back up at them.

“Was there a car in any of the nearby parking areas?” Collin asked to shift the subject.

Todd shook his head. “Nope. We’ve checked them all.”

“Any reason a hiker would continue hiking the trail through this stretch despite all the signs and warnings to hop up to Waynesboro?”

Todd thought aloud, “People who leave society to spend six months walking from Georgia to Maine aren’t known for listening to authority figures or follow posted rules.”

Collin asked a few more questions, and when he seemed satisfied he’d gotten the information he’d wanted, the conversation turned to other, far less stressful topics. Gloria didn’t want to abuse their willingness to cooperate. After a casual exchange about their lives and families, she and Collin said their goodbyes and left the trailer.

“What’s the plan now?” Gloria asked.

“I need to get inside the killer’s mind.”

Gloria was not on board with that plan. She wanted to stay as far away from the mind of a psycho as possible. “You’re joking, right?”

“I want to walk where the victim walked and follow the killer’s tracks. It can help me understand her thinking, which will make it easier to find her or guess her next move. Any chance you could help me with the tracking?”

Gloria huffed her disapproval. “Could I? Yes. Will I?” She paused before giving in. “Fine, but only because I really want to catch the asshole.”

They decided to leave their truck parked at the ranger station and hike from there. Gloria followed Collin to the

trailhead and then up the side trail to the white blaze. The trail was wet, slick, and squishy with mud anywhere bare dirt had been exposed. They had to hop over, bushwhack around, or slog through several places. It was quiet as they began walking deeper into the forest. The sounds of the occasional passing vehicle disappeared amongst the birds and freshly blossoming leaves. Even though there wasn't much foliage yet, nature provided a million hiding places. Everywhere Gloria looked, she could picture thirteen places the killer could conceal themselves. There was low-lying brush, fallen logs, giant rocks. Hell, the peaks and dips of the land itself provided ample hiding spots.

“There's no way to spot any footprints in this mess,” Collin grumbled as he studied the ground around them.

Gloria hadn't even bothered looking. So many people loved to think of mud as being great for tracking, but when it was as wet and flooded as it was right now, it was hopeless.

She'd been scanning the surroundings, looking for movement or something out of place, or anything that felt important. Honestly, she wasn't sure what she was looking for. Only that she had a feeling she'd know it if she spotted it.

This was part of her section of the trail. She was out here hiking it regularly to check on people, clean up after them, and do her part to maintain the trail she loved. Her thoughts were interrupted by a new one.

“Did anyone check the logbook at Seeley Woodworth?” she stopped and turned to Collin. Every shelter along the

Appalachian Trail had a notebook and a few pens stored there. They were usually tucked into a ragged Ziploc bag and stored in a box in an attempt to protect them from the elements. Hikers used them to swap stories, keep in touch with each other, share trail news, and update their progress. They were often used when a family couldn't locate a loved one on the trail. Rangers would leave notes in the logbooks and other hikers would respond. Often times, authorities could use entries to track a hiker's progress and get a clear idea of where to start searching for them.

Surely someone would have thought to check the book already, right?

Collin's eyes lit with interest. "Do you think our hiker left a message in the log?"

Gloria shrugged. "They might have if they were coming up from that end of the trail. Most hikers do."

Collin picked up his pace.

Seeley-Woodworth shelter looked just like many of the other shelters along this stretch. It was plank-sided, had a good room, and was kept up and off the ground by concrete pylons.

The front was fully exposed and there were plenty of strings with sticks to hang belongings, so mice couldn't get to them.

Gloria ran right over and pulled out the logbook. They both hopped up to sit on the elevated floor of the shelter to open it and start reading.



In tiny childlike printing, every letter lowercase, in dark print as though the letters had been traced repeatedly, it read, “This is hallowed ground. Our timeless laws are to be revered and honored with endless duty. Be warned that you are to respect the trail. The Mother’s vengeance will come for those who violate Her peace. I am merely the custodian of Her world.”

The entry wasn’t signed or dated, but it was the last one in the book, so they knew it had to come after the previous entry, which was marked eight days earlier.

This wasn’t a casual note left by a hiker. These were the words of the killer.

“She left this,” Collin said. He adjusted his gloves and turned the pages of the book.

Collin turned the book on its side, and Gloria sucked in a breath. Maybe it was dirt. Maybe it was clay. Whatever it was, the red smear felt important.

After eluding the police, the park rangers, and the FBI, would the Grapevine Killer leave DNA evidence behind? If it was blood, it could belong to any of the hikers who passed through. Cuts and bruises were normal along the trail. Then again, if the substance found at her cabin was blood, could they be a match? Gloria wished Collin had more information about the investigation. She hated that he was being shut out.

“Has she left any other notes in other logbooks?”

Collin gave her a disbelieving look. “No, she’s never left anything behind. Believe me, if she’d ever marked a logbook before, I’d have been checking every single one of them immediately. Given the tradition of using the logbook at the Priest as a confessional for hikers, I expected to find an entry from Beth’s killer, but the book just had normal stuff about sleeping with food, listening to music without earbuds, and cutting through switchbacks.”

“It could be a hoax,” Gloria said. “There are some stupid kids who like to explore the area.”

“It’s all we have to go on. Let’s hope the last victim didn’t come out to play a prank and end up dead instead.”

# CHAPTER 21

## COLLIN

**M**ike Harrison was not happy when he answered the phone. But Collin couldn't have cared less what pleased Harrison. From day one, he'd pegged Collin as trouble because Collin wasn't old-school and hard-nosed. Now, it was time to leave their differences behind them.

Since Harrison had allowed Gloria to come to the most recent crime scene, Collin owed him. They had formed a reluctant working relationship. Collin needed the crime lab to examine the logbook, and he wouldn't have access on his own to that type of evidence analysis.

The moment Harrison arrived on the scene, as expected, he corralled Collin and Gloria thirty feet from the shelter and told them to wait. Collin had half a mind to leave. He couldn't be required to stay, but he wanted an update on what was happening.

"At least he isn't accusing us of the murders," Gloria muttered.

Collin's gaze swerved from the crime scene, or what he could see of it, to Gloria. Every time he looked at her, he was taken aback by how beautiful she was. In the forest, with the backdrop of the trees, she was even more breathtaking. "It has to grate on his nerves that we've found more evidence than he has."

Gloria gave him a shaky smile. “We keep landing in the middle of the investigation.”

“We’re looking for evidence and getting lucky by finding it,” Collin said.

Gloria folded her arms over her chest. “How do you take this pressure? How do you deal with it day after day?”

Collin didn’t always work on active crime scenes. He spent a lot of his time on research and talking to people and reviewing evidence. “It’s not usually like this. I usually have an office with a computer where evidence and analysis are delivered to me, so I spend a lot of my time sorting through it. I end up solving so many cases by reexamining the details until the tiniest thing connects for me, and suddenly, all the pieces will fall into place, and the answer will be obvious. This case is different. Without access to my normal resources, I’m spending a lot more time doing the dirty work myself. This case is more personal, too.”

Compassion was plain on her face. “Tell me about her. Tell me about your cousin? What was she doing on the trail?” Gloria asked.

“She loved the outdoors. It was why she decided to become a science teacher. I used to tease her for being nerdy and boring, but it worked for her. Taking a year off before starting work was so out of character. My mom supported her fully, but my aunt and I were worried. She’d graduated in December and wanted to start by hiking the trail. She had plans to spend the

next fall in Europe and was trying to put together a trip to Peru next spring.”

Collin swallowed the thick emotion building in his throat. “She and a friend had started SOBO from Harpers Ferry, but her friend was struggling with shin splints and decided to get off trail as they passed through Shenandoah. Beth decided to keep going.”

Gloria set her hand on his arm and squeezed. It was as if she’d flipped some switch in him and the words and emotions he’d kept locked inside bubbled up in his chest. At the funeral, he’d stayed stoic for his mother and the rest of the family. Collin had been the person everyone had leaned on, the calm and rational pillar of strength, but he was tired now. He’d promised them he would find her killer. He was honored to do it, to see that his family got resolution and peace.

Collin didn’t have the words. Instead, he settled on a simple phrase, something to convey his gratitude for Gloria’s help. She might not fully understand how important this was, but she worked it with him anyway. “Thank you,” he said while looking her right in the eye.

Gloria wrapped her arms around him and hugged him, letting her head rest on his shoulder. “For what?”

He dropped his cheek to rest on the top of her head. He struggled to find the words, knowing they’d be awkward, and then Harrison broke in to save him from himself.

“I need you to drive to the crime lab and get fingerprinted and swabbed for DNA.”

Collin's head snapped up and he took a step back from Gloria. "We didn't touch the book without gloves."

Harrison cracked his knuckles. "I don't care. Do it anyway."

Collin sealed up his emotions, glared at the agent, and decided to accept the escape and let it go.

# CHAPTER 22



## GLORIA

**A**nother small opening in his defenses. Gloria had felt the slightest shift in Collin, from an investigator to the man who had rocked her world with orgasms. Then he'd shut it down again. His mixed signals were making her nuts. She knew this situation was difficult for him and his family, and she wasn't planning to complicate things with questions about them or their future or whatever the sex between them had meant to him. She was a big girl and would deal with whatever the future held.

She and Collin took the trip to the lab with country music playing on the radio to keep them company. Swabbing for DNA and getting fingerprinted was a pain that only took a few minutes of actual activity but required hours of sitting around and waiting in between bursts of activity.

Once they finished and headed back toward Great Hikes, Gloria's thoughts wandered to the case, the victim she'd found, the blood in one of her cabins, and the victim she'd seen that morning.

The entry in the logbook felt out of place. It didn't fit with everything else. Collin had been adamant that the Grapevine Killer never left evidence behind. Were the boot prints in the cabin deliberate? What made her decide to leave the message? "Why do you think the killer is suddenly leaving behind traces and evidence of herself?" she couldn't help asking aloud.

“I’ve been thinking about that, too. She wanted that message found.” Collin drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “She’s working to put her message out.”

Why? What sense did the ranting make? What did the killer expect to happen? Did she expect law enforcement to find the logbook? Or had she hoped another hiker would find it and post it on one of the trail forums? If it had been another hiker who had found it, that’s likely exactly what would have happened, and the post would have gone viral. Was that the killer’s goal?

Gloria laid her head against the window, exhaustion battering her, her eyes feeling gritty and heavy. The more she tried to sort the information and figure out the whys and hows of the case, the more confused she felt.

By the time they got back to Great Hikes, FBI agents were packing up their gear and getting ready to pull out. After overhearing that blood had been found in the cabin, Gloria kept busy with mundane chores, sweeping her floors, cleaning out her fireplace and taking the ashes outside. Of course, she also took care of Spike and spent some time playing fetch with him in the front yard. Collin had returned to his own cabin to review his files alone. It was giving her time to think.

Despite her body’s exhaustion, her mind refused to settle. She ticked through the events, remembering Collin’s hot and cold behavior, her fear for her sister’s life, sadness at the loss of another hiker, and terror over finding the Grapevine Killer’s

message. The wave of emotions was overwhelming, confusing, and impossible to sort through.

Collin was the hardest to figure out. Who he was as an agent was so different from who he was when it was just the two of them.

Confusion and exhaustion turned to anger as rage began snapping in her blood. Why did Collin think it was fine to turn on and off his emotions whenever he felt like it? She tried to put a lid on her anger, but it refused to simmer down. Spike was picking up on her mood and pacing around the room.

Too tired to fight it, she grabbed her keys and locked the door before stomping across the property to Collin's cabin door. She pounded on it with her fist until he pulled it open.

He looked surprised to see her. Which made her want to lash out at him even more. She had things to say to him, and he sure as fuck was going to listen to them. The second he opened the door, she blurted out, "Why are you pretending that we didn't sleep together?"

Collin's face stayed infuriatingly calm as her rage grew. "I don't know what you mean."

Oh, fuck that noise. "You don't know what I mean? Like you don't understand that slept together is the polite expression used to refer to fucking each other's brains out or like you don't understand that you were affectionate, open, and kind then, but are now a cold, closed-off tampon when everyone else is around."

Collin blinked rapidly a few times before a small grin teased up the corners of his mouth, and he asked, “Did you just insult me by comparing me to a tampon?”

“Oh, shut up! I wanted to say penis breath, but you refuse to get your penis involved and your mouth is staying firmly shut as you just absorb my feelings which makes me feel like an emotional nutcase ranting at a rock except without anything bouncing back, so I ended up at tampon.”

