



44.1644°
North

JOSH LANYON

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The decades-old disappearance of twenty-one-year-old teaching student Deirdre O'Donnell is the Holy Grail for true-crime buffs—and Skylar Brennan, the host of the *Ugly Town* podcast, is no exception. In fact, on the mean streets of the internet, he's considered an expert on the case. (In law-enforcement circles, he's viewed as just another crackpot amateur sleuth.)

Every February, the remote New Hampshire village of Woodlark holds a candlelight vigil for Deirdre. Family, friends, and “supporters” of the long-missing girl gather at the spot where she was last seen. This is Skylar's first vigil, and his fans are really looking forward to meeting him—though maybe not as much as the anonymous person who emailed him coordinates to Deirdre's grave.

44.1644° North

Josh Lanyon

Prologue

She was not afraid of the dark.

But now, beyond the ominous red flash of the Saturn's hazard lights, her flashlight beam seemed to feebly poke and prod at the shroud of night enveloping Route 112.

It was *very* dark.

Unnaturally dark.

Uh, hello, Deirdre. This near total absence of light was as natural as it got.

Primordial. That was the word.

Really, it wasn't the color of night. It was the woods spooking her. The forbidding black line of sentinel trees that seemed to swallow every sound—her boots crunching on the snow, her brisk, steady inhalations, the crisp rustle of her parka.

She felt like she was being watched.

And that would be because the woods were full of things watching her: deer, rabbits, squirrels. Things that were much more afraid of her than she was of them.

Bear. Occasionally. But there hadn't been a fatal bear attack in New Hampshire since the 1700s. She knew because her family used to summer about forty miles from here.

Technically within walking—or running—distance. At least, for a girl who ran marathons.

But not at night. Not in February. Not in the snow. Not alone. She was not crazy. She was *not* drunk.

That was not to say she could necessarily pass a breathalyzer test. The way things were going, better not risk it.

Still. She knew this was not a great idea.

Her dad would have a fit if he knew. *Is this the advice you'd give one of your students?* That's what he'd say. And no, this was not the advice she'd give one of her students. Especially since her students were kindergarteners. Kindergarteners rarely got nailed for DUIs.

She huffed a shaky laugh. What did it say that she'd rather brave the unknowns of a winter's night in the White Mountain National Forest than face what lay behind her?

And just that, the memory of her compounding troubles, made her heart flinch and recoil.

How? How did I get myself into this?

How do I get myself out?

Dad would say, *The O'Donnells don't run from their troubles.*

She was not running. She was choosing a strategic withdrawal. A tactical retreat.

You've the blood of Irish kings and queens in your veins, girls.

Probably not. But they were named for Irish princesses. All four of the O'Donnell sisters: Grania, Grace, Eva, and Deirdre.

She was no princess, but she was strong. She was smart. She would figure this out.

One day it might even be funny.

Fingers crossed.

Gosh, it was quiet out here.

In a dark, dark wood...

She'd been reading that to the kids last Friday, and she smiled faintly, remembering their shrieking delight at the ending. It never failed.

It's not like she was in the middle of nowhere. Not really. She could see a few scattered window lights, porch lights through the trees. She could ask for help at any of those homes. Better, though, to put some distance between herself and the crash site. Just in case the sheriff's deputy returned.

She needed somewhere warm and quiet to spend the night. It had been a few years since she'd traveled this road, but she was pretty sure there would be lodges, motels down the highway a bit.

Tomorrow she'd retrieve her car and deal with whatever there was to deal with. Everything always looked brighter in the morning. She just needed a good night's sleep—something she hadn't had in...weeks?

Impossible to make important decisions, life-changing decisions when you were this exhausted.

Now that the initial heart-pounding surge of adrenaline had passed, she was starting to feel the aches and pains of the

crash. And the cold... The cold really sucked the energy out of you.

Well, the best remedy for that was to keep moving. The white circle of her flashlight beam bounced playfully ahead of her.

She'd kill for a cup of hot coffee. The stop for lunch at that diner felt like a week ago.

The quiet was getting to her. The *crack* of every tree branch under snow sounded like a gunshot.

How far had she gone? It felt like miles, but the spot where she'd gone off the road was only just out of sight. Maybe she'd flag down the next car that came by. If she could get to a phone, that would simplify things.

After all, she'd been camping a million times. She loved the outdoors.

She began to sing one of those goofy old songs her dad loved, raising her voice in defiance of the ringing silence around her.

"When Irish eyes are smiling..." The air tasted of snow and pine. *"Sure, it's like a morn in spring..."*

Overhead, the tufted stratocumulus layer of clouds drifted, pulled apart, and for a few encouraging seconds, the waning moon glowed warmly, brightly off the snow banks, gilded the tree tops.

"You can hear the angels sing..."

All too soon, the light faded and shadows fell once more. The trailing threads of clouds rewove themselves into a

tapestry of darkness and silence.

Chapter One

“I don’t agree with your theory,” the drunk guy in the blue T-shirt said. “The idea that Deirdre would just *happen* to climb into the wrong car with the wrong guy is too far-fetched. It’s too much of a coincidence.”

I get this a lot, and I smiled politely. “If I told you that an anonymous woman hitchhiking at night in the White Mountains was found murdered, would you say that was too much of a coincidence? Would you even think twice about it?”

We were wedged into a table at the very crowded, very noisy Swiftwater Pub outside the village of Woodlark, NH (population 892—though this weekend that number would swell to something over one thousand). It was on a lonely stretch of mountain highway in this rural outpost off Route 112 that Deirdre O’Donnell, a twenty-one-year-old Massachusetts teaching student, had vanished off the face of the earth almost two decades earlier.

The drunk guy—short sandy hair, florid face, a boyish fortyish hitting his flabby fifties—scowled. “Yeah, but Deedee wasn’t an *anonymous* woman. I mean, what are the odds that *she* of all people, would get into the wrong car at the wrong time?”

“Have you ever seen *Disappeared?*” Kind of a rhetorical question. Most people crowded into the bar area were true-crime buffs and had seen episode six, “Road to Nowhere,” more than once. In fact, that 2010 showing had been Deirdre’s

introduction to most of the country, which until then had been largely ignorant of the 2004 disappearance.

To be honest, most of the country was *still* largely ignorant of Deirdre's disappearance. In internet sleuthing circles, Deirdre was the grand dame of missing girls. In the real world? Just one of currently over five-hundred-thousand missing persons.

“What about it?” Blue T-shirt—had he introduced himself? Everybody was starting to blur together—demanded belligerently.

It always took me aback how personal this was for so many internet sleuths. How deeply, *fiercely* invested they were in their theories.

I said, “Most women who disappear—and these victims are usually, by far, women—got into the wrong car with the wrong man at the wrong time.”

Blue T-Shirt scoffed, “It's too convenient. It's too *easy*.”

“It seems that way to us: how could *she*, of all people? But that's because we've been studying her, analyzing her case for so long. We feel like we know her. She seems like a personal acquaintance. Or even a celebrity. The idea that something like that, so tragically common, so mundane, could happen to *her* is hard to believe. It's like hearing Rihanna was snatched off the road.”

Blue T-shirt's face screwed up in disgust. “Bullshit. That's not what I mean. That's not how it is at all.”

I hung onto what I hoped was an expression of pleasant inquiry—or what my brother Kaj refers to as my *teacher face*.

Says the guy with the *marine biologist* face. “Okay. How is it, then?”

“The boyfriend did it. Tommy Aldrich. Obviously.”

“Ah.”

In fairness to the Tommy Aldrich camp, boyfriends and husbands usually *did* do it. Just as, on the flip side, girlfriends and wives were usually suspect #1 when their significant other went missing or turned up dead. The problem in this case was that Aldrich had an airtight alibi. Confirmed by cell-phone records and security-door hardware. Substantiated by the people who’d been with him on the evening in question. In this case the boyfriend had *not* done it. But that didn’t stop a small, hardcore contingent of amateur sleuths from believing with all their hearts that he had.