Then she slammed her fists onto her hips with her elbows jutting out wide and firmed her stance to await a more appropriate response from him.

He shook his head and looked at the floor. “It was a chaotic day. I’m doing my best to find the killer and give you space to process.”

The coldness in his voice chilled her. She was intentionally provoking him, purposefully picking a fight, and he wasn’t reacting.

She felt pressure building behind her eyes, and knowing she was overreacting, she blinked furiously to keep her tears from falling. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing he had affected her this deeply. Gloria didn’t need to tell him that she wasn’t a woman who slept around or that their time together had been meaningful to her, even if he didn’t give a shit about it.

She suddenly wished she hadn’t come to his cabin. What was she hoping he’d say? That he wanted her still? That he felt it, too, the electricity that never stopped flowing between

them? Not likely. This would only end in more devastation and embarrassment for her. “Just forget it.”

She dropped her hands from her hips and turned to go, but he snagged her arm and pulled her back. He spun her to face him and in the next moment, his mouth was crushed to hers and he was kissing her. His lips were soft and pliant. She struggled only an instant in anger and confusion, but he held her tight, his hand pressed to her lower back, coaxing, persuading. Then she was giving herself over to the kiss and over to him. He pulled her into his cabin. She was aware of him slamming the door with his foot without breaking the kiss before he backed her up to the bed until she felt it hit along the back of her knees.

His teeth skimmed along her neck, nibbling, tasting. “How can you expect me to forget anything when it comes to you?”

She lowered herself onto the bed and slid back, bracing her arms behind her. He ran his hands down her legs, stopping at her feet and pulling off her shoes, letting them clunk to the floor.

He was hovering over her, his body straddling hers, his mouth dipping down at uneven intervals to kiss and lick at her jaw, neck, and collarbone as his hands slipped along her body, sending her sensitive skin blazing.

“Tell me if you want to stop,” he whispered.

She stiffened, and he stilled. Did she want this? She’d come looking for answers and now all she felt was arousal. How had he diffused her anger and frustration in a way that turned her

on? She shoved him onto his back beside her and climbed atop him.

“This doesn’t mean I’m not still mad at you,” she said as she ripped her shirt over her head.

He grinned from beneath her. “You compared me to a tampon.”

“See, mad.”

“And sexy.” He rubbed his hands up her ribcage before circling them around behind her to unclasp her bra.

“I’m just saying, we aren’t done arguing about the way you’ve been acting when other people are around.”

Collin crunched up and wiggled his own shirt up and off his body. “You’re welcome to continue yelling at me while you ride me, but we will need to remove our pants first.”

Gloria glared at him before climbing off him with a huff to drop her pants and underwear.

“Give me a second to grab a condom from my bag,” he said as he rolled off the bed and sauntered to the closet.

She crossed her arms over her chest just below her breasts, so they were lifted and put on display for him. Then she lifted her arms to allow her nibbles to tuck in and hide beneath them, but she didn’t like the way that pulled down on her chest. There was no way she was climbing on the bed to lay herself out for him, but if having her breasts rest on top of her arms was more comfortable than squashing them down, well, that just made sense. She readjusted as Collin walked back toward

her and dropped a foil packet on the bed before shoving his own pants to the floor.

He didn't say a single word as he climbed back onto the bed and arranged himself comfortably on his back. Only once he'd settled in and started to slowly stroke himself, did he turn to her. "It's a bit chilly over here by myself. I got the impression you might like to work out some frustration by using me for your pleasure." Then he raised an infuriating eyebrow in challenge at her.

"Give me the condom." She demanded as she climbed astride him.

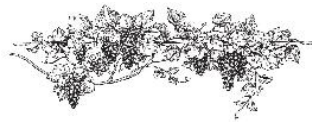
He was right about her desire. She didn't want to overthink it, either. She just wanted to enjoy herself, and if he was willing to let her use him to do so, who was she to decline the offer?

She got herself settled and rocked slowly down onto him before starting her list of demands.

"I expect to be greeted politely." Up she rose and down she slid. "It's not unreasonable to expect you to touch me now and again." Up and back down as slow as her legs would allow. "Just a quick brush of hands or tucking hair behind my ear or whatever." Each slide up and back down felt better than the one before, and he was agreeing with everything she said.

It was exactly what she wanted. She took what she needed until they both ended up in a heap together, happily exhausted.

“I’m sorry I was acting like a tampon,” he said softly as he rolled them both over to cuddle her in his arms and kiss her temple. “I’ll try to do better.” And then they laid there together and drifted off.



Gloria jolted awake in Collin’s arms and was immediately aware that it had gotten dark outside. It was nearly nine pm. She wondered if Collin would make good on his promise to do better or if those had just been sex words. He was still snoring softly beside her.

She wriggled out from under his arm to stand up, but his sleep-fogged voice stopped her. “You okay? Where’re you going?”

“I need to go let Spike out. I’m heading back to my cabin.”

“Yeah, ok. Just give me a second to find my pants.”

“Why?”

He gave her a confused look at that question. “Um, because it’s too cold to traipse around naked. Plus, while I’m sure Betty and company would love it, they might also post pictures of it all over the internet or at least show them to all their friends.”

Gloria was almost afraid to hope. “Are you coming with me?”



“Fuck, yes, I’m coming with you, and I’m sorry I was such a dick before. I was afraid I was taking advantage of you during a vulnerable time. Obviously, that was stupid of me.”

Maybe she should be careful what she wished for. She was going to lose her heart to this man, and then he was going to leave.

# CHAPTER 23

## GLORIA

The sound of scratching at the front door and the wiggling knob woke Gloria up. When Spike shot across the room with a snarl and raised his hackles, Collin bolted up with his gun already in hand. She looked at the numbers on the clock and saw 12:47 am as she climbed out of bed and pulled on the first pants and t-shirt she could grab. Then she picked up her shotgun and took aim through the bedroom door.

“You good for me to throw pants on?” Collin asked her in a whisper.

“Yeah, they’re having trouble with the door.”

He lowered his gun just long enough to grab his pants and pull them up. Then he was back at full attention and heading toward the door just as it burst open.

“Freeze!” Collin snapped out.

The intruder’s hands went up. “What the fuck are you doing in my sister’s—”

“Collin, stop,” Gloria burst out of the bedroom right behind him. The intruder was Lily. Hearing her sister’s voice, relief and joy fogged her brain. Gloria raced to her. “Lily?” Gloria threw herself against her. She was home and safe and smelled bad, but that was okay. She could fix that. Spike pounced between them and shoved his nose in to get their attention.

Gloria released Lily and fumbled for the light in the kitchen. Lily closed the door behind her.

She and Collin sized each other up long and hard. Spike paced the kitchen before settling near his food bowl.

“Who’s he?” Lily asked, shrugging off her pack and dropping it to the floor. She stood there looking as strong and proud as ever, despite being rumpled and thinner than the last time Gloria had seen her.

Gloria scrambled for a reasonable answer. Lily wouldn’t believe that Collin was a federal agent here to investigate. For one thing, his jeans were still unbuttoned and slung low around his hips, and it was obvious he was naked under them. She was wearing his t-shirt and had pulled it on inside out, and her sleep shorts would not be mistaken for regular clothing.

So, how was she supposed to answer that question?

“This is my friend, Collin. He’s been staying here.”

“Friend, huh? Is that really the word you want to use here? Is this your Doug rebound?”

Gloria sighed. She hated answering questions like this but would do the best she could. “Friend is the best I’ve got for it right now, and I don’t know what this is beyond it not being your business. Now sit down. We need to talk. I’ve been trying to get ahold of you for more than a week!”

Lily took the chair closest to the door, looking between Collin and Gloria. Mercifully, she didn’t continue with more questions about their relationship. “My phone fell in a creek and died permanently.”

Gloria stared at her until she added, “I don’t have your number memorized.”

When she didn’t continue beyond that, Gloria couldn’t help herself, “And you didn’t call the Great Hikes number that’s listed in every single guidebook and posted on Far Out because, why?”

“What would you have done if I’d called?”

“Made you come home where it’s safe and gotten you a new phone.” How dumb did Lily think she was?

Lily just stared at her for a moment. “Exactly. I was fine out on the trail, and it was nice to feel completely independent for once.”

“And what about the Grapevine Killer? Have you heard about the serial killer running amok on the trail?”

Lily scratched the back of her neck. “Well, yeah, but that didn’t really get serious until the last few days. Or at least, it didn’t sound that way. That’s when I started heading back here.”

Though she was safe and in front of her, Gloria couldn’t ignore the stab of fear that Lily had been out there solo. “Are you hungry? Do you want something to drink?”

They fell into a familiar pattern. She started heating water for tea and pulling out some cheese and crackers as Lily told Gloria about her adventures on the trail and the characters she’d met. Collin watched this from his position, leaning

against the counter. He'd pulled on a t-shirt and buttoned his pants, but Gloria still found him a bit distracting.

"I'm assuming a gear explosion is imminent?" Gloria asked. She'd need a shower, but washing dirty things, dumping trash, airing everything out, and sorting stuff would be just as high on the priority list.

"Nah, I'll do that back at the house. No need to clutter up your place when you've got company."

Gloria took another sip of her tea. "You are welcome to just stay here. At least to shower and hang out."

Lily's laughter burst forth as she pointed out, "I stink fiercely and could sleep for a week! You know I want to be clean and sleep in a real bed first. We'll have plenty of time to hang out. Unless, you've rented the house to someone else?"

"Of course not!" Gloria had preferred to move into a small cabin once they'd been renovated, but Lily had wanted to stay in the big house. It was just on the other side of the clearing and set slightly away from the cabins. It even looked like the cabins but had three bedrooms instead of one and central heating and air instead of a woodstove and window unit.

Gloria was fine with her sister staying in their old home. She liked knowing their parent's house was still standing, still loved, and still lived in – even though she couldn't bear to live there.

Collin moved to take a seat at the opposite end of the table. His posture was relaxed and nonthreatening, but Gloria saw

the glint in his eye and knew he was about to shift the conversation to questioning what Lily had seen and heard on the trail. “What are the hikers on the trail saying about the murders?”

Lily’s mug paused midway to her mouth. She set it back on the table. “Not too many hikers right now. I went out earlier than most. The ones I did run into are saying to be careful and alert. And there’s constant talk of which sections to skip or what behaviors to avoid.”

“Have you spoken to any federal agents along the trail?” Collin asked, leaning forward with interest.

Lily normally provided one-word answers when talking to strangers. The fact that she was saying as much as she was amazed Gloria. She was glad Lily was sharing so much information, but she couldn’t help wondering what caused the difference.

She knew how observant Lily was. Add in that she was hiking solo, and she’d be on high alert and even more aware of things happening around her. She might have noticed something that could help them find the killer.

Lily shook her head. “Haven’t seen any federal agents.”

A sudden coldness hit her core. Agents were posted along the trail for miles. How had Lily missed them?

Collin raised his eyebrow. “The FBI has people stationed all along this section of trail. How did you get here?”

Lily looked down at her food without responding.

Collin sighed. “You should be careful. We have reason to believe the killer is in this area.”

Lily took another sip of tea and shrugged. “I’m fine. I know what I’m doing out there.”

How could she know that? Maybe Lily thought she’d been on her own long enough that she didn’t need anyone to look out for her. Maybe she felt safe here or on the AT in general and felt like she had all the skills necessary to survive anything and everything.

“Lily, I’m not trying to scare you, but you need to be careful. I found a body right here on our property,” said Gloria.

Lily looked between Gloria and Collin. She swore under her breath. “Tell me about the body you found.”

Gloria told Lily what she and Spike had discovered along their blue-blazed trail before ending with an ominous, “What’s even worse is that you know the victim.”

Lily’s eyes grew wide. “Who? Tell me.”

“Nicole Smith,” Gloria said.

Lily closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. “Not Nicole. Her poor family. She didn’t deserve to die that way. No one deserves that.”

“It’s awful. Absolutely terrible,” Gloria said. From Lily’s reaction, it was difficult for her to imagine she was lying or that she’d known about it.



“I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you needed me,” Lily said.  
“Are you doing okay?”

Gloria continued to see the image of Nicole lying on the ground. “I’m handling it. It helps to have Collin this close. Being alone isn’t my favorite thing right now. But there’s even more you’ve missed,” Gloria said. “Aunt Kim showed up.”

“I’m sorry. What? Why the fuck would Aunt Kim show up now?” Lily asked with equal parts anger and confusion.

Lily’s emotions echoed Gloria’s own. “I didn’t talk to her long. She wanted to speak to me and have dinner, but I’ve been avoiding it.”

“What the fuck does she expect to get out of this?” Lily asked.

“She said she wanted to explain,” Gloria said.

“Nope. Forget that. I don’t care to hear anything she has to say at this point,” Lily said.

Gloria’s initial reaction had been similar. After having some time to cool off and talking it over with Collin, she was starting to consider the whole thing as an opportunity to get some answers about their family history that never quite fit together. “I might talk to her again.”

Lily shook her head. “You know what a flake she is. It was her stupid letter that upset Uncle Gavin so much.”

Gloria rolled her eyes. “I’m not a child. I’m not planning to just accept everything she says as fact. I am capable of making my own decisions about the truth of what she might say.”

“Don’t meet with her. You’re making a mistake,” Lily said. “You shouldn’t let people do this to you. You’re too kindhearted and you just accept every sob story that comes along.”

“Excuse me,” Gloria’s voice rose with her anger. Was she talking about Doug or her generosity with hikers, too? “What the fuck?”

“Come on, Gloria. Do you really think that woman is someone you want in your life?” Lily’s condescending tone did not incline Gloria to listen or accept what was being said.

“I didn’t say I wanted her in my life. I said I wanted to hear what she had to say. It’s my mistake to make, and I think I’ve proven that I can handle myself and my life just fine.” Gloria was pissed. “I was going to invite you to come along, but I’m thinking it might be best for you to not join us.”

“Yeah, that’s probably best,” Lily snorted.

Gloria didn’t want to fight with her only sibling. She’d missed having Lily around and was still feeling very grateful to know she wasn’t dead. “Why don’t you just stay here with us?” She wanted to keep Lily close.

Lily blinked at her several times. “Nah, I’m good on my own, back at the house.”

Gloria sighed in frustration. “You need to take this killer seriously. She’s in this area. Like, right fucking here. She even broke into one of our cabins.”

Lily just shrugged. “It’s not like we’ve never had a cabin broken into before.”

Gloria tamped down her frustration and tried again to convince her sister of the danger. Was she in denial? “We’ve never had a break-in by someone who left blood all over the entryway.”

That shut Lily up.

Gloria added the last bit of important information. “There was also a fourth victim killed less than two miles from here. Just down near Seeley Woodworth.”

Lily swallowed the last of her tea. “I know.”

Gloria darted a look at Collin. Frown lines had formed around his eyes. “How do you know?” she asked.

They’d just found the body the day before, and nothing had been released to the public.

Lily set down her mug and pushed away from the table. “You know how news travels on the trail. I’m going to stay at the house and sleep in my own bed after enjoying my own shower. I just stopped by to let you know I was here.”

Gloria shook her head with disbelief. “And are you planning to stay for a while?” Gloria asked.

“Not really,” Lily said.

Her heart fell. “The FBI wants to talk to you. You should at least stay around and meet with them,” Gloria tried. Maybe they could convince Lily to take a break from the trail.

“I’ll see.” Lily wasn’t looking at her. What was she not saying? Her tone had changed when she’d mentioned the most recent victim.

Mike Harrison wanted Gloria to alert him when she’d heard from Lily. Could she talk Lily into meeting with Harrison? Her other options were to either withhold information from the FBI or rat out her sister. Even if she came to terms with keeping back information, what would Collin do? She couldn’t picture him withholding information. Would he call Harrison to inform him that Lily had shown up?

“Offer to stay here stands,” Gloria said.

“I’ll be fine, thanks. Night, Gloria. Nice to meet you, Collin.”

And with that, Lily picked up her pack and disappeared as quickly as she’d arrived.

Collin didn’t move from his chair at the table. He just cocked his head to the side and commented, “Well, that was odd.”

People had been saying that about Lily since birth. “She’s not normally so cranky, but she’s also not usually one to talk much. She’s probably just tired from the trail.”

“No, I don’t mean that. I completely understand the exhaustion that comes when you’re due for a zero or two. I meant her comments about the most recent victim. She was so vague about knowing about it.”

He'd picked up on Lily's change in tone and behavior, too, then. Gloria was hoping maybe he'd not noticed. Sure, he was a fantastic investigator, but this was her sister. She was supposed to notice things no one else did. She felt like she was being pulled between the two. On the one hand, the killer needed to be caught. On the other hand, she did not want to encourage anyone to dig into Lily's life. Then again, she was completely confident Lily wasn't the killer, so maybe those were both on the same hand.

Still, something in Collin's tone sent worry scurrying through Gloria's belly. "We'll talk to her more tomorrow. I'm sure it's fine, and she's just tired."

Collin raised a single eyebrow at her but kept his mouth shut tight for all of thirty seconds. Then he just had to voice what she'd been trying so hard not to think, "She knows something about the victim she's not telling us."

Gloria heard what Collin was saying. Hell, she even agreed with him, but that didn't mean she was comfortable with it. She stepped closer to him and sifted her fingers through the hair along the nape of his neck as she asked, "Please don't go full-blown FBI agent on her."

Collin hummed with pleasure at her touch and looked down to encourage her. "You mentioned that Lily's a loner and had some trouble in high school?"

Gloria removed her hand from Collin's neck. She was tired, and the conversation was not going in a direction she wanted it to go in. Not that she knew how she did want the conversation

to go. She just knew she didn't like it going like this. "I didn't say that. Just because someone prefers to hike solo does not make them a loner. You, of all people, should understand that." Gloria crossed her arms in front of her chest. "And don't most people struggle through high school?"

Collin stood up, looked at her posture and sighed. "I'll go talk to her alone tomorrow."

Gloria stared at him as her frustration with the continuing emotional roller coaster spiked again. "Alone," he had said. Collin had returned to cold, professional, and uncaring. Gloria was considering poisoning his coffee. Of course, she wouldn't really do it, but she wasn't going to continue this nonsense either.

She turned away from him.

"Ready for bed?" he asked with an innocence that made her reconsider her commitment not to murder him. A part of her really wanted to send him back to his own cabin and be done with him. She deserved better. And yet...

He was human, and humans were fuck-ups. She wasn't so harsh that she didn't understand the need for compromise. She just didn't want to compromise to the point of giving up her own self-worth. She'd done that with Doug and wouldn't do it again.

His brows furrowed as she just stood there and stared at him.

"Gloria?"

He had no idea why she was upset. In that moment she realized, whatever the outcome, his intention hadn't been to hurt her or shut her out. It didn't mean she'd just let it go, but it did give her reason to let him back into her bed. And right now, the thought of curling up next to him sounded much more appealing than the thought of sinking between cold sheets all by herself.

They both climbed into bed, but she was hesitant to curl up with him. He was laying on his back with one arm tucked up and out of the way to give her space to snuggle in, but instead she laid on her side with a space between them.

After a moment of awkwardness, during which Gloria wondered if Collin might just fall asleep, he spoke toward the ceiling. "I fucked up, didn't I?"

"You said you'd talk to Lily alone tomorrow. It feels like you're shutting me out instead of talking to me about what's going on."

"You don't have a clear perspective when it comes to Lily."

"That's it, right there. It's condescending bullshit. We both know I don't have a clear perspective. We can both acknowledge it. It's not an excuse to stop talking to me or talking around me or... I don't know, but you just shut down and turned it all off, leaving me with nothing."

Collin rolled onto his side to face her.

"I guess I can see that. I'm just not sure how to fix it. I don't know what to say yet. I feel like there's something there. Like

I'm missing something obvious. It's just out of reach, and I can't quite bring it into focus yet. I'm afraid if I talk through it aloud, it will disappear completely. I'm not saying I think Lily did it. I just..."

He stopped there and looked at her.

"Yeah, ok, I get it." She didn't. Not really, but she wouldn't pout or beg. She was a big girl and could handle things for herself, even when that meant remembering to keep up her guard with Collin.



# CHAPTER 24

## COLLIN

Collin only dozed for a few hours before he gave up on sleep and climbed out of bed without disturbing Gloria. He hated how upset she was, but he didn't know how to fix it. He knew how to solve cases, though. Maybe if he could solve this one, it would be a step toward figuring everything else out.

Back in his own cabin, he spread out every bit of information he had. He taped things to the walls, laid pictures out on the bed, and unfolded the giant map of the area that Gloria had let him borrow after she'd pointed out locations on it.

Then he grabbed his notebook and started making lists. Every victim had been gutted and wrapped in grape vines with big grape leaves smashed in their mouth and over their eyes and ears. One victim also had earbuds in, and their phone wrapped up with them; One victim had been covered in food; Beth had been tied up with a grocery sack full of trash; the only male victim had been pinned down, spread eagle, across the trail.

Three victims were thru-hikers; one was a day hiker. Beth and Nicole were both from Virginia, but Nicole was born and raised way out here, while Beth had always lived in the Hampton Roads area. Jacob had been born and raised in Arkansas. They ranged in age from Nicole, who was twenty-two, to this latest victim, who appeared to be in her late forties.

Collin felt like he was staring directly at the solution. It was right there. He just couldn't put his finger on it. He took a deep breath and tried a different approach.

He's placed red dots at each point on the map where a victim had been found. They were all within a few miles of Great Hikes. But then he scratched his head and had to ask himself if the hostel was really the center of things or if it just felt that way because Gloria was here.

The killer moved from north to south, then north again, then south again. Two victims had been found smack on the trail. The other two were along blue blazed side trails within the trail corridor. Each death was a result of cardiac arrest that started with consuming poisonous mushrooms. If only he could talk to someone who'd seen them before they'd died. Had they all been picking mushrooms as they hiked? Did they all spend time with the same person before they died? It would take six hours or so for them to die. Had the killer been right there with them for the entire time?

Collin forced himself to step back and slow his thoughts when he looked in the mirror and saw his own hands fisted and pulling at his hair. His eyes were red rimmed from lack of sleep, and he was looking a bit wild.

Just then, there was a knock on his door. "Come on in." He hoped it would be Gloria but wasn't surprised when it wasn't. The sun had just crested the horizon, so it was still early. He nodded to Geri before asking her if she wanted coffee.

“Yes, please. I swear I could hear your thinking from over in my own cabin.”

“Did I wake you?” Collin didn’t think he’d been making any noise, but he hadn’t been focused on the here and now.

Geri waved away his concern as he filled the coffeepot with water. “No, no. I’ve never been one to sleep in. Five is a late wake-up for me. I figured your light was an invitation to come see how things are going.”

Maybe she could see what he was missing. Collin hit brew to get the pot going and turned toward the mess surrounding his bed. “It’s like I have all the pieces but can’t see the full picture. It’s right here; I can feel it. I just don’t know what it is.”

Then he reached over to grab his first list, detailing possible connections between the victim, but she interrupted him before he could show it to her. “Not about the case. That will get solved. I want to hear about you and Gloria. Why aren’t you over in her cabin right now?”

Collin deflated like a sliced open balloon. “Because I suck at peopling.”

Geri laughed at him as she cleared things from a chair so she could sit. “That sounds about right. I just want to know why you aren’t doing anything to make that better. It seems to me Gloria might be your perfect match, and I’ve seen her forgive you for being an ass before.”

“Yeah, but I keep screwing up the same way over and over. If I don’t figure it out, she’ll eventually stop forgiving me.” He didn’t want to apologize again until he knew it would be the last time he made the same mistake. That meant he needed to understand what mistake he kept making.

“But you aren’t even sure what mistake it is you keep making, is that about right?” Nosy, little old lady mind-readers.

“Yeah, something like that.”

“It’s always the same mistake for every man, every time, in the history of ever. At least it is if they’re a good man trying to work it out with a good woman.”

Collin stared at her with disbelief but didn’t dare to argue.

“You’ve gotta talk to her. I mean, remove the filter between your brain and your mouth and vomit your feelings, thoughts, and confusions all over her.”

“That sounds like a terrible plan.” Collin couldn’t imagine any woman wanted feelings and confusion word-vomited all over them.

Geri just shrugged. “That’s my advice, and it’s never failed before. Do with it what you will. Now, is that coffee done yet? We can talk about the case while we sip.”

# CHAPTER 25

## GLORIA

Lily might know something about the murders. Her evasive answers replayed in Gloria's mind. By eight the next morning, Gloria had showered, dressed, and taken care of her morning chores. Unable to think of anything except the killer, she knocked on her sister's door until she finally answered it.

Despite her late arrival the night before, it was obvious she was already awake by the final spurts and sputters of her coffee pot.