Something about this particular case really brought out the kooks and conspiracy theorists. Maybe because of Deirdre herself. The enigma of the girl next door. Smart, pretty, fun, athletic, and responsible. The quintessential good girl. Struggling a little as she tried to navigate the contradictions and complexities of adult life, but nothing she couldn’t have weathered, nothing plenty of other girls before her hadn’t pushed through. A short run of bad luck that had suddenly, without warning, turned catastrophic.

“Don’t patronize me,” Blue T-shirt said. He was staring over my head, scanning the room. He nodded to someone I couldn’t see and jabbed his index finger at me.

What. A. Dick. As Bette Davis would have said. Or maybe she wouldn’t have said that. She’d have thought it, though. That I guarantee. Everybody was thinking it.

Anyway, the blue man was once more honoring me with his full attention. “You pod people are all the same. You think it’s about you. It’s not about *you*.”

I said mildly, “I agree. I don’t think it’s about me.”

“You’re one of the worst. Just because you’re an associate professor wannabe criminologist at some nothing junior college, you think you get to talk down to everyone. The truth is, you’re full of shit.”

In addition to (hopefully?) beer droplets, the blue T-shirt across the table featured a bloody-knife graphic and the words TRUECRIME IRL.

“You could be right.”

“In other words, you just say whatever shit you think will get you listeners.”

If I’d just wanted to argue with people who hated me on general principles, I could have stayed home. I mean, not that there was anyone at home who hated me. There was no one at home at all. Which was probably another reason why I came to this soiree.

I said, “In other words, you can think whatever you like. Same as me.”

“*That’s* what I thought,” Blue T-shirt said with bitter triumph and melted away into the crowd.

“What an ass,” said Hailey, the host of *Coffee, Tea, or Murder?*

“Tell me the whole weekend isn’t going to be like this.”

Hailey didn't exactly laugh, but her lip curled. She was a tiny, fragile-looking thirtysomething with Raggedy Ann-style hair, multiple facial piercings, and black-rose tattoos winding up her throat. She'd had the good sense to drop out of the "debate" early on.

She said, "I mean, seriously, *Tommy*? He might as well suspect Pat."

Pat—Patrick O'Donnell—was Deirdre's father. He too had his... Well, *fans* was hardly the word. But even more people suspected Pat of doing away with his daughter than they suspected Tommy, and with even less reason. Like Tommy, Pat had an unbreakable alibi and, unlike Tommy, zero motive. Not that either of those facts ever discouraged the hardcore conspiracists.

"It's going to be a long weekend." I was mostly thinking aloud. It was a long flight from LA to Lebanon, and a short but trying drive from Lebanon to Hastings. Nor had I been sleeping well. Not since that anonymous email had dropped into my private inbox a month ago.

Hailey laughed. "Nah. Your fans don't know you're here yet. You're going to have a blast. You'll see. You're going to be a regular from here on out."

"Yeah, not so sure about that."

"You want another drink?"

"If I do, I'll be sleeping on the table." It *was* going to be a long weekend, no matter what Hailey said, and I needed to pace myself.

“Probably more comfortable than your bed tonight. I stayed in one of the guest cottages the first year I came for the vigil and, I’m not kidding, it took my chiropractor three months to put my spine back in alignment.”

“I believe you.” My brief glance inside the little ice box designated for my use supported that. I added glumly, “It was all I could get by the time I made up my mind to come.”

“Yeah, I want to hear what changed your mind about showing up this year. Save my seat.” Hailey slipped off the tall wooden stool and began to push through the crowd. *Coffee, Tea, or Murder?* is a very popular podcast. Her progress was slow.

I sighed, toyed with the idea of stepping outside for a breath of fresh air—between the roaring fire at the far end of the taproom and the press of bodies bundled for the ski slopes, it was *very* warm. The air didn’t get much fresher than a February night in the forests of New Hampshire. But if I got up, I’d—literally—lose my place at the table. It had been standing-room only for the last hour or so.

A male voice to my left said, “That wasn’t a bad argument you made.”

I glanced around and gazed into a pair of light and lively eyes. The eyes were the best feature of an otherwise pleasant but nondescript face. High forehead, rectangular jaw, pointed chin: symmetrical to the point of monotony. No, wrong. The smile that accompanied the words was terrific.

I blinked in the radiance of all that good use of time and dental floss. “Yeah? Thanks.”

Like me, this guy was somewhat older than the late-twenties-early-thirties crowd. I was thirty-three. I thought he might be a bit older. The faint lines around his eyes weren't all due to laughter. He had dark brown hair, light maybe-blue eyes, and was a little over average height with an athletic build.

In short: just my type.

He was saying in an easy baritone, "Other than the fact that there's no data to suggest hitchhiking is an exceptionally dangerous endeavor."

"Oh, I know. I've seen that 1974 CHP report."

"And according to the FBI—"

I finished, "Less than a thousand rapes and murders along the interstates between 1979 and 2009."

"Correct." He smiled again and offered a tanned, well-shaped hand—class ring, no wedding band. "Rory."

It suited him. It also didn't ring any bells for me. We shook hands. "Skylar."

"Ah. Skylar Brennan. *Ugly Town*, right?"

"Right."

"I've listened to you a few times."

I waited to hear more, but that seemed to be it. Not exactly effusive. In fact, downright noncommittal, but that was okay. I wasn't here to build my fan base.

I felt it was only right to point out, "Anyway, less than a thousand rapes and murders is still a lot of rape and murder."

“I don’t disagree.”

I couldn’t help a little snort. “Then you’re in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“You people *do* argue a lot.” There was no denying the appeal of that smile. All the same...

I tilted my head, giving him another, closer look. “*You people? You’re not one of us?*”

He avoided my eyes as he sipped his beer. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“What would you say?”

“I’m more of an observer than a participant.”

“That’s how it starts.”

“It’s how most things start.”

“True. But you’re a true-crime fan?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Should you really admit to being a *fan* of true crime?”

“Good point.”

Hmm.

Hailey returned, drinks in hand, and introductions were shouted across the table. If possible, the noise level had gone up a couple of decibels in the last five minutes.

She looked at Rory, looked at me, and in answer to her silent inquiry, I shouted, “Rory’s making the argument that violent crime wasn’t all that common along the interstate back in 2004.”

Hailey, who shared my theory that Deirdre had most likely climbed into the wrong car at the wrong time, leaped into the fray. “Okay, but Route 112 is not an interstate highway. Maybe the rates for homicide and sexual assault are higher on back roads and country lanes.”

“Maybe. Do you know of any data to support that?”

Why did I feel like Rory had probably seen the data?

Hailey shrugged. “That doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.”

Rory didn’t exactly wink, but his eyes got a little twinkly when he was amused. And he seemed to find us pretty amusing. Saving up stories to share at the next office party?

Not that Rory looked like a guy who spent a lot of time at a desk.

Gentleman explorer? His clothes were so perfect, they could have been chosen by a film wardrobe department.

No, if I had to guess, I’d say Rory looked like someone who spent time on the firing range. I was starting to get a stop-in-the-name-of-the-law vibe.

Anyway, his curiosity appeared genuine when he asked, “Why do you think she turned down help from the bus driver and hid from the sheriff’s deputy?”

Hailey made a face. “I don’t think there’s any mystery about that.”

“No?” Rory turned to me. “You seem pretty confident you know what was going on that night.”

There was definitely a challenge in that.

Which I accepted. “No. I don’t know what happened that night. I just try to think, given this set of circumstances, what’s the most likely thing that would have happened. And then I go from there.”