"Let me get us both some coffee before we have whatever conversation I can tell you're all geared up to have," Lily said, while pulling down two mugs. "You up for some porch-sitting?"

Gloria remembered how enclosed a building felt when you'd become accustomed to living most of your life outside. It was one of the things she loved most about long backpacking trips. It would remind her how magical it could feel to be surrounded by crisp morning air while steam rose from her warm coffee mug.

"Yes, please."

Once the two of them were settled in the wooden rocking chairs they had out there, she turned to Lily and asked, "If you know something about what's been going on, you have to tell Collin."

“I don’t have to do anything.”

Gloria stared at Lily until she looked back at her. “This is important, Lily. This isn’t high school pranks or practical jokes. People are dying.”

“What makes you think I know anything, anyway?” Lily was picking at her coffee mug and avoiding eye contact.

“No bullshit, Lily. We both know I know you better than that.”

Lily narrowed her eyes, and a long pause passed. “I’m not sure I know much of anything anymore, Gloria. I have theories and ideas, but there’s nothing real.”

“So, start there. What are you thinking?”

Lily sighed and took a sip of coffee before continuing, “Something about the situation feels familiar. It’s like Deja Vu. It’s weird, but I feel like I know what will happen next even though I don’t, and I couldn’t put it into words. It’s just that no new developments really surprise me.”

An uneasy feeling skittered down Gloria’s spine. “Okay, so let’s go with that. We’ve never had a killer on the trail before, so what parts or details feel most familiar?”

Lily thought for a second. “There’s something about the leaves and vines.”

“It’s funny you mention that. Yesterday, I realized it reminded me of Grandma’s desk thingy with the monkeys where one was covering their eyes, the next their ears, and the



last one was covering their mouth. Remember how Dad said it represented See no evil; hear no evil; speak no evil?”

Lily’s eyes got big. “I do remember that. I don’t think it’s just that, though. There’s something about the way each body was posed.”

Collin had said something similar when describing the killings. “Yeah, I mean it’s creepy. Collin has a theory that the killer thinks of herself as a guardian of the trail or something.”

Lily stood abruptly. “Do we still have Uncle Gavin’s old nature books?”

Gloria stood up, too. “Not all of them, but I kept some. They’re still packed away in the attic here, I think.”

Lily thought for a few minutes. “I met the last victim. She wasn’t an experienced hiker. She was trying to do a thru-hike as a way to recover from divorce, but she was starting in Virginia because she’d heard it was the easiest part of the trail. She was struggling with the cold nights, and her equipment was heavy. I got the impression she wasn’t going to last long before bailing.”

Gloria froze, and her eyes snapped to Lily’s face. What was she saying? “Why didn’t you tell Collin about any of that?” The FBI still hadn’t announced the victim’s identity. Lily could have cleared that up for them. “Her body was scavenged beyond all recognition,” Gloria said.

Lily ran an agitated hand through her hair. “I don’t want to be involved in this. I can’t.”

“It’s too late for that! This is our community and my business. We can’t turn our backs and pretend nothing is happening. It’s not right!”

If Lily knew something, she damn well better share it with the authorities. If they found anything on their own, they’d be happy to lock her up and toss out the key. Not to mention basic human decency demanded she do things like help stop a serial killer.

Lily glared at Gloria. “Things haven’t been right since Mom and Dad died.”

Following the jump in conversation, Gloria moved closer to her. “I know. I get it. I feel—”

Lily cut her off by holding up a hand in her face. “Stop, Gloria. You don’t get it. It’s different for you. You’ve gone on to run this place and live your life. I haven’t. I’m so fucking angry about it, but no one seems to care. We’ve lost everyone. We have no one but each other.” She looked down and Gloria could see Lily’s jaw clenching as she tried to reign in her emotions.

Gloria hadn’t realized her sister had been having this much difficulty dealing with her grief. Losing their parents had been hard. Sure, Lily hadn’t spoken much about it since the funeral, but Gloria had assumed she’d been coping with it in her own way. Day by day, Gloria had felt her grief settling in and smoothing out. It would always be there, but it wasn’t the sharp pain it used to be. It was being weathered by time, just as the Appalachian Mountains had been smoothed over and

weathered more than the Rockies. Had that not been happening for Lily?

Gloria set her hand on her sister's arm, and when Lily leaned toward her, she wrapped her arms around her in a tight hug. "I'm so sorry Lily. I didn't realize you weren't healing. You can always talk to me about it. I do understand the pain, and I want to be here for you."

Lily let herself be hugged for a few moments, then shoved away, squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. Her eyes were pooling with tears, but none of them dripped.

Lily paced across the porch and stared out into the woods. Eventually, she asked Gloria, "Do remember Uncle Gavin and Aunt Kim's book?"

Gloria was confused. "Yeah, it was part nature book and part scrapbook. They used to press flowers and leave notes in it and stuff. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Remember how Uncle Gavin used to use it to collect plants for Mom? She'd dry them to make tea."

Gloria shook her head, uneasy about where this was going. "Yeah, but that stopped when Uncle Gavin died."

Lily shook her head. "No, it stopped before he died. That last month, when things got really bad, I overheard him and Mom arguing about him never collecting plants anymore. I don't remember what exactly they said. At the time, I just thought it was weird people would buy plants from a store to make tea." Lily's voice trailed off as she stared off in thought.

Gloria was trying to put the pieces together. Lily spent time with the victim. She'd lied to Collin, and now there was this weird thing with an old book. "Lily, you have to explain this to me. It's starting to creep me out."

Lily sighed but turned back to Gloria. "I don't know exactly. I just know the book talked about grape vines being introduced to Virginia and identified all the native plants in the area. It was also where Uncle Gavin and Aunt Kim kept records of their life together."

"But what does that have to do with the murders?"

Lily thought for a second before responding, "It's in the way the faces were wrapped with leaves and vines. That's weird, right?"

"Yeah, but Lily, someone killing hikers is weird. Serial killers in general are weird. This whole fucking thing is weird. The leaves and vines feel like just one more weird ingredient in a giant fucking pot of weird stew!" Gloria tossed her hands up in exasperation. How could any one thing be weirder than all the rest of this mess?

"The last victim, she went by "T-mobile," and was basically incompetent. Her real name was Eliza. We stayed at the same shelter a couple of nights ago. I was trying to give her pointers like switching to a Verizon phone and getting off the trail before the storm hit. I thought I was getting through to her, but when she stuck her food bag in her tent instead of hanging it from the rope I'd thrown for her, I realized none of it was sinking in. I figured the storm would drive her off the trail. I

stayed at a hostel during the worst of things Monday night but headed back out as things calmed down Tuesday evening. I wanted to get up here to you. I stayed at that stealth site down by Piney River the night before last. I was up early and thinking I'd make it back here by breakfast, but then I came across the body near Seely Woodworth. Gloria, it was T-mobile, and she was surrounded by food."

"Why the fuck didn't you tell anyone about this?" Gloria practically screamed at her sister. Lily had been right there. She'd seen the body before Ranger Todd had found it. What the fuck?

"Gloria, calm down. I heard someone coming up the trail. There was no way I was going to get caught standing there right next to the body. You and I both know that wouldn't have ended well. I bushwhacked far enough away to hide, and when I realized it was Todd Gilliam coming along in his full uniform, I wasn't left with a ton of options. He called it in but never left the scene, so I just stayed hidden. I crept farther away now and then when I could, but it wasn't until darkness fell that I was able to leave the area without being spotted. I had to take the long way around to avoid all the investigators and their vehicles to get here."

"Which is why you arrived in the middle of the night," Gloria finished for her.

"Exactly."

"And then you couldn't tell Collin about it without having to explain everything."

“See. You know he wouldn’t understand how much the locals hate me. The rest of the world thinks it’s fine to love other women. It’s only around here that it’s considered a mental illness that suggests I might be a violent psycho.” Lily was flapping her arms as she spoke.

Gloria’s stomach twisted in a mixture of horror and fear. Lily had been in the vicinity, in the backcountry, where another killing had taken place. Why had she been spared? She was quick and quiet in the woods. Had the killer not seen her? Was one victim enough? She grabbed Lily’s forearm. “You have to tell Collin what you saw.”

Lily shook her head adamantly and pushed her unruly dark hair away from her face. “I can’t. Really, Gloria. I’m only telling you because you’re my sister, and it’s tearing me up inside, but I won’t go in for questioning. Hell, he’s likely to think I’m involved.”

“If you tell the truth, you have nothing to worry about,” Gloria said. It was at that moment that she decided to put her full trust in Collin.

Lily threw up her hands. “Pull your head out of your ass, Gloria. It’s likely he’s only sleeping with you to get what he wants, which doesn’t involve looking out for my best interest or even yours. The police and FBI want a suspect. Look at how quickly Doug was ready to point his finger at me. I was there. Right, fucking there. They’d be happy to say it was me and close the book.”

“That’s not true. Collin and I are working as a team. We both want to catch the killer. Pinning it on you won’t do that. It will just leave time and room for more dead bodies, which is the opposite of what Collin wants.”

“That’s very positive thinking, but I just don’t think the real world works like that. No one will care to dig deeper. They’ll just hear my connections to the victims, learn my history, and decide it’s settled. No one will really believe what I have to say. They never do.”

“Me, Lily. I believe you. Whatever you tell me, I’ll believe it no matter what. Tell me how you think this all ties together.”

Lily blew out her breath in a huff. “Uncle Gavin showed me one chapter of the book about how humans impacted nature. It basically explained Leave No Trace principles, but it also included a section about Indians stalking and killing people for harming nature. It talked about wrapping their bodies in vines to bind them.”

“And you believed all of it? Or you think Uncle Gavin did?” Gloria felt like she was still missing some important pieces of the picture, and she could tell Lily had more to say but only if Gloria was still listening to her.

“No, that book is old enough to still applaud Columbus for *discovering America*, not to mention all the other stupid shit it spouted. Uncle Gavin was showing it to me because I’d just had a fight with Aunt Kim. She’d yelled at me for throwing away the potato peels instead of adding them to the compost bin. In hindsight, I think he was trying to get me to understand

that people have different beliefs or something, but I totally didn't get it at the time. I just remember him talking about working with mother nature and not fighting against it."

Gloria couldn't stop the picture that popped into her mind, "So you're saying Uncle Gavin and Aunt Kim were some OG hippies who might have danced naked under the full moon?"

Lily laughed, which was what Gloria'd been hoping for. "Yeah, something like that. Anyway, he said Aunt Kim took it a lot more seriously than he did. She believed the spirits of nature would come for us if we didn't honor them and treat them with respect. He told me I didn't have to agree with Aunt Kim, but it was always better to err on the side of kindness. He said putting the peels in the compost instead of the trash cost me nothing but showed my care and respect for Aunt Kim and her beliefs."

"That reminds me of the kind of things he'd say on his good days," Gloria confessed.

"Yeah, that's why it stuck with me. It was one of the few good days I remember with him."

"So, how are you thinking the killer is connected to this?"

"That's what I don't know, yet." Lily got a thoughtful look on her face.

Gloria didn't know of anyone in the area who would be more familiar with stuff like that than her own family, but there were plenty of people who loved the trail and nature enough to go beyond what most people would consider



normal. Heck, that was often what drove them to live in places like this. “Ok, let’s take a bit to think on it.”

She didn’t suggest that Lily talk to Collin, but she was secretly hoping her sister would come around to the idea. She felt like Collin could really help with this.

Lily took her arm. “I agree. Gloria, I can’t tell anyone else about this. I have no proof it means anything, and the fact that I see the connection would make it easy to point fingers right back at me.” Her eyes bored into Gloria, but Gloria held her stare. She needed to convince Lily that she should bring Collin in.

The sounds of cars pulling up the drive to Great Hikes had Gloria turning toward the entrance to their property. Police cars and the FBI. What the fuck was happening now?

As the cars approached, Gloria saw Collin exit his cabin and walk directly toward Lily’s. Had they found another victim? Had they caught the killer?

Special Agent Harrison headed their way at the same pace as Collin. “Stay out of this. It’s not your case, Warner.”

Collin stopped at the bottom of the steps to Lily’s porch. “You have no grounds to force me to stay away, Harrison, and you know it.”

Four officers stepped out of the police cars and moved their hands to their holsters.

“Lily Lopez?” Harrison asked.

Fear skittered across Gloria's spine as she realized what was about to happen. She stepped forward before Lily could. "No. She just got home and has nothing to do with anything. She needs to relax and not be bothered by you."

Harrison gave her a pitying look. "We found her DNA on some of the last victim's things. Were you planning to let me know she arrived here?"

Gloria didn't answer.

Harrison continued, "Step away from her, Gloria." Then he turned to Lily. "Ms. Lopez, please don't make this harder than it needs to be. For now, we just want to bring you in to ask you some questions."

Lily looked between her and Special Agent Harrison. "I've done nothing wrong."

Special Agent Harrison looked amused. "Really? That's mighty interesting. DNA tells us otherwise."

DNA? Now Gloria was really confused. "Someone needs to tell me what's going on," Gloria said, refusing to step away from her sister. She glanced at Collin, but he appeared as confused as she was.

"Your DNA is a close match to the DNA we found on the Seeley Woodworth logbook and the blood in your cabin," Harrison said to Gloria. "It belongs to your relative."

It couldn't be. Lily wasn't a killer. There was no way. Before she could form a coherent question, Special Agent

Harrison continued. “We have questions that need to be answered.”

This hit every single one of Gloria’s protective instincts. She’d already seen her sister go through too much to put up with anymore. She’d fight them, or shoot them, or do whatever she had to do to keep her sister here where she was safe. “You’re not taking her anywhere. You can ask her questions here.”

Harrison reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. “This warrant grants us the authority to search this property and arrest Lily Lopez.”

Lily stepped forward and turned to Gloria. “I’ll be okay. It’s fine.”

She heard something in her sister’s voice. She didn’t want Gloria to be upset, but Lily wasn’t okay with this either.

“Just let me go with them. There’s no reason to make a bigger deal out of it.”

Lily’s raised eyebrows suggested she knew what Gloria had been willing to do. “Fucking fine, but don’t you dare say a damn word without a lawyer there. I’ll be taking care of that immediately. Do you understand me, Lily?”

Lily walked down the steps before turning to smile over her shoulder and winking at Gloria.

Collin was at her side a second later. “She’ll be okay.”

She turned to Collin and grabbed the front of his shirt. “Lily didn’t kill anyone. You get that, right?” She needed to know

that Collin believed her. That he wouldn't turn against their family the way so many others had.

“You need to hire a lawyer for her.”

Her mouth dropped open. He didn't believe her. The fucking asshole was siding with Harrison. This was bullshit. “I can't believe you think she's guilty of this!”

Collin stepped back and scrubbed at the back of his neck. “It doesn't matter what I believe. It only matters that you take care of Lily right now. Harrison is on a mission to prove that Lily did this. He won't be looking for anything else. Lily will need your help.”

One of the police officers had handcuffed Lily and was reading her rights. Then Gloria watched them load her into the back of the police cruiser.

As they drove away, Gloria tried to hold herself together and not lose her shit. She needed to think logically. There was no point in following them to the police station. She needed to get a lawyer on the phone. A good lawyer. One who specialized in criminal law.

Collin rubbed her shoulder. “I'll follow her to the station and see if there's anything I can do. You call the lawyer. Do you have someone?”

Gloria gave him a blank stare.

“Call Somer Helens. She's good, and she'll help. It'll take her a bit to get here, but it will be worth the wait.”

Gloria nodded as another thought hit her. “Collin, you have to keep her out of jail. Lily doesn’t deal well with being locked in places, especially if there are no windows. You can’t let them stick her in a cell.”

Collin’s face took on a worried look. “Gloria, there’s not much I can do. It’s not my case, and with DNA evidence—“ he huffed and raked his fingers through his hair. “I’ll do as much as I can, but I don’t know how much that will be.”

# CHAPTER 26

## GLORIA

Gloria sat in her kitchen and stared down into her mug of tea. She'd called Somer Helens, who was now on her way. Since she'd dropped Collin's name, Somer had accepted a fraction of her normal fee. It had still taken every cent Gloria had. If she had to, she'd sell part of their property to cover the lawyer's bills, though she really hoped she wouldn't need to sell the entire hostel. Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

Seeing Collin standing there gave her hope. "How's Lily? Any news?"

Collin looked at her for a minute. "That's why I'm here."

Gloria could hear it in his voice. Whatever it was, he wasn't delivering good news. "Just tell me."

"Gloria," Collin took a deep breath. "Lily's refusing to provide a DNA sample."

Gloria thought about it for a second. "Why should she give them DNA?"

"Her refusal makes her look more guilty. They already have your DNA, and they know it's a female relative. Lily's just making it worse."

Gloria paused to breathe before responding through teeth gritted with anger, "So, what? You want me to help you prove my sister is guilty? You want me to come down there and tell her to just go ahead and hand you every fucking bit of

evidence you need to put her in prison for the rest of her life? Is that really something you think I'm going to do?" She was so angry she was shaking. Spike had tucked his tail between his legs and was pressed tightly against her while whimpering.

"No, Gloria. It's not like that. We're trying to solve this case." He started to reach toward her, but Spike's whine shifted to a menacing growl as the hair on his back raised with warning. Collin dropped his hand, stepped back, and swore under his breath.

Gloria disagreed with him, "If the police and FBI were interested in doing their job for real, they would be following the correct evidence and finding the real killer rather than wasting time terrorizing my sister. The killer is still out there." She would not waver in her belief that her sister was innocent.

"I'm trying to speed things up, Gloria. Giving a sample could prove her innocence. You get that, right?" Collin pointed out.

"Lily admitted she was on the trail. That doesn't mean she killed anyone, but her DNA could easily be on the shelter logbook."

Collin set his hands on either side of her against the railing, his legs braced apart so they were nose to nose. She turned her head to the side and crossed her arms. She could shove him away or lift her knee and strike him in the balls, but she was so tired. So much of her wanted to curl into him, tuck her face against his neck, snuggle into his chest, and let someone else help with her worries. It would be so much easier to talk



through everything with someone else. But that wasn't how it was. She couldn't trust him. She wouldn't trust him. It wasn't worth the risk.

“Gloria. Please. Please, let me help you and Lily,” he whispered.

She looked at him and felt that spark she'd felt when they first met. “Are you trying to help us? Or are you here to solve the case, no matter what? Are you determined to find the murderer, or will you be happy with any guilty verdict?”

“I'm here to help. I'm here to find the person who killed my cousin, and there's no way that was Lily.”

He looked sincere. “So, what should I do?”

“She needs to give them her DNA sample.”

Gloria shook her head and fought to hold back her tears. It had all been an act. Collin didn't really give a shit.

She shoved his arm out of her way and stepped across the porch and away from him. She swallowed her hurt and her rage before responding icily, “I'll call the station. If they let me talk to her, I'll remind her to listen to exactly what her lawyer says to do and no one else.” Her voice warmed as she spoke until the unspoken, “fuck you,” was too thick of an undertone for him to ignore. “Now get out.”

She caught just a flash behind his eyes before he screamed, “Fuck!” and slammed his fist into the log exterior wall of her cabin. Then he shook his fist and paced a few times before stopping as far from her as he could get.

“That’s not it.” He huffed and glared at her before continuing. “Gloria, I know Lily didn’t do it. I’m with you, and I agree. The DNA would prove her innocence and force everyone to refocus because you are exactly right. The killer is still out there. Hell, still out *here!* Right fucking here. Where you are. And I’m fucking terrified that—“

He ran his non-bloody hand through his hair, so it was standing in all directions, and turned his back to her. “I can’t find you that way. It’ll break me. I’d like to sleep on your couch or your floor, but if you won’t let me, I’ll sleep here on your porch, or in the fucking dirt if I have to.”

With his back turned, Gloria had to take a few steps closer to be sure she could understand what he was saying.

“Why?” she couldn’t stop herself from asking any more than could stop herself from wondering if the whole thing was just a ploy to get more information about her family and her sister.

Collin winced and turned back around. “I’m not them, Gloria. I’m not disappearing like your parents and uncle, abandoning you like your aunt, or using you like Doug did. Let me be here for you, please. I know you don’t let anyone in. I’ve seen how good you are at dealing with everything yourself, but I was hoping maybe you’d let me in.”

He looked heartbroken. That couldn’t be right. And what the fuck did he mean about her not letting people in? She ran a freaking hostel and had random hikers staying with her all the time.

“You can’t expect me to believe you care about me after how cold you are when we’re around other people.”

Collin looked down at his feet. “I’m not cold to you. I’m not trying to deny our relationship.”

“Yeah? Then what are you doing? The minute we’re around others, you get all professional and stay a nice arm’s length away from me.”

“No, that’s not it.”

Gloria gave a disbelieving snort.

“I was plenty close to you every time we went out in public on a date.” He paused for a moment of thought. “Okay, I think I get what you’re saying, but Gloria, do you... I mean... Look, the case...”

Gloria gave him the stink eye for that false start.

He stalked over so he was standing right in front of her while cradling the hand he’d used to punch the wall. “I bailed on you that first time we were together out in the woods looking at the scene after dark. I fucked up and took off after the killer instead of staying with you, and in that moment when I turned around and realized what I’d done, I had visions of you in the condition Beth had been in, and I panicked. I completely freaked out. And it just keeps getting worse. The more I get to know you, the more time I spend with you, the more I care about you, the more thinking about the Grapevine Killer getting to you wrecks me. Just thinking about it makes me feel like I’m suffocating or having a heart attack or being

buried alive or, I don't even know, but it makes it completely impossible for me to think, let alone seriously investigate this case. And the only way for me to ensure that you are safe and never suffer what my cousin did is for me to work the case. So yeah, I need a bit of space between us to focus when we're investigating."

Gloria wasn't sure what to say to that and before she could come up with anything, he added, "I'm going to go clean up my hand and take a shower." And he walked away.

# CHAPTER 27

## COLLIN

Collin pored over the evidence as he undressed for his shower. Maybe the warm water could wash away his frustration and clear his mind enough for new ideas. He took one last survey of the notes, maps, and information he had everywhere before taking a deep breath and stepping into the steamy bathroom.

He rolled his neck and tried to relax his shoulders as the hot water cascaded down his back. His mind conjured the comfort of having Gloria tucked against his chest as they snuggled together beneath the warm blankets. He remembered her smile when Lily had shown up, and the way she would relax when he rubbed circles on her back. Alone in the shower, Collin had to admit he had fallen in love with Gloria. Geri's advice had felt crazy that morning, but now he wondered if his outburst of emotional vomit was exactly what they needed.

As he grabbed his shampoo, he found himself stressing about Gloria's reaction to his honesty. He thought about the shocked look on her face and tried comparing it to the shock he'd seen when her aunt had shown up.

Collin's hands froze mid-lather. Gloria's aunt had shown up. Aunt. As in, female relative. Could the DNA be hers instead of Lily's? Holy fuck! He needed to get into town and get Lily to take that DNA test right now!

He frantically rinsed his hair and threw on the first clothes he grabbed. If they could get the results fast enough, he could

bring her home tonight. Even if it did take longer to process, simply knowing there was another option would give him some leverage. He wasn't sure exactly how to use the information, but that was what Somer was for.

Collin glanced at the clock as he grabbed his keys and tried to do the mental math to figure out if Somer would have arrived yet. It was possible, but not likely. She'd have had to leave immediately and sped the whole way. He forced himself to breathe before he cranked the engine and reminded himself that Somer was an in-demand attorney who likely had several things to take care of. She probably wouldn't arrive until this evening. In the meantime, he could use the drive to plan how to convince Sheriff Riley and Agent Harrison to let him bring Lily back to the hostel.

It wasn't until after he'd argued with Lily, after he'd called and spoken with Somer, and after he'd gone a few rounds with Harrison, that Lily was finally getting her cheek swabbed. Sheriff Riley had stayed out of it more than Collin had expected, and his flicker of hope, that had been nearly snuffed out more than once through the whole ordeal, finally burned as a bright and strong flame.

Lily rolled her eyes as the tech explained what he was going to do before telling her to open her mouth wide. Collin flopped back in his chair and breathed a sigh of relief. This would prove Lily's innocence. He allowed his brain to consider what needed to happen next.

He had to return his focus to catching the real killer. Collin smiled as he realized for the first time, he had a real suspect. If the DNA didn't belong to Lily, it must be Aunt Kim's.

At that thought, Collin felt his heart beat with newfound intensity. What the fuck had he done? He truly was an idiot! He'd just promised Gloria that he wouldn't leave her, and then he'd left without even warning her that Kim was the killer!



# CHAPTER 28

## GLORIA

Gloria was just fixing her lunch when there was another knock on her door. She was starting to think she should put a counter on the damn thing to track how many visitors she had. She saw more company this week than she had the entire previous hiking season. Now, if only she could figure out how to make these visitors pay her bills.