“And you think that in this set of circumstances, the most likely thing is this lone girl, over a hundred miles from home, would turn down help after a car crash?”

Hailey said, “That’s what she did.”

Rory waited, eyes on mine.

Did I know him from somewhere? Because he sure seemed to know me.

I said, “She wasn’t injured, and it was obvious the car wasn’t going anywhere that night. I think she couldn’t be sure she wouldn’t get a DUI. A DUI is a disaster for anyone at any time. And the timing for Deirdre would have been especially problematic. She just needed six to eight hours to make sure the alcohol was out of her system, and then she could safely retrieve her car and see about salvaging her plans for the week.”

“So she leaves the scene of an accident?”

I glanced at Hailey. She wrinkled her nose but restrained herself to swallowing a mouthful of beer.

I said, “There was no property damage, no injury to anyone or anything. In New Hampshire, that’s a misdemeanor at most. Yes, she’d risk being cited for a misdemeanor over a DUI. Most kids her age—and probably a lot of adults—would do the same.”

Rory considered, conceded. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“Also, though there’s plenty of debate about the run-down condition of her car and the cause of the accident, there’s more reason to believe the car stalled out than she overshot the curve. I think she was shaken up, but still thinking clearly, weighing the risks, considering her options.”

“Walking off into a winter’s night was thinking clearly? You have an unusual perspective.”

I shrugged. “Do I? Sometimes we all have a tendency to forget that Deirdre was only twenty-one.”

“An adult.”

“Sure. Technically. But twenty-one is pretty damned young. Take it from someone who’s spent years trying to teach twenty-one-year-olds stuff they don’t think they need to know.”

His smile was half-grimace. “Okay, I have to give you that one.”

“In fact, if I consider some of the decisions I made at twenty-one, chances I took, risks I thought were worth it?” I shook my head. “At twenty-one you still feel invincible.”

“Truth.” Hailey wiped foam from her lip.

“If you stop thinking of Deirdre as a helpless victim following some preordained path to her doom and start viewing her as a resourceful young woman determined to get out of a scrape, her choices make perfect sense. She couldn’t anticipate she might be that unlucky anomaly in the crime stats.”

“That’s what I always say,” Hailey put in.

Rory was still thinking it over. He said finally, “Yeah, that makes a certain amount of sense. Especially choosing a misdemeanor over a DUI. I can see that.”

It was my turn for a little mockery. “You’re *too* kind.”

Rory was attractive, no question, but something about him bothered me, and the more we chatted, the more bothered I was. True crime attracts a variety of people for a variety of reasons. I like to know who and what I’m dealing with, and the more we talked, the more I wondered what Rory was up to. If he was law enforcement, okay, but why not say so?

Not that law enforcement is welcome at such gatherings. One of the more disillusioning things internet sleuthing teaches you is how often law enforcement gets it wrong. No, worse, how often law enforcement just doesn’t bother. But police departments are like any other organization. There are a handful of high performers, a couple of employees coasting along and taking shortcuts, and a majority of people doing the best they can with the tools they’ve got. In this venue, a cop doing a little sightseeing would probably get a chilly reception.

So even as I was thinking I might like to sleep with him, I wasn’t sure I liked Rory much. In addition to his general evasiveness, there was a sharpness there, a hardness, which I associated with police and policing. Or maybe I had it totally wrong and he was an investment banker with an interest in true crime and a free weekend. Either way, my initial, instinctive interest had given way to wariness. I had good reason to be careful this weekend.

Rory's eyes flickered at whatever he heard in my tone. But then he offered that spectacular smile. "Would you like another drink?"

"He's barely touched the one he has." Hailey too was suspicious of Rory. The message in her gaze was *watch this guy*.

I offered a smile that probably matched his for both brightness and insincerity. "Thanks, no. I'm going to step outside and get some air."

Rory assessed and corrected. His expression was rueful. "Right. Maybe I'll run into you again this weekend?"

"Sure," I said easily. "Maybe."

Hailey raised her mug to me in a farewell salute before turning to Rory. "So, what do you do when you're not listening to true-crime podcasts, Rory?"

I didn't hear Rory's reply. I suspected it wasn't going to be the truth.

It took some doing to work my way through the loud and increasingly boisterous mob. This meet-and-great felt a lot more like a wake than a vigil. I can't say it wasn't what I expected because I'd had no idea what to expect. More people recognized me now than when I'd arrived two hours earlier, and I was stopped several times on my way to the front entrance.

That wasn't a problem. I like hearing from my listeners, my fans. But this wasn't like CrimeCon or the True Crime Podcast Festival. I'd been vlogging and podcasting about Deirdre O'Donnell for over three years, but this was the first

time I'd felt the desire—felt *compelled*—to attend the crash-site vigil.

Sure, I was on guard. I was viewing every person I met with a degree of caution, even wariness.

Because if I was right, one of the people in this noisy, crowded pub—maybe even someone I'd already spoken to this evening—had emailed me the coordinates to what was supposed to be Deirdre's grave.

Which meant, there was a good chance Deirdre's murderer was in this room.

Chapter Two

That first blast of fresh air felt like getting shoved into a freezer.

The cold night air stung my face and eyes, and I inhaled reflexively, dragging in oxygen that felt infused with needles. It was...refreshing. To say the least. Like getting smacked between the eyes with a snowball. Or an iceberg.

Two guys, smoking at the far end of the covered porch, laughed at my instinctive recoil. The taller, a skinny twentysomething with a pale, pointy face beneath a black toque, called, "Welcome to New Hampshire."

"Thanks. It's a long way from California, that's for sure." I zipped up my jacket, stamped my boots on the wooden planks, trying to get my circulation going. "Wow. This is...brisk."

The other guy, shorter, stouter, and sporting an unfortunate mustache-beard-sideburns combo, peered through the jaundice-hued gloom. "California?"

They exchanged glances.

"Skylar from *Ugly Town*?"

"Guilty."

We shook hands—which, since we all wore gloves, was more like patty-cake patty-cake—and the taller one said, "Blake Kay. *Disappearing Deirdre*. This is Tony Mezzasalma."

“Oh hey. Nice to meet you.” I knew them. Or *of* them. These were the two doofuses who’d produced a documentary on Deirdre which basically consisted of visiting a string of strip joints in Montreal for...reasons? They were adherents to the theory that Deirdre had run away to Canada for motives as sordid as they were unlikely.

“Oh man, this should be good.” In the yellow porchlight, Tony’s smile resembled that of a friendly zombie. “People are taking bets whether you’d show.”

That threw me, largely because I couldn’t imagine anyone caring if I attended or not. “Why wouldn’t I show?”

“You know Peter’s here, right?”

“Who?”

“Peter Weber. *Weber*. He’s *the* expert in the case.”

“Ah.” I tried to look impressed, but...not so much. According to my family, I’m probably the worst poker player on the planet. Which is kind of much, since I’m the only one in my family who actually *plays* poker.

Blake said, “You *had* to have read *Unusual Suspect: The Real Story of What Happened to Deirdre O’Donnell*. It’s the definitive analysis of the case.”

“Right. No. I haven’t read it.” As much as I wanted to keep things civil, I wasn’t going to lie. Weber, a problematic investigative-journalist-turned-author-of-fiction’s reputation preceded him, and I’d skipped the book. I felt like everyone should have skipped the book.

Come to think of it, Weber had accompanied Blake and Tony on that pointless junket to Montreal. If he hadn’t been

the first to come up with the runaway theory, he'd certainly been the one to push it to prominence.

Blake and Tony exchanged looks again.

Tony said meaningfully, "Well, Weber's looking forward to meeting *you*."

What did that mean? More to them than me, that was for sure.

I said, "Great. He can buy me a drink." I pointed at the steps leading off the porch. "I'm just going to stretch my legs."