Spike was on full alert but stayed silent while she grabbed her shotgun and peeked out to see who it was before rolling her eyes and opening the door. She'd expected it to be Linda or one of the other ladies, but it was her aunt.

She looked at her aunt with her gun pointed toward the ground and greeted her with a cold, "This isn't a good time. What do you want?" This was the last person she had time for right now.

"What's happened? Is Lily okay?"

"If by okay, you mean arrested for murder, sure. She's peachy."

"Lily's not a killer," Aunt Kim said stupidly.

"Yeah, duh."

"I can help—"

Gloria's laugh cut off anything else her aunt might have to say. She didn't believe for one second that the offer was sincere. "We've been just fine without you so far."

She didn't have the time or energy for her aunt's drama, so she started to shut the door in the woman's face.

"Please, Gloria. It won't take long," her aunt said. "I think I can tell you some things that might make more sense of the past. There's another person involved, and I think you need to know about her."

"Why does that not surprise me? Why does it feel like learning you cheated on Uncle Gavin really does make everything make sense?" Gloria was done.

"I never cheated on him, Gloria!"

Gloria pinched her fingers on the bridge of her nose. This was not the time for this. "Ok, look, that's fine. I clearly misunderstood things. How about you head into town for now, and I'll call you later?"

"I'm not sure this can wait."

Gloria looked her directly in the eyes. "I don't have time for you right now."

"Gloria, you have a cousin!"

Nope. Gloria was done. She was going to find the serial killer, get her sister out of jail, build a really fucking tall fence and gate between her property and town, and refuse to see anyone who didn't carry everything they needed in their backpack.

"That's nice, Aunt Kim, but I can't do this with you right now. Get off my property. I'm going to take Spike for a walk,

and then deal with my sister, and then, and *only then*, I will call you to talk about you having a kid.”

Aunt Kim looked less sure of herself than she had when she arrived, but Gloria really was beyond caring. She just needed the woman to go away for now. She could only fight so many fires at a time, and getting her sister out of jail was her first priority.

Gloria grabbed Spike’s leash and headed out for a long walk. She pushed past her aunt and locked the cabin door behind her. She didn’t say another word as she headed across the property. She needed fresh air and trees to clear her mind so she could refocus on what was important. She was going to solve this case, or at least prove her sister’s innocence. Fuck the professionals. They were clearly idiots. As she heard her aunt’s car start up and drive away, she found herself heading toward the house as her thoughts drifted to the old book Lily had been talking about.

It took a bit of rummaging, but she found the book in the attic at the bottom of a box labeled “Gavin’s Stuff.”

It was dustier and older than she remembered. Since Spike couldn’t climb the ladder to the attic, she’d left him downstairs. He’d barked a few times a little while ago but stopped before she felt the need to go check on him. Now, she closed the box and shoved it back against the wall before grabbing the book. She wanted to take it back to the table downstairs, where she could look at it more closely.

She entered the kitchen to find Linda already sitting at the table. She touched the woman's shoulder so as not to startle her too much.

“Oh hi! I hope you don't mind I came on in. Spike was all worked up but settled once I started petting him. I'm guessing this is your old house?”

Remembering their previous conversation, Gloria spoke clearly, but didn't scream at the woman as she responded, “Yes. My sister, Lily, still lives here. There are too many memories for me.”

Linda nodded her understanding. “What's that?” she gestured toward the book.

Gloria sighed and set it on the table. “My aunt and uncle kept an old nature book that they turned into a scrapbook of sorts. Lily mentioned a few things about it, so I thought I'd pull it out.”

Just then, they heard the rumble of an engine tearing up the drive. Gloria grabbed the book, and Linda grabbed Spike's leash as they headed out to see who was here.

They stepped onto the porch just in time to see Collin fling himself from the driver's seat and fly up the steps to Gloria's cabin without so much as closing his car door.

Neither Linda nor Gloria said a word. They could both see the panic in his actions and headed in his direction. Geri, Betty, and Joan apparently saw or heard the commotion as well, and joined them.

Collin hadn't bothered to knock before flinging open the front door and bursting inside. By the time all five women were climbing the steps behind him, he was returning to the front room with wide eyes and crazy hair sticking out in all directions.

The second he spotted Gloria, he leapt toward her. She had just enough time to pass the book she was holding over to Joan before he enveloped her in a clutching hug.

"Oh my God! Gloria, you're okay. Thank goodness. I was so worried. I thought she'd get to you because I left because I'm such an idiot. I'm so sorry. Please believe me. I know how stupid it was—"

"Collin, stop! What are you talking about?" Gloria loved being in his arms, but she didn't understand what he was saying. They'd last parted ways after he'd left to go take a shower. He had promised to protect her, but she didn't understand the connection between that and his current rambling. What was she missing?

Gloria managed to pull her head back far enough to get a look at Collin's face, but he refused to let go of her completely. She saw the pool of tears in his eyes and felt the terror in his grip.

"Hey, Collin. It's okay. I'm okay. What's going on?"

Before he could answer, Geri spoke up. "Unless you two need us for something, we'll head back to our own cabins. We'll take Spike with us, so you two have some privacy." All four women snickered as they walked away.

“Thank you,” Collin called out to them as he swept Gloria up into his arms and carried her into the cabin. “I promise, I’ll explain, and I’ll make it up to you. Let’s just go inside first.”

“Why are you sorry?” People only apologized when they knew they’d be caught doing something awful, and she wanted to know what he’d done.

“Just this morning, I told you I was not leaving you, and then I did. The minute I figured out how to prove Lily’s innocence, I just took off and left you here. But I swear, the thought of you being the next victim scares me more than anything else ever has in my life. As I was standing there watching them swab Lily’s cheek, I realized what could be happening right that minute.”

Gloria was still in his arms, but it didn’t stop her from pulling back in astonishment. “You know Lily’s innocent?”

“Oh, I’m sure Lily is guilty of many things. In fact, I’m willing to bet she’s been lying to the police, obstructing justice, and tampering with evidence. I just don’t think killing anyone is on the list.”

“Huh.” Gloria’s shoulders relaxed just a bit. “You can put me down now, you know.”

“Uh, right. Sorry. No. Actually, I’m not sorry for scooping you up. I’ve been wanting to do it since the moment I met you. Our time together during the storm meant more to me than I was comfortable saying, but I’m done with that. I might make a fool of myself, but at least I’ll know I tried. I’m falling in love with you, Gloria. You’ve built this amazing life in the

most beautiful place in the world. You are so strong and don't put up with anyone's bullshit. I admire everything about you, from the way your ass sways when you're angry to the jiggle of your breasts when you laugh. I'm infatuated with your kind and welcoming nature and the way it floats above your rock-solid core that weathers every storm."

She wasn't sure she was ready to share her entire life with him, but letting him carry her to bed felt like more fun than arguing. Besides, if she were being completely honest, she'd have to admit that she kind of liked having him around, especially now that she knew he really did believe Lily was innocent.

She was even starting to think she might understand his standoffish behavior when focusing on work.

By the time the last of their clothing hit the floor, she'd forgotten all about being mad at him. Instead, she was trying to picture how they could build a life together. "I love you, too, you know," she confessed quietly as he rocked into her.

Afterward, she lay with her head on his chest as she voiced her final fear. "I don't like the idea of you leaving when this case is done."

Collin hummed at her and rubbed her back. "Gloria Lopez, I can't picture ever voluntarily walking away from you."

"What about your job?"

"I haven't been happy with the FBI for a while now." Collin sighed. "A while ago, I took some time off to help out a friend



up in Vermont...”

“That’s when you met Geri and her friends, right?”

“Yeah. I’m still not sure what I think about that, but I do know I felt better there than I did back in my office. And here, at this hostel with you? It feels like home in a way nothing else really has before. Growing up with my mom, aunt, and cousin was great, but I was the only guy around, and I always felt like a bit of an interloper. It always felt like I had the responsibility of taking care of them. Here, with you, I still feel that, but it’s different. The feeling is more conscious. When I let my guard down, I still think about you and worry, but it’s like I know you can handle yourself just fine. It makes me feel lighter.”

“I like this side of you. You’ve shared more with me in the last twenty-four hours than you did in the first four days we spent together.” Gloria wasn’t sure what spurred the change. It made her wary.

Collin’s chuckle didn’t reassure her. “Yeah, I talked to Geri for a bit this morning. She basically told me to vomit my emotions all over you.”

That was enough of a visual image to send Gloria into laughter that brought on tears. She felt Collin’s hand rubbing gentle circles on her back. Once she’d gotten her blubbering self under control, he asked, “Tell me what else is going on, please. I know you and Lily talked this morning.”

Gloria didn’t want to tell him, but she figured if he could vomit his emotions, she could trust him with everything she and her sister had figured out.

“Okay.” She sighed and sat up enough to wipe her face and figure out where to start. Gloria felt a bit like she was leaping off a cliff. She just hoped there was a deep pool of water for her to land in and not a bunch of jagged rocks that would snap her neck.

“I told you Nicole was Lily’s ex-girlfriend. Lily came out to my parents in March of her junior year of high school. My parents weren’t the most open-minded, and they announced they’d be cutting her out of their will and kicking her off Great Hikes the minute she graduated.

“Didn’t they die in April of that year?” Gloria was impressed that Collin remembered that detail.

“Yeah. They died before they had a chance to change anything on paper. Lily was 17, but I was 22 and convinced the court to let her stay with me. Since she was my only remaining family, I was happy to keep her close. I told you she brought Nicole to the funeral as a final *fuck you* to my parents, but they broke up right after. They ended up friends but never rekindled any kind of relationship. They actually did a fair bit of section hiking together as Lily got ready for her thru-hike.”

“Okay.”

“That’s not the important part, though. When Lily showed up the other day, she told me she’d been hiking with this most recent victim. Her name’s Eliza, but her trail name is “T-mobile.” Lily didn’t know her last name. Anyway, Lily has a theory about how or why the killer chooses her victims. See, having dated Nicole, Lily knew her habit of hiking with music

blasting from her phone without using earbuds.” Gloria paused to check that Collin was following along.

He was nodding, and she was relieved to see he understood how disrespectful it was to listen to music on-trail in any way that would disrupt the peace and quiet of nature.

She continued, “It drove Lily nuts, but Nicole was known for dancing up and down the trail more than she hiked it. It was how she earned the trail name “Dancer.” And she said T-mobile slept with her food instead of hanging it.” Gloria looked at Collin, hoping that he’d start to connect the same dots.

“Wait, so Lily thinks the Grapevine Killer is going after people who don’t follow best-practice on the trail?”

“Basically, but there’s a bit more to it.”

“Wait, do you already think your aunt’s the killer?”

“What?” Collin was looking at her like she should know what he was talking about. “Why do you think Aunt Kim’s the killer?”

“The DNA evidence. It belongs to a female relative of yours, so it has to be your aunt, right?”

“Uncle Gavin was my dad’s brother. Kim’s only my aunt by marriage.”

Before Gloria could ask any more questions or finish telling Collin what she and Lily had figured out, there was a banging on the door followed by Linda shouting, “Collin! Geri found

something and needs you. She said to put your pants on and get your ass over to her cabin.”

Gloria groaned, but Collin rolled out of bed and grabbed his pants. “If it were anyone but Geri, I’d ignore it. But she’s the one who suggested giving us privacy and pushed me to talk to you, so if she’s calling me over there, it’s important.”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“You should come too.”

“Nah, I need tea and a snack. Just come back quick.” Then she winked at him. It felt overt and stupid, but the grin he gave her prevented her from regretting it.

“I’m going to ask Linda to stay here with you. I still don’t like the thought of anyone being alone right now.”

She waved him off. “That’s fine.”

As she pulled on her own clothes, she heard him chatting with someone in the cabin before the door opened and closed as he left.

# CHAPTER 29

## COLLIN

Collin walked into Geri's cabin to find her and Betty sitting on the bed with a book spread out between the two of them. They were pointing at different details on the page between glances back at a sheet of paper Betty was holding. They looked up when he walked in and started talking over each other right away.

"We've got it all figured out, I think." Geri announced.

"We were missing an important detail," Betty added.

"It's all in this book."

"And the note. Don't forget to show him the note," Betty prompted.

Collin closed his eyes and prayed for patience. He wanted to be back in bed with Gloria, discussing his options to leave the FBI and join local law enforcement, or transfer offices, or get a job with the forestry department. The last would be a big jump, but maybe that was what he needed. If nothing else, losing Beth had reminded him of what really mattered in his life. Meeting Gloria and seeing what she'd built here had solidified his desire to get out of the city and settle down in a rural community where he could hike every day if he wanted.

But first, he needed to close this case, and when the dust settled, he needed Gloria to still be alive. Bonus points if he could reconnect her and Lily. As he released his breath and

opened his eyes, he pulled back his shoulders and asserted himself as the FBI agent he still was for now.

“Enough. Betty, you point. Geri, you talk. That’s it. You tell me what you found, and why it matters, and nothing else. I’m giving you two minutes, so talk fast.” Then he glared at Betty. “Don’t you dare interrupt. Just point.”

Geri grinned at him with pride, “That’s my boy. Alright, Gloria said Lily mentioned this book. We don’t exactly know why, but there was a letter inside from Kim to Gavin dated 15 years ago.” Geri looked at Betty, who pursed her lips, pushed the loose paper in front of him, and poked it repeatedly with her pointer finger.

“Okay.” Collin started to read the letter, but it was long, and he wasn’t sure what he was looking for.

“It’s Kim telling Gavin they have a kid, but she’s terrified he’ll hurt his daughter the way he hurt her. Apparently, he had some bad PTSD. Anyway, Kim named the daughter Flower.” Collin gave Geri a side-eyed look when she couldn’t contain her snort of derision over the name.

Then he waved his hand for her to continue.

“Basically, she promised that she’d tell Flower all about Gavin. She gave him a PO box where he could send pictures or letters or anything he wanted, but she refused to tell Gavin where they were and didn’t want him to meet Flower. She mentions including a picture of Flower’s first steps, but we haven’t found the picture.”

“Well, that’s certainly interesting, but how—” Collin stopped himself because he knew exactly how it related to the case. Hell, he probably knew better than Geri and Betty did. They’d found DNA of Gloria’s female relative, but it wasn’t Lily’s, and Kim was only related by marriage. That left Flower.

He still had questions, though. “How long ago was the letter?”

Geri looked at Betty, who gave them both an inquisitive look before double checking the date on the letter that she still had her hand on. “A little over fifteen years ago.”

“Does it say how old Flower was at the time? Or do either of you know exactly when Kim left Gavin? Though that doesn’t mean they never saw each other again later.” Collin’s voice trailed off as he tried to think back through everything Gloria had told him about her family.

“She says toddler, so I’m guessing between two and four.” Betty responded.

Collin did the math and was pretty sure Kim had left about seventeen years ago, so having a two-year-old would fit with leaving around the time she was pregnant. Now he just needed to figure out what to do with this information. Where was Flower, and why would she be coming after Gloria? How did Kim fit into everything?



# CHAPTER 30

## GLORIA

**B**efore Gloria could even make it out of the bedroom, she heard Joan calling her name. “You’ve got a visitor pulling up in a Volkswagen bus!”

Gloria slumped. There was only one person she knew who drove a bus. It had to be her aunt. She steeled herself for what was sure to be a delightful conversation and headed to the front room to answer the door.

She peered through the window in the door to confirm that it was Aunt Kim, and then opened the door with a sigh. “Hi, Aunt Kim. Now’s not really a great time.”

“Oh dear, I understand. I’ll make some tea, and you can tell me all about it. I just wanted you to be sure to meet your cousin, Flower.”

Before Gloria could protest, Aunt Kim and a younger woman had shoved past her. Aunt Kim was busying herself in the kitchen getting water on to boil and mugs down from the cupboard, while the girl, Flower, she presumed, headed for the living room and started introducing herself to Linda and Joan.

Gloria stuck close to Aunt Kim and tried to help in the kitchen, but she was quickly shooed out to the living room and told to spend time getting to know her cousin.

Flower looked as uncomfortable as Gloria felt, so she tried to ease the tension by asking how old she was, and if she was in school.

“I’m seventeen, but I graduated high school early. Eventually, I want to get a business degree to take over the family business, but its current mismanagement makes it important for me to take charge now. I can finish my education while I work.”

Flower’s response surprised Gloria on several levels, but before she could ask follow-up questions, Aunt Kim brought out a tray of five mugs, a sugar bowl, and a stack of spoons. She set the whole thing on the side table before asking who’d like sugar and carefully handing out mugs.

Once everyone was settled, Aunt Kim gracefully lowered herself to sit on the floor with her legs crisscrossed in front of her. “I added ice, so no one should need to worry about burning their tongues. The tea is a special blend. I dry myself.”

Joan and Linda thanked her politely and started taking uncomfortable sips to occupy themselves. Gloria set her mug on the table. Something about this felt wrong. What had Flower been talking about?

“Oh Gloria, dear, you’ve grown up into such a lovely young lady. Are you dating anyone now? I’ve seen that handsome man here. Is he yours? I don’t see a ring on your finger, but then in today’s world, that doesn’t mean anything.”

As Aunt Kim prattled on about various topics, Gloria developed a deeply uneasy feeling and debated walking over to the front door to grab her gun and bring it closer. But couldn’t come up with a reasonable excuse to sit in her own

living room with four other women while cradling a shotgun in her arms.

When Gloria didn't respond to Aunt Kim's prompts, Kim asked, "Gloria? Is the tea not good? Would you like me to get you something different?" She looked more scolding than concerned by Gloria's untouched mug.

"No, I'm good. I have some things I need to take care of. Perhaps we should get together at a different time." She didn't want Kim in her house anymore. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Flower, but now really isn't a great time for company."

"Oh, nonsense. It's fine." Kim didn't smile, though. Instead, she turned her focused gaze to Joan and Linda, who had both finished their drinks and were listing toward each other. "Ladies, you should set your mugs on the table before your nap."

With that, Kim rose to one knee and stood up without tipping her own mug. She set it down gently before helping the two older women do the same. "These two are really tuckered out," she turned to say to Kim as Joan slumped sideways. Linda was slower to go down and raised a waving hand as she argued, "Hey, what kinda tea was it?"

Before Gloria could fully process what was happening, Kim had shushed Linda into dreamland beside Joan. At least, Gloria hoped they were only sleeping.

She stood up, but Kim was between her and the front door. "Oh no, there's no need for you to do anything but drink your own tea. It will be so much better for you than the alternative."

“Yeah, no. What the fuck was in that tea?”

“It was just some special leaves and other natural remedies to help them relax. Don’t worry, yours has half the nightshade I put in theirs. After all, Flower still needs you to answer a few questions for us, so she can properly take control of the business.”

Gloria had been shaking her head no and backing away, but once her back was against the wall, she wasn’t sure where to go next.

“Tsk, tsk. You always had to do things the hard way.” Kim reached down to grab her bag and pulled out a taser. “Now tell us where the deed is. Did your parents even bother to make out a will? If so, a copy of that would be nice as well. It might take a bit of doing, but Gavin was the older brother, so this place should pass on to him and his heirs. If I’d realized he’d died all those years ago, I’d have brought Flower back to claim her property then, but your family never did bother to consider my well-being.”

“It’s you. Why? I don’t get it.” Gloria was starting to see how some of the puzzle pieces fit together, but there were still holes. “I don’t understand.”

“Of course not, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to get sucked into a full conversation, either. Just know that I didn’t intend for it to land on your sister, but when she stuck her nose into the situation, I didn’t have much choice. The trail must be protected. Mother nature deserves our respect, and those

fuckers couldn't follow even the basics. That was why your business has been so slow.”

Kim stepped toward Gloria, aimed, and fired the taser. It only missed because Gloria was able to step far enough to the side that only one prong connected with her. The other barb crashed into the chair she'd stepped behind, rendering the whole thing useless. Without the barbs embedded in Gloria, Kim was left holding nothing more than a wire tether.

Part of Gloria wanted to stop and stare in awe at the situation, but she knew this was her split-second opportunity. She wasn't going to waste it. She glanced around to look for Flower but didn't see her anywhere. Gloria could find Flower after she took down Kim.

She hopped out from behind the chair, pulled the wires to yank the taser back to her and throw Kim off balance. Then Gloria charged forward with a roar.

“Aaaarrrrrrggggggghhhh!” There was no plan and no coordination. Gloria did not throw a punch, do a karate chop, or elegantly swipe Kim's legs out from under her. Instead, she threw her entire body into Kim with every bit of force and ounce of weight she had. As they crashed to the ground, Gloria continued to smash forward with her head, hands, shoulders, and elbows. She pulled hair, ripped clothing, and shook the lunatic beneath her with every ounce of energy and anger she had.

Vaguely, Gloria could hear Kim shouting and grunting in pain, but she wasn't about to stop. She grabbed Kim's head

and bashed it against the floor while sitting astride her slender body. Eventually, she realized that she was the only one left grunting and shouting. The body beneath her was limp. She didn't see any blood, but still Gloria held her breath while waiting to see if Kim's chest would rise and fall. She wouldn't have been surprised to find the woman lifeless, but Gloria didn't want to be a killer. She didn't want to go to prison or live her life knowing she'd stolen the life of another in a blind rage.

When she saw the gentle rise and fall of the other woman's chest, she leapt up to grab her phone and call Collin. Before she could make it over to the kitchen counter where she'd left her phone, it began to dance and vibrate. Snatching it up, she saw Betty's name on the display and hoped it would be Collin.

“Collin?”

“Gloria? Oh, thank God!” It wasn't the deep rumble of Collin. It was Betty's voice.

“Betty? Where's Collin?”

“The crazy girl took him. She just barged in here with her gun out and made him come with her. I don't know if he's armed, but she wouldn't let him near her. She just gave him directions to walk back toward your cabin with his arms up. Geri's trying to climb out the bathroom window to sneak into her cabin so she can give you back-up, but she's having trouble squeezing through the opening. It's a bit like when Winnie-the-Pooh got stuck in his hole after he ate too much honey.”

Gloria could hear Geri struggling and swearing in the background. Just then, she heard footsteps walking up the stairs of her porch.

“They’re here! Betty, tell Geri to use the door, and call Special Agent Harrison with the FBI. You’ll have to find his number.”

She didn’t have a chance to listen to Betty’s response or click the end button before Collin opened the front door and stepped through. He tried to kick it closed behind him, but Flower must have been prepared for that. Her foot was up to block it and kick it back open.

“Don’t move any closer to her, or I’ll shoot you,” Flower said. “The same goes for you, *Gloria*. I know you love him and are too soft-hearted to let me shoot him. So, you’re going to do exactly what I say.”

Then Flower looked down at her unconscious mother sprawled across the floor and chuckled. “Thanks for taking care of her for me. Did you know my stupid mother actually wanted to help you?” The level of derision in Flower’s voice surprised Gloria.

She wasn’t sure how to respond and was trying to figure out what to do. Collin was making an odd squinty face at her. She suspected he was trying to tell her not to do anything stupid, but the joke was on him. She didn’t have a clue what counted as smart versus stupid in this situation.

Right after the accident that killed her parents, Gloria had been completely overwhelmed trying to get custody of Lily,



figure out how to earn money to pay bills, deal with the estate, and handle her parent's final arrangements.

One afternoon, Todd had stopped by to check on her and found her sobbing with frustration, anger, fear, and loss. He'd come in and helped, but along the way, he'd accidentally given her the best advice she'd ever received. He told her to feel all the feels separately from shoveling the shit. Once she'd dried her tears, he'd reminded her that moving a giant pile of shit requires focusing on one shovel full at a time.

That was how she'd dealt with everything. She'd done just one thing, and then just one more.

This moment felt similar. She needed to keep Flower from firing the gun. She needed to get Collin and herself away from Flower. If she could hold out long enough, eventually Harrison would arrive with the cavalry.

It was with those thoughts in the back of her mind that she allowed herself to focus on the surprising information Flower was sharing. "Wait, what do you mean she wanted to help us?" she asked.

Flower's chuckle deepened into a menacing rumble before she answered, "She thought we should run this place *with* you. She's so fucking naïve, she actually believed you'd be willing to share it with us. I'm not that stupid. This is my legacy and my inheritance. It should have been left to me. My mother might not have been strong enough to stand up to your family back when she lived here, but that's not a problem for me."

“So, you’ve been killing people along the trail?” Collin was gently nodding his head and smiling at Gloria. She assumed that meant she was doing well. Flower still had her gun aimed at his back and was keeping Collin between the two of them, so Gloria couldn’t get a clear view of her. She wasn’t close enough for Collin to spin around and reach her, and she’d positioned herself just inside the edge of the doorway, so it wasn’t an easy-to-spot target.