I was pretty sure these guys rarely wandered much farther than their sofa, and sure enough, they nodded, stepped back to let me pass, then snapped back together as though magnetized.

As I went down the short flight of wooden stairs, I could hear them whispering.

Whatever. My days of worrying about what people I didn't know and didn't care about thought were long behind me. Even at Deirdre's age, I'm not sure I cared as much as she had. That poor kid had been a high-performing people pleaser.

I started briskly up the road, passing a long line of parked cars glowing in the moonlight as their windshields slowly iced over.

It was a relief to be outside, to be able to take a full breath without inhaling the stifling scent of too many people having too many drinks and sharing too many secrets they would later regret. There was bound to be a lot of that this weekend. For whatever reason, the Deirdre O'Donnell community was one of the most toxic on the internet. In fact,

the antics of Weber and others were one reason for a growing backlash against true-crime shows.

One reason. Another reason was understandable revulsion for sensationalizing other people's tragedies for one's own profit.

The full moon was so big, it seemed to fill the entire night sky, blurring the stars and casting cold, steely light over the scene below. The Swiftwater Pub and adjacent guest cabins were the only structures on this desolate stretch of road. The crash site was a mile farther up, around the bend and out of sight.

On the far side of the highway was a nearly impenetrable wall of thick forest.

That was another—probably one of the more rational theories—for what might have happened to Deirdre: in an effort to avoid the scrutiny of law enforcement, she'd hidden in the woods but then got lost and died of exposure.

Which was not impossible, although given how often these woods had been searched, it seemed likely her remains would have been discovered by now. My problem with that theory was: A – she wasn't an idiot, and B – if her intention had been to avoid the sheriffs, she only had to step a few feet into the tree line to be virtually invisible. Why wander in so far, she couldn't find her way out?

Panic?

Were girls who attended West Point, even briefly, subject to panic attacks?

Hard to imagine.

But then so much of what had happened to Deirdre was hard to imagine.

In between the *crunch* of my boots on the old snow carpeting the side of the road, I could hear voices and laughter falling farther and farther behind me. Woodsmoke mingled with the scent of pine and snow. I felt a lot better. I didn't mind crowds, but until I'd received that disturbing email from partsunknown@anonymousemail.me, my interest in the O'Donnell case had been academic.

I wanted to know Deirdre's fate. I wanted her family to have closure and for her to have... Was justice a possibility?

Realizing I was walking farther than I'd intended, I slowed my steps. I wasn't far from the pub, but despite the parked cars and lights gleaming distantly through trees, it suddenly felt a long way away from civilization. From the safety of other people.

My nerves flared at the *chomp* of boots on snow behind me, and I turned, walking backward a few steps, keeping space between me and whoever was coming. Someone trying to find their car, I assumed, but you don't spend your free time poring over cold cases and not learn to be cautious of your fellow man. And fellow woman.

My eyes raked the darkness.

I didn't see anything, which was exactly what I expected.

But as I continued watching, a tall shadow seemed to materialize out of the darkness. He was still several car-lengths away, walking toward me.

My scalp prickled.

Was I being *followed*?

This *had* to be someone looking for his car.

The shadow remained too far away for me to be able to make out the features, even if he—given height and build, it had to be a he—hadn't worn a hoodie. Or maybe it was the hood of his coat. There was nothing inherently sinister about a hood or a hoodie. Everyone up here was dressed for a polar expedition, me included. But silent hooded figures following you? Yeah, creepy.

I watched as he plowed on, walking steadily with speed and determination, facing front—facing me. I couldn't see his face, let alone his eyes, but I knew he was staring at me.

Like the way I'd known Rory No Last Name had been watching me long before he spoke up. I wasn't being paranoid. Or at least, I wasn't *only* being paranoid.

Anyway, the silent purpose with which this guy walked toward me was unnerving.

Was this someone just going to his car?

I continued to stare, still walking backward. This was definitely starting to feel weird. Weird or ridiculous. Or both.

I raised my hand and called, "Hey."

A second passed.

Another.

No response. Only ominous stillness broken by the slip-slide of boots on snow and the eerie echo of the woods. He

didn't speed up. He did not slow down. And that focused, measured pursuit was... Well, it was starting to worry me.

But why assume it was *pursuit*?

Maybe he hadn't heard me?

Maybe he had poor night vision?

Maybe he had poor night vision, couldn't hear well, and couldn't find his car.

Despite my disquiet, I just couldn't believe that anyone would attack me, let alone attack me less than two hundred yards from the Swiftwater.

Right?

Right. But with each slippery step, I was getting farther away from any kind of certainty.

Was I really about to... What? Fight? Fight for my life?

"Can I help you?" I called. Not in the tone of someone eager to help.

Headlights swept over and past me before I heard the engine of an approaching car. High beams illuminated the gleaming snake of parked cars, the short and crumbling snowbank, and the figure walking toward me.

He threw his hand up—shielding his face?—and, as the car slowed, he turned and started back toward the pub. Not running, not rushing, but striding briskly, steadily putting distance between us.

"What the hell?" My words seemed to hang in the air with my frozen breath.

Heart still bumping against my ribs, I hesitated, one eye on the retreating figure, one eye on the car which had pulled to the side of the road and was attempting the complicated maneuver of parking in a too-small space.

I continued the business of reasoning away what had nearly happened—assuming anything had nearly happened.

Maybe he'd remembered he had his wallet on him after all? Maybe he'd realized he'd left his wallet in the pub? Or, yes, maybe he'd realized his plans for assault and bodily harm had been thwarted?

He was definitely heading straight back to the Swiftwater.

“Just who the hell are you?” Realizing I was asking the wrong person, I belatedly sprinted after the figure now making haste for the pub.

Running in snow—old snow that had melted and refrozen a few times—was a laborious process. The waffle soles of my boots couldn't get any real purchase, and the faster I tried to go, the more precarious was my balance. I slipped once, landing on my knee, but was up instantly and running—with all the grace of an elderly yeti.

I was still a couple of yards behind as the other man jogged unhurriedly up the porch steps of the pub, pushed open the door, and disappeared inside.

Eventually I reached the pub, perspiring and out of breath as I staggered up the steps. Blake and Tony had vacated the premises, but a cluster of young women, disciples of the

murder-and-makeup sisterhood, dressed for the slopes of St. Moritz, were laughing and taking selfies.

I puffed, “Did you...see that...guy...who just went inside?”

They dropped their poses, lowered their phones, but clearly had no idea what I was talking about.

“Which guy?” asked a stately blonde. She was wearing a pink parka and a pink beanie embroidered with the words: *I’m just here to establish my alibi.*

“There are a lot of people coming and going,” pointed out her dark-haired companion. She was dressed in a fur-lined white parka and a white quilted beanie decorated with little skulls, gravestones, hearts, and blood spatter. “You included.”

“He just walked by you, like two minutes ago.”

They shook their heads in unison. I made a sound of frustration and moved past them, shoved open the door to the pub, and nearly fell back at the wall of sound.

I couldn’t have been outside for more than ten minutes. Fifteen at most. But either a lot more people had arrived in that time, or a lot more drinks had been served. My hasty scan of the room didn’t reveal anyone who looked out of place. The bartenders were hustling behind the bar. Waitstaff, trays held high, were fighting their way through the mob. And the partygoers—er, attendees—were drinking, talking, laughing. It could have been any conference in any field of endeavor. No one seemed to be attempting to hide. A few people glanced my way and returned to their conversations.

Had he *not* come inside?

I began to work my way toward the rear exit, which was at the end of a small hallway leading to the lavatories and storeroom.

What was the maximum occupancy of this place?

Safe to say, it was currently being exceeded. There had to be over ninety people jammed into a room built to accommodate *maybe* sixty.

A few people called out to me, but I ignored them. I spotted Hailey at the table we'd shared earlier. She was engrossed in conversation with the duo from *Discovering Deirdre*.

No sign of Rory *You People*. Could *he* be—

No. Unlikely. If anything, Rory had given off a cop vibe.

Granted, one of the theories in Deirdre's disappearance was that local law enforcement had some involvement. But that was not the prevailing or even a particularly popular opinion.

But nothing about Rory indicated he was local. He had that Mid-Atlantic Maryland accent, and his winter weather gear looked like he'd bought it from Patagonia.

Speak of the devil.

As I ducked into the short hallway leading to the fire doors, I spotted Rory on a pay phone.

"...cell service is sketchy as hell up here. Anyway, I know this is a DND weekend, but can I talk to him? I'll make it fast."

There was no one else in the hall, and the doors to the exterior looked firmly shut. But that didn't mean no one had gone through here in the last couple of minutes.

Rory listened for a moment and then laughed. "Hey, he might be one of the *saner* ones. Which isn't saying—" He broke off, looking acutely self-conscious at the sight of me.

"Did a guy in a hoodie come back here?" I demanded.

"Sorry?"

"A guy in a hoodie. Did he come back here?"

I moved to squeeze past Rory, who stepped back against the wall, putting the receiver to his chest. I was close enough to smell his aftershave—something light, reminiscent of cedar and sage—and to see that his eyes were gray. I'd been thinking blue. I mean, I hadn't been thinking *anything*, but if I had, I'd have assumed blue.

He said, "Uh...every other guy in the place is wearing a hoodie."

"Did anyone run out the back?"

Rory looked blank. Was it a complicated question?

I gave him a look of exasperation, jogged to the end of the hallway, and shoved open the panic hardware. The tall doors swung open onto blackness as frigid as outer space.

From the doorway, I could see the silhouettes of scattered trees and a few small structures with dark windows, which were the guest cabins. They looked even less inviting in the dark than they had in the daylight.

Behind me, I heard Rory's quiet, "Jason, I've got to go. I'll phone back." I heard him replace the phone on the hook and his footsteps as he joined me at the exit door. "No one went out while I was on the phone."

I nodded, eyes straining the darkness. Nothing moved. I couldn't hear anything to indicate someone was sneaking through the garbage pails and discarded boxes. That didn't mean nobody was out there. I glanced at Rory, who was watching me with a curious expression. "How long were you on the phone?"

"Only a minute or two, but I was waiting to use the phone for at least five minutes."

God, it's dark out there.

The idea of sleeping in one of those little black boxes was less appealing by the second.

"Who are you looking for?" Rory's shoulder brushed mine as he peered into the night.

I glanced at him. He had a nice profile—and a tiny mark on his earlobe where there'd once been a piercing. I shook my head and turned, brushing past him as I headed for the restrooms.

Restroom. Singular.

It was locked.

"She's been in there a while," Rory informed me with a hint of commiseration.

"*One* restroom? For the entire pub?"

Rory shrugged. “It’s not a problem three hundred and sixty-four days of the year.”

The guy on the road could not have come this way.

Either he *hadn’t* entered the pub—and I knew what I’d seen, *knew* the guy had walked into the Swiftwater—or he’d somehow managed to enter the pub and instantly blend into the crowd.

Which I guess would be relatively easy to do if he was one of this crowd.

The latter was what had to have happened.

The whole thing was weird.

Was I making too much of nothing? I didn’t know for a fact that the man on the road had been following me. I didn’t even know for sure he’d heard me call out.

Sure, I trusted my instincts, but if I was honest, I’d been worried and uneasy from the point I’d received that first threatening email. Inevitably, I was going to be looking for connections—and maybe jumping to some wrong conclusions.

As I had to keep reminding myself, whoever had sent that email could—probably was—just pranking me. If so, he was probably laughing his ass off at this very moment.

“Want to tell me what’s going on?”

Rory’s voice jarred me out of my grim thoughts, and I threw him a distracted look. “No.”

“*No?*”

I started back toward the bar area.

Hailey met me as I reached the entrance. “Sky, a group of us are hiking up to the crash site. We can be there at about the same time Deirdre hit that snowbank. Did you want to come?”

Google Maps, Google Earth, contemporary news reports, and the endless debates on forums like Reddit and websleuths.com could only take you so far. Yes, I wanted to see the crash site for myself, wanted to walk the road Deirdre had walked when she vanished into legend.

“Yep. Count me in.”

Sure, there was safety in numbers. But if someone was out to spook me, make me look like a fool, that someone was probably going to try to stick pretty close.

I couldn't wait to see who decided to join our little expedition.

Chapter Three

The facts of the case were frustrating and few.

On a snowy February afternoon, shortly after lunch, twenty-one-year-old Deirdre O'Donnell had emailed her faculty advisor, Professor Egan MacArthur, who headed up the program in Secondary School Teaching, to tell him there had been a death in the family and she would not be attending class for the next week.

There had been no death in Deirdre's family.

Phone records indicated that at 2:05 p.m., Deirdre called a hotel in Stowe, Vermont, inquired about booking a room, but no reservation was made. At 2:18 p.m., she telephoned Tommy Aldrich and left a brief message, promising they would talk later.

She then packed clothing—including her running gear—jewelry, makeup, and other toiletries, college textbooks and homework assignments, birth-control pills and over-the-counter sleep aids.

When her room was later searched by campus police, most of her belongings were packed in boxes. However, as it was the start of a new semester, there was debate as to whether she had ever actually *unpacked*. She did not have a roommate to confirm one way or the other.

Lying on top of the boxes was a printed email to Tommy, which referred to problems in their relationship, including past infidelity. For decades sleuths had puzzled over

that letter. Did she intend to take it with her? Was it meant for Tommy to find because she had no intention of ever returning? Did she accidentally leave it behind?

At around 3:30 p.m., without sharing her plans with anyone, Deirdre headed out in her 1996 black Saturn for parts unknown.

Ten minutes later, she stopped to withdraw \$280 from an ATM, leaving her account nearly empty. Her next stop was a nearby liquor store, where she purchased wine and the ingredients for making White Russian cocktails.

A lot of speculation had gone into Deirdre lying about a death in the family, draining her bank account, her purchase of alcohol, and the fact that she had sleeping pills in her possession. For some internet sleuths, these all added up to an irrefutable case of planned suicide.

From my point of view, lying about a death in the family in order to take some time off was standard operating procedure for college kids. It was a rare semester when I didn't have at least fifty grandmas supposedly heading to that great knitting club in the sky. The ATM stop? There was no Apple Pay in 2004. Naturally, she'd need cash for her week away. I found it more telling that Deirdre had left enough money in her bank account to keep it from being closed than that she had taken as much cash out as she reasonably could.

The booze? This was a college kid, after all. And a kid from an Irish Catholic family. Safe to say, she liked to drink. If she was planning to enjoy a modest one to two cocktails a night, that was not an unreasonable amount of alcohol. Unless you thought one or two drinks a night was an unreasonable

amount of alcohol. Either way, it was a lot cheaper to buy full-size bottles than a bagful of minis. She did not have unlimited funds.

And, finally, the sleeping pills. If Deirdre was so stressed, as some believed, that she was ready to take her own life, then she was certainly stressed enough to need a little help falling asleep at night. Speaking as someone who occasionally resorted to sleep aids, I didn't find anything sinister in her decision to pack a bottle of Nytol or whatever it had been. This was a girl with things on her mind.

No, nobody planning suicide bothered to bring their homework, birth-control pills, and workout clothes. That was not a thing.

Anyway, after purchasing the alcohol, Deirdre checked for phone messages, then headed north on (probably) Interstate 91.

There was no record of her journey, though presumably there had been at least one stop along the way to buy gas or take a bathroom break or have a cup of coffee.

The next time Deirdre appeared on anyone's radar was around 7:00 p.m., when she'd skidded off Route 112 in rural Woodlark, New Hampshire, and plowed into a snowbank. At 7:27 p.m., a nearby resident had phoned in the accident to the county sheriff's department.

At the same time, another local, a school-bus driver by the name of Rusty Bailey, came across the crash site and asked Deirdre if she needed help. According to Rusty, Deirdre seemed shaken but unharmed. She assured him everything was under control and she'd already called AAA. Rusty drove on,

but knowing there was no cell reception in the area, phoned the sheriff's department when he reached home a couple of minutes later.

At 7:46 p.m., Deputy Col Dempsey arrived at the scene but found no trace of Deirdre.

Dempsey's story was there was no one inside or around the locked vehicle. He deduced the Saturn had struck a large tree on the driver's side, damaging the left headlight and pushing the car's radiator into the fan, rendering it inoperable. (Years later, accident reconstruction teams would determine the tree had *not* been hit, making it yet another thing for the internet to argue over.) In addition, the car's windshield was cracked on the driver's side—though too high up for Deirdre to have hit her head—and both airbags had deployed.

Dempsey noted red stains inside and outside the car, which he presumed—given the damaged box of Franzia in the rear seat—to be wine. He also found the AAA card issued to Deirdre O'Donnell, blank accident-report forms (she'd wrecked her father's new car a few days earlier, driving back late from a party), gloves, compact discs, makeup, diamond jewelry, her favorite stuffed animal, and driving directions to Burlington, Vermont.

Missing was Deirdre's backpack, along with the fixings for White Russians, Deirdre's debit card, credit cards, and cell phone. Not to mention, Deirdre.

In fact, Deirdre was never seen again.

At least, not by anyone who was talking.

She had left just enough clues, just enough information to create a maddening wealth of possible, even contradictory, scenarios.

“These hick cops weren’t experienced,” Blake from *Disappearing Deirdre* panted somewhere to my right. I had the impression he was a New Englander, but he sure didn’t have suitable shoes for this terrain. “They made all these dumbass assumptions about her.”

This was met with murmurs of agreement.

There were twenty of us, mostly men, making the pilgrimage to the crash site. Blue T-Shirt was not present or accounted for. I didn’t know over half of our group, neither by sight nor name. Our guide—Simon Overhiser, the editor of the *Woodlark Weekly*—kept us moving at a brisk pace down the narrow, mostly unlit road.

“They probably trampled over whatever clues were there,” Tony agreed. No surprise there. His role on *Disappearing Deirdre* seemed mostly to be agreeing with everything Blake said.

Overhiser, who would have been a teen around the time of Deirdre’s disappearance, said, “The rangers were. Experienced. The lead guy was a twenty-four-year veteran with Fish and Game. He’d led hundreds of search-and-rescues.”

Hailey, walking beside me, chimed in. “But he wasn’t brought in until thirty-six hours after Deirdre disappeared.”

Overhiser admitted, “Yeah, the delay wasn’t good. But even so. It hadn’t snowed overnight. The ground was

unchanged since Deirdre had left her car. There was no more than two feet of snow with a very thin crust on top, so anyone who left the road would have left distinct footprints. There were no footprints. No indication she ever left the asphalt.”

I said, “So the terrain would have been very much as it is tonight?”

Overhiser glanced at me, nodded. “Pretty much, yeah.”

“Déjà vu,” someone said from the rear.

“Poor kid. It’s creepy as hell along here,” Hailey muttered.

I nodded. Deirdre was comfortable with the outdoors. She regularly went camping with her family, she was an experienced cross-country runner, and she’d attended a military academy for a time before transferring to UMass. This was a kid confident in her ability to manage an evening hike through the woods. Sure, she would have been shaken from the accident; maybe she had been more badly injured than was immediately apparent to Rusty Bailey—or even herself—but she had probably been less creeped out than we were now as we followed in her footsteps.

From right behind me, a male voice remarked conversationally, “New Hampshire has one of the lowest missing persons rates in the country. It’s around 2.6 per one hundred thousand people.”

This was greeted with silence.

I glanced over my shoulder. “You just happen to know that number off the top of your head?”

Rory shrugged. He'd joined our little expedition at the last minute, and I was acutely aware of him. No wonder, since he was keeping pace practically on my heels.

Hailey said, "Since Deirdre *is* missing, I'm not sure how that's relevant."

To which Rory didn't seem to have an answer. I felt another flicker of amusement. *Welcome to the wild, wild West of online investigation.*

But seriously, what in the hell was Rory doing here?

From the front of the group someone called, "Don't forget about the helicopters."

Tony said, "Yeah, but what could you really see in forestland this thick?"

Once again, Simon was the guy with the answers. "The helicopter was equipped with a FLIR unit. That's forward looking infrared. If Deirdre had been around here, giving off any heat signal, they'd have picked that up."

"But how far did they actually look?"

"According to Search and Rescue, they covered a ten-mile radius around Highway 112 as well as the outlying roads, and they couldn't find any human tracks leaving the road and going into the woodlands that were not cleared or otherwise accounted for."

It seemed that outsiders weren't the only ones consumed with the disappearance of Deirdre O'Donnell.

"By the end of the day, the consensus of everyone looking for her was that she hadn't left the roadway."

“By the end of the day, she’d have frozen to death,” Hailey said grimly.

Overhiser said, “I mean, that’s not impossible, but nobody gave up trying to find her. Ten days later, a second search was organized to comb the woods with three cadaver dogs. If you know about cadaver dogs—”

“*We know*,” we chorused.

“Then you know they’re trained specifically to find human remains. The dog teams went into the woods and combed different grids on both sides of Route 112 within a half-mile radius for any sign, any clue that Deirdre had passed that way. There was nothing.”

I said, “And after *that*, Fish and Game conducted three more searches, one of them with a seven-dog team. They searched a total of twelve miles of roadway, at various points as far as one to two miles into the woods. They even took the dogs to areas fifty miles away that Deirdre had visited with her family.”

Simon nodded, “That’s right. But they were never able to find a single trace of her.”

“And after six months, the official search was called off.”

“Correct.”

I said, “Since then, people have continued to search the area. Her friends and family and boyfriend all continued to search. For years.”

Pat O’Donnell had come up every weekend for the first five years to hunt for her. To me, that right there was reason to

dismiss the theory that Deirdre had taken off of her own volition. By all accounts she was kind and she was responsible. It would take a heart of stone to let your grieving father search for you for years when a phone call could reassure them you were still alive even if you didn't want to see them ever again.

“And then came the amateur sleuths,” Rory said in the tone I figured local law enforcement probably used when referring to those of us trying to help with no official status to do so.

“Which is why the theory of the tandem driver makes the most sense.” Blake threw a challenging look my way.

I sighed inwardly. These people *really* loved their tandem-driver theory.

The blonde YouTuber from the porch (Iliana from *Murder, Makeup, and Moscato*, according to Hailey) said, “A lot of people, local people, say it would be impossible to find a body in these woods because they're so thick. They ought to know.”

“I've lived here all my life,” Simon said, “and sure, there's some truth to that. But she'd have to walk into the woods to begin with, which, again, would leave tracks. Unless you believe in people levitating over long distances, it's not possible. For her to get lost in the woods, she'd have had to leave the road, and she never left the road.”

“That's one opinion.”

“It's a fact,” Simon insisted.

“It's an alternative fact,” Iliana countered.

“Oh my *God*,” Rory muttered. I swallowed a laugh, but I felt his pain.

“It’s not a fact because *you* say it’s a fact,” Iliana said hotly.

Hailey said, “It’s a fact because it’s a *fact*!”

“Oh, *that’s* convincing.”

“There’s the crash site,” Simon announced with relief.

If he thought they were going to stop arguing and lapse into respectful silence, he had another think coming. But the group did quiet for a minute or two as they observed the frozen stand of oak trees.

The largest and oldest of trees was wound with a large, tattered ribbon, hueless in the moonlight, though everyone present knew the ribbon was blue, Deirdre’s favorite color. Though the road itself had been snowplowed, snowbanks covered the brush and shrubs so that the entire landscape looked as blank and bare as the surface of the moon.

“If she’d just made that curve,” someone finally broke the silence.

Someone else said, “If she just hadn’t been drinking.”

“It’s not for sure she was,” someone else returned. “The deputy sniffed the coke bottle and assumed she’d had alcohol in there. That’s not exactly science.”

Blake said, “Unless the whole thing was staged, which is what Weber thinks.”

“True.”

“People go off the road here in the winter all the time,” Simon said. “She didn’t have to be drunk to miss that curve.”

Rory said suddenly, “But *you* don’t think she missed the curve. You think her car stalled out.”

It took a second to realize Rory was speaking to me. I glanced at him. “Correct. According to one of the EMTs at the scene, if she’d lost control of the car as she came around the corner, she’d have impacted the north side of the curve. But she didn’t. She clipped the corner. She sheared off the snowbank and skidded to the other side, which turned the car in the opposite direction. He thought the car stalled and she was fighting to regain control when she came into the curve.”

“Maybe she wasn’t drinking after all. Maybe the wine was from the box being thrown around during the accident.” This was volunteered by another anonymous member of our party.

Someone else said, “There was alcohol in her soda bottle.”

Full circle.

Tony said, “There was *nothing* in her soda bottle because it was emptied out. Deputy Dempsey *thought* the bottle smelled like alcohol and assumed she was drunk driving. There was no forensic testing done.”

“Is that true?” Rory asked.

I shrugged. “It’s unclear. If there was forensic testing done, the results were never made public.”

Blake was not to be distracted. “There’s no reason to believe her car was in that bad a shape. She never complained

about it to friends.”

I said, “The spring semester started January 28. She’d been back a total of two weeks. She lived, worked, and went to school on campus. How much driving was she doing? Her college friends said she hadn’t complained about the car. Her friends back home said the car was in bad shape. Her family said the car was in bad shape. Her dad took her car-shopping the weekend before she disappeared. I think the car was probably in bad shape. I don’t see any reason for her dad to lie about taking her car-shopping, and I don’t see any reason to take her car-shopping unless she really needed a car.”

“None of the dealerships in the area could remember them car-shopping,” said yet another young guy I didn’t recognize. A whole new generation of online sleuths were now pursuing Deirdre through the mists of time and the Intertubes. “And they didn’t talk about it at dinner when they went out with one of her friends.”

I sighed.

“If he was helping her get away from Tommy, which is what Weber thinks—”

“Which is it?” I interrupted. “Because originally Weber thought Deirdre was fleeing her abusive father. Now he thinks her dad played a role in a convoluted plan to escape her abusive boyfriend? Come on. Pat O’Donnell strikes me as the kind of man who wouldn’t hesitate to have a word with a jerk he thought was mistreating one of his daughters. The last thing he’d do is ship her off to parts unknown.”

“But if she was trying to get away from Tommy and she was *pregnant*,” Iliana began.

“If she was pregnant, she wouldn’t have been drinking and taking birth-control pills.”

Iliana had no reply to that, but Blake was far from out. “You’ve never met Pat O’Donnell.”

It was tempting, but I restrained myself to, “Neither has Weber.”

“Weber’s still the expert on this case. He’s been investigating Deirdre’s disappearance a lot longer than you.”

“Is it a contest?”

“You know who else has been investigating it?” Rory broke in. “State and Federal law enforcement. And yet you *all* think you know more than they do.”

This pronouncement was met with wordless astonishment.

Hailey, who’d moved away with most of the group to more closely inspect the oak tree, called, “Law enforcement is *useless*.”

As Rory began to splutter, I murmured, “Careful. You’re about to blow your cover,” and he threw me a sharp look. He didn’t answer me directly, though. “Occam’s razor. The simplest explanation is most likely correct.”

“There we agree.”

Iliana said, “But who’s to say what’s the simplest explanation in this case?”

“Good point. From my perspective, faking an accident to stage a disappearance that was bound to attract media attention and the involvement of law enforcement and would

then require going into hiding for the next nineteen years doesn't seem like the easiest way to get out of a difficult romance. But what do I know?"

"Exactly. *You* have no way of knowing what it was like for a woman like Deirdre."

"Nobody knows what it's like for someone else. The best we can do is try to think what we'd do in that same situation, and weigh it against what we know of the other person and their circumstances."

Hailey walked back over and looped her arm through mine. "I don't think Deirdre was the kind of girl who tried to run away from her problems."

Blake said, "Really? What the hell was she doing in the mountains of New Hampshire?"

I said, "There's a big difference between taking a few days to figure out some major life decisions and abandoning your entire life."

Simon said, "Do you want to walk up the road, or is this enough for you?" He sounded like all this—we—had already been more than enough for him.

We wanted to walk up the road, of course, and that's what we did.

Even with the reflection of moonlight on snow, the pinpoint gleams through trees reminding us of the nearby presence of homes and people, and twenty of us hiking up the highway, it was dark and it was eerie.

Not much had changed through the years in the Rockwellian village of Woodlark. There were a few more

homes, but not many. Most of the residents were retirees, and the median income was about \$52,000—well below the national average. Just your typical rural small town. Life moved at a leisurely pace, and everyone knew everyone.

More to the point, the shops closed early and the nightlife was nonexistent. When evening fell, residents pulled the drapes, closed the blinds, and kept close to hearth and home.

It was a relatively short hike from the crash site to the intersection of Bradley Hill Road.

Hailey muttered, “I have to admit, I wouldn’t want to drive these roads alone at night.”

“That’s what I’ve been *saying*,” Blake responded. “That’s what Weber says. No woman would make that drive voluntarily without a clear destination and companionship. There had to be a tandem driver. Or she was coming up here to meet someone.”

“I didn’t say *no* woman would want to make this drive alone,” Hailey said irritably. “I said *I* wouldn’t. I also wouldn’t have enrolled at West Point. Not to mention, Deirdre was obviously a much braver woman if she was willing to lock herself in a classroom with little kids.”

That got a few chuckles.

I guess it’s normal that people have trouble believing that someone they identify with could make choices they never would. But that’s the reality. We’re not all the same. That’s why people we love sometimes end up married to people we

can't stand. That's why *we* sometimes end up married to people we can't stand.

I didn't bother to comment because I was on the record many times over on this point. I didn't believe Deirdre was running from her life or her father or Tommy. I didn't believe she was afraid of anyone or anything when she started driving that snowy afternoon. I thought she needed time and space. I thought she was not afraid of adventure or challenge, let alone spending a week in her own company.

Iliana said, "It just seems impossible someone could have grabbed her right off the road and no one saw anything. Especially when there was such a small window of time. Twenty minutes."

That I did answer. "Twenty minutes between the time the neighbor reported the accident and the deputy arrived. But if she hid in the trees while the deputy looked around, and then started walking, the timetable changes."

"Even so, it's only a few minutes' walk from the crash site to the intersection."

"You can't see the crash site from here," Rory observed thoughtfully. I studied him for a moment. It's strange how you can find someone attractive but not trust them. I liked his looks, I liked that he was smart—there's nothing sexier than intelligence—and informed, and I thought I would maybe like his sense of humor. If I ever caught more than a glimmer of it.

But I've had experience being lied to by people I loved, so...

“How come we’re not talking about Rusty Bailey?” someone asked. “He’s the last person on record to see Deedee alive.”

Simon snapped, “Rusty used to drive me to school every morning. He drove my ex-wife to school every morning. I don’t want to hear this.”

Nobody said a word.

It seemed we had reached the end of the road, physically and metaphorically. There was a small cluster of signs, including a large double arrow indicating the intersection of Route 112 and Bradley Hill Road. Route 302 headed north toward the town of Bath and then eventually Vermont. Route 10 led toward Hanover.

Beyond the mosaic of signs were trees and wilderness, and a bit to the left was Rusty Bailey’s property.

While there were potential issues with the NH state police bloodhound brought in on that first day of searching, the dog had twice run the same track from the crash site. Both times he’d lost the scent just before the intersection of Bradley Hill Road—and right in front of the driveway to Bailey’s property.

Assuming the dog track had been accurate, a couple of conclusions could be drawn: Deirdre had headed east after the crash. The dog losing the scent in the middle of the road was not consistent with Deirdre walking up to a house or continuing down the highway or wandering off into the woods. It *was* consistent with her climbing into a vehicle.

Maybe the vehicle of the tandem driver? Though why not pick her up at the scene of the crash?

Maybe the vehicle of someone just passing through?

Or maybe the vehicle of someone local. Someone who had already been on the road at the time of Deirdre's accident. Maybe the vehicle had been Rusty Bailey's school bus.

Chapter Four

“So, I understand you want to hire me to take you up to Blackbird Ridge?”

Simon Overhiser was around my age, though the wings of silver at his temples made him look older and more distinguished. Or maybe he *was* older and more distinguished. He was tall, lean, and had the kind of chiseled handsomeness that ages well.

“Everyone I’ve talked to says no one knows the area better than you.”

Simon grimaced. “I wouldn’t say that. Maybe I know the history of the region better. There are plenty of people who know the geography better. Including George.”

George was the bartender who had referred me to Simon.

I smiled. “I’m starting to get the feeling nobody wants to take me up there.”

“Why would we? There’s nothing up there. It’s not a particularly scenic hike. And you’re not here for the scenery anyway.”

“True.”

Simon gave me a long look. “You know, people around here feel terrible about what happened to Deirdre. But she wasn’t a local kid. She wasn’t one of ours. And having our town turned into a permanent shrine for lookie-loos and

wannabe detectives isn't fun. Having outsiders wandering around suggesting one of us committed a heinous murder isn't fun."

"I imagine not."

"You don't have to imagine. I'm telling you. You know they're going to cut down that oak tree."

"The ribbon tree? Deirdre's tree?"

"See, it's not *Deirdre's* tree. And the property owner is fed up after nineteen years of tourists wandering around, digging up his land because they believe Deirdre's buried there somewhere."

"I'm sorry about the tree. Sorry that people are assholes. But I can't help pointing out that you're also the guy conducting tours of the crash site."

He said grimly, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer."

"Ouch."

Simon relented. "I'm not saying we regard all of you as enemies. There's no question the vigil brings in a lot of business we wouldn't have this time of year."

George—short and muscular with dark, curly hair—appeared with our drinks, making his way through a crowd that had begun to thin as people retired to their motels and B&Bs to grab some sleep or edit videos and blog posts.

"Shandy for you." He placed my ginger ale and beer in front of me. "Simon, another Double Clip." He stepped back and studied us. "Everything set?"

I took a swallow from my mug, shook my head. “I’m going to have to find another guide.”

George looked at Simon, and Simon protested, “I didn’t say no. I just...didn’t say yes.”

“You know that hill like the back of your hand.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

George grinned. “I would!”

Simon looked a little irritated, but said to me, “I’ll take you up there on Sunday. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

George chuckled. “Don’t worry. His bark is worse than his bite.”

I paid for the drinks and left them bickering amiably as I excused myself to have another try at the much-in-demand sole restroom.

I was in luck.

When I exited a minute or two later, Rory was stationed at the pay phone again, fuming.

“It only takes cash,” he informed me. “It’s a fucking relic.”

“It’s a useful relic up here. Half the time I can’t get a signal.”

“Same.” He eyed me with a kind of frustrated indecision. “Have you had dinner?”

“You’re not going to find any place around here still serving dinner.” I managed not to laugh at his expression. “I

think there's a vending machine outside the market up the road. I bet they still have Funyons from 1969."

He gave me a look of pure horror. "I suppose you ate on the plane."

"Nope. I had a layover in Denver. I had a nice meal at the Boulder Beer Taphouse."

To be honest, I wished there *had* been some place nearby to grab dinner. I was starting to feel the effects of nearly eight hours of flying. Not to mention a long evening of drinking with only pretzels to soak up the alcohol.

I left Rory brooding over his life choices and returned to the table. Simon and George were gone. Hailey had taken up residence again. She too was starting to look a little wilted around the edges.

"Hey."

"Hey. I'm guarding your drink."

"Thanks." I took a swallow, grimaced. "I probably should have had coffee."

Hailey looked interested. "Are you buzzed?"

"Aren't we all?"

"Good point." She yawned widely, then frowned at me. "Is it just me, or did you notice that no one here seems to remember how things were in 2004?"

"I guess that's understandable. Most of the people here would have barely been in their teens."

"Speak for yourself."

“I am. And I’m older than you.”

She laughed. “The hell. I’m forty!”

I peered more closely at her. “What? No way.”

“I’m the same age as Deirdre. Nearly.” There was something odd in her smile. “In fact, I was at UMass the same time she was.”

I sat up straight, took a harder look at her. “You knew Deirdre?”

Hailey shook her head. “No. I was majoring in journalism and communication. I don’t think our paths ever crossed. But it’s one reason I’ve always been interested in the case.”

“How come you never mentioned that? In all the times we’ve discussed Deirdre’s case—”

She protested, “That’s like two or three times in as many years. Anyway, I don’t know. It’s not relevant. I didn’t want to claim a connection I don’t really have.”

“I don’t know about *relevant*, but it’s interesting. What did people think after Deirdre went missing?”

She lifted a shoulder in dismissal. “That some nut grabbed her.”

“There wasn’t any suspicion that she killed herself or that she ran away?”

“Oh, probably. Whatever the prevailing theory is, you’re going to have those people who just *have* to disagree on general principles.”

“True.”

“Initially, the police started the suicide theory with their endangered-female posting. The Millennials were the ones who really picked up that idea and ran with it. Probably because they all wish they were dead anyway.”

I choked on my Shandy.

Hailey handed me a paper napkin. “But seriously. Why would she kill herself? Because she was having boyfriend problems? Puh-*leaze*.”

“Well, aside from whatever was happening with Tommy, she did have some stressful stuff going on. Having to leave West Point. Getting caught using someone else’s credit card. Wrecking her dad’s car. That’s a lot to deal with. I don’t buy the suicide theory either, but I can see she might have been struggling.”

“You know what, *everybody* struggles through their twenties. Everybody’s making mistakes left and right. Making all those dumbass mistakes is how we turned into the wise, self-sufficient citizens we are today.”

“Uh, yeah. As we sit here closing down a bar in a remote mountain village in New Hampshire *in February*.”

“I’m serious, though. All this garbage about how she had to feel like the walls were closing in on her.”

“Well, but—”

“She walked away from every single disaster *unscathed*. West Point let her resign, so she popped over to UMass, where she changed majors—what does *that* tell you?—and was thriving. She was on the Dean’s List.”

I opened my mouth, and Hailey demanded, “What’s the first sign a kid is struggling?”

I opened my mouth again, and again she cut me off. “Their grades start to fall.”

“That’s one, sure, but—”

“She was allowed to walk away from credit-card fraud with an assurance that if she kept her nose clean, her record would be wiped in three months. She wrecks her dad’s car after a party, and she’s not breathalyzed, she doesn’t get so much as a ticket. They drive her back to her dad’s motel room! *And* her dad’s insurance company agrees to cover everything.”

Right. That was another cause for alarm among the conspiracy theorists. Pat had come up to Amherst