“That’s working out even better than I’d hoped. I’d hoped that killing one person would drive down your business enough to force you to sell. Then I could just swoop in, show you I was the rightful owner and take it off your hands. I was spending time on the trail planning everything when I realized how horribly some of these idiots treat the place. That first woman left trash all around the fire pit at the shelter. Who does that?”

Gloria watched Collin’s jaw clench and his hands ball into fists. She willed him not to do anything that would end with Flower shooting him.

Flower was oblivious and kept talking, though. “Killing her felt like I was already taking care of my new home, so when I saw an asshole bragging about cutting through switchbacks and blazing new trails around corners, I figured I should do my part to stop him.”

“Are you saying you killed Nicole because she was listening to music?” Gloria knew that Flower was nuts, but that felt like

a stretch, even for her. At least she'd moved on from talking about killing Beth.

“Oh no. That stupid bitch was prancing along the trail with her music blaring. I used my earbuds to force her to show a little respect.”

“After you killed her?”

Flower's sly grin made Gloria shiver. “Did you like that I left her right here for you? I realized how much the media was starting to cover the murders and figured leaving a body here would be great publicity for the hostel. Once I took over and the deaths stopped, everyone would know this place. Hell, I figure it'll be the most popular place on the trail this year.”

“Now that your sister has been arrested, my work is even easier. I just need to leave your bodies where no one can find them. I'm thinking the rock field is the perfect place. The animals will handle your remains long before another human finds you.”

“Six bodies are a lot to deal with.” Gloria was actively working to shove feelings aside and focus on one shovel full of shit at a time. Flower would need to deal with her, Collin, and the four women whose company Gloria had come to enjoy.

“I only need to deal with two bodies. Mommy dearest will shoulder the blame for poisoning the old ladies. I'll just add a small injection to these two and give the other two a larger dose. Now, let's get the two of you tied up, so I can deal with that in peace before we go for your final hike.”

Fuck! The distract and delay portion of Gloria's loose attempt at a plan was coming to an end. She needed to figure out what to do next.

Just as she was starting to panic, she caught a glimpse of Betty through the cabin window. She tried her damndest not to react but was thrilled to only have to school her face for a few seconds before Geri burst through the front door, swinging a stick at Flower's head.

"Get her gun!" Geri shouted as she swung.

Collin was closest and didn't waste the opportunity. "Got it," he confirmed.

Gloria looked over to see Kim's breathing had shifted, and she had started to shift her body. Gloria didn't hesitate as she gave the woman a swift kick to the side of her head to knock her out again. There was a brief flash of worry about doing brain damage, but Gloria wasn't willing to risk anyone else's safety right then. Kim might not have been the killer, but she had been the one to drug Joan and Linda.

# CHAPTER 31

## COLLIN

**T**hank God for crazy old ladies! The way Flower had talked about his cousin had made his blood run cold.

He spent a moment taking stock of the situation. Gloria had just kicked Kim in the face, so she was out cold. Flower was moaning and worming around a bit, but she was mostly unconscious. Linda and Joan were both flopped on the couch.

He nodded to them before asking, “Any idea if they’re still alive?” While Flower had mentioned further poisoning them, that wasn’t enough for him to feel confident they were okay.

Betty was closest to the couch, since she’d been the last one to enter, so she headed over to check on them. “They’re both breathing with steady pulses,” she assured them. “What happened to them?”

“Kim was kind enough to make us some tea. I just didn’t drink mine.”

“Hmm. Any idea what was in it? Linda’s on some heart medication that has lots of possible interactions.” Betty stepped closer to Linda and picked up her wrist to check her pulse more closely.

“Uh, she said something about nightshade. Knowing her, she found it growing around the trail.” Gloria sounded strong for now, but Collin could already hear the beginning exhaustion that would hit like a semi-truck when her adrenaline dropped. It was time to be done with this.

“We need to call Harrison and get agents up here immediately.”

Before he could go looking for his phone, Betty informed him that she’d already made the call. Gloria had no compunction about zip-tying Flower’s hands and feet into a hog tie configuration before rolling her on her side.

While they waited for reinforcements, Collin wanted one more question answered, but it wasn’t a question for Flower or Kim. He kept an eye on Flower but directed his words to Geri.

“I couldn’t help noticing that everyone’s alive, and there are no bullet holes in anything. What made you choose the stick instead of your gun?” He was incredibly grateful she had and didn’t want to kick a gift-horse in the mouth, but his curiosity demanded some explanation.

Geri harrumphed and grumbled for a minute before answering, “Betty pointed out it would be easier to clear Lily’s name if Flower were alive to answer questions.”

Collin looked to Betty and raised his eyebrows. While she did tend to be the voice of logic among the four of them, she wasn’t known for her restraint.

She shrugged and added, “Last time we were at the range, her aim was a little off. I think she’s got a touch of glaucoma and didn’t want her to shoot you or Gloria by mistake.”

Geri shot eye daggers at Linda but didn’t argue.

EPILOGUE



## Six Months Later

Gloria had been worried Collin would miss being an FBI agent, but Todd had helped him transition to forest ranger. It hadn't been as tough as either of them had feared, and Collin loved spending his days in the woods.

Gloria loved that he spent his nights in her bed.

Without a professional pull to maintain a calm and cold exterior, Collin was one hundred percent an affectionate lover. If she was within his arm's reach, he'd reach out for her in some way. Sometimes, he'd link just his pinky in hers, while other times, he'd step up behind her and wrap his arms around her while kissing the top of her head.

With him beside her, Gloria had no trouble finding the gumption to go into town regularly and had reconnected with several old friends. Collin was subtle about it, but anytime someone started to mention a rumor, he'd shut it down fast.

Flower had turned out to be right about one thing, though. With all the publicity the hostel had gotten, it turned out to be their biggest and busiest season ever. Apparently, people weird enough to get excited about spending six months living in the woods also got excited about sleeping where a serial killer had hunted.

Gloria wasn't crazy about the reason for Great Hikes' notoriety, but she couldn't complain about what it had done for her bank account.

The only thing missing from her life was her sister. Being arrested for murder had been her last straw with a town that had never been terribly kind to her. She'd packed up her stuff and headed for the Pinhoti trail, located in Alabama and Georgia. For now, she was happy living as a nomad and exploring long trails across the US.

Gloria had talked to Collin about her long-term idea for Lily, and he'd assured her it was brilliant. She'd started saving some money each month, so when Lily was ready to settle down, she'd have what she needed to start her own hostel on any trail she wanted.

She smiled as she watched Collin coming down the blue blaze trail. Spike had run off to greet him. She'd already brought out the food for dinner, and the hikers staying with them were all seated around the tables under the pavilion enjoying their meals. She'd hung back to wait for Collin. Many nights she enjoyed hanging out with hikers, but tonight she'd left their plates back in her cabin.

Flower's trial was scheduled to start tomorrow, and Gloria needed some time alone with the man she loved. When Kim had pled guilty and cut a deal, Gloria had been relieved. She couldn't imagine she'd ever let the woman anywhere near her life again, but she didn't want her to spend her entire life in jail just because her daughter was a wacko.

Flower was a different matter.

She'd killed four innocent people, including Collin's cousin. The compassionate part of Gloria wanted to see the woman get

some help, but there was a bigger part of her that wanted Flower to rot in hell. Then again, if Beth hadn't died, she might not have ever met Collin.

With Lily gone, they'd been talking about renovating the big house to turn it into a bed & breakfast and wedding venue. Recently, Gloria'd been thinking it'd be nice to name it something like Beth's B&B. She figured tonight was as good a night as any to ask Collin his thoughts about that.

Spike was dancing circles around the man as Gloria descended the porch steps to accept his *I'm glad to be home* kiss.

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Writing and publishing a book requires time. More than anything, writers need the time to daydream, the time to type, the time to cry and scream with frustration, the time to revise and recover, and the time to reimagine the story we're creating. This would not have been possible without the support of my family.

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I'm fortunate to have an awesome community in the AWW Romance Writer's group on Facebook. I also benefit from the fantastic support of the All Write Well team.

The most valuable people in any author's career are our readers. Thank you for reading Gloria's Gumption! I'd love it if you clicked on some Amazon stars to help others find this book. You don't even need to write a review; a quick rating helps a lot.

## ABOUT AUTHOR



*This photo captures Maria's time spent section hiking through central Virginia where Gloria's Gumption takes place.*

Maria has a BA in English and an M.Ed. in Secondary English. She spent more than a decade in the classroom helping students grow as authentic writers. Her work alongside them, as a mentor, has been published in the peer-reviewed, professional journal, *Voices from the Middle*.

Maria lives in the woods and loves hiking, reading, and writing. Her first completed work was a play about her family's crazy holiday adventures. It was written in pencil on wide-ruled paper. Maria was 8. Since then, she's worked in

restaurants, gone to college, taught middle school, published some stuff, written scary amounts of online content, and hiked sections of the Appalachian Trail.

When she can't go enjoy an adventure, she writes one down on paper. They usually involve the woods and hot, loving men who support strong women. She's lucky enough to be married to a man willing to cook dinner and care for the dogs when Maria gets too sucked into the story in her head to remember the world around her.

She has recently shifted to working alongside adult writers who want to share their stories but want support and guidance through the writing process. You can learn more about this work at her company website [www.allwritewell.com](http://www.allwritewell.com)

## ALSO BY

Every book in the On-Trail Love Adventure series is written as a standalone, but some side characters like to appear in books that are not their own, “Ahem, I’m talking to you, Geri!” Sometimes, the characters just demand to make an appearance!

**Be sure to join Lucy as she and Jacks must survive being lost and getting kidnapped in Alongside Lucy!**

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**Man is more dangerous than any wild beast!**

When Lucy meets Jacks along the Appalachian Trail, she knows her time to mourn has passed. The feel of his skin against hers sparks arousal that she feared died with her first



love. When he's willing to let her take the lead, she knows their connection isn't limited to the bedroom. Now she just has to keep them alive long enough to get un-lost. It would be easier if she still had her tent, or at least food and water.

Getting lost in the woods of Vermont was not part of Jacks' hiking plans. Thank goodness he's lost with Lucy. Not only has she got great survival skills, but her legs are also amazing. He has no doubt the two of them can survive nature's worst; he's more worried about the owners of the guns that Lucy found. Jacks is determined not to let anyone hurt Lucy.

Too bad not everything is under Jacks' control. When Lucy gets kidnapped, he's determined to rescue her, even if that means enlisting the help of grandmothers with an arsenal in their trunk instead of a spare tire.

*This romantic suspense features a strong, independent woman who wants love for the joy of companionship and a man who seeks a true and equal partner. They'll get their HEA, but not without some help from friends. This standalone romance novel is for women who are brave enough to adventure solo, strong enough to dine alone, and crazy enough to believe they can have all of that and a relationship.*

**Check out [Standing by Stephanie](#) to watch enemies turn to lovers as she and Adam face off against an unstable fellow hiker.**

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**Sometimes, saving the ones we love requires running  
away from them when they're at their most vulnerable.**

When Stephanie got sick, she worried it'd be the end of her Appalachian Trail thru-hike, but she's back on the trail now and not about to let anything, or anyone, stop her.

*Persistent creep bothering another hiker?* Stephanie's happy to step in.

*Bear shreds supplies?* Stephanie has a plan for resupply.

*Hiker hoping the trail will help with his PTSD?* Stephanie is compassionate.

*Misogynist insisting on protecting her?* Stephanie can stand up for herself.

But when mental illness turns to violence and protection starts to feel like love, Stephanie will have to question the actions that align with her values. Is hiking on worth someone losing their life?

Adam loves the trail community and is happy to support and protect solo female hikers, so why is Stephanie so insistent on tackling everything on her own?

He just wants to stand by her and support her hike, but she keeps walking away. Sure, she's got a plan for every situation,

but that won't stop him from helping her out. It's the right thing to do, and she's a beautiful woman.

Yet, the more he gets to know her, the more he starts to see, he might be the one in need of help, and Stephanie might be the woman to save him.

In the unpredictable wilds of the Appalachian Trail, the rules of civilization don't apply, and bears aren't the only beings to fear. How do you call for help when 911 isn't an option?

*This standalone adventure is the perfect thriller for those who enjoy spicy romance in the woods and strong women who aren't afraid to go solo. Join Stephanie and Adam as they explore extracurricular activities in a hammock, avoid snake bites, and get advice from some unique friends while fighting for their HEA.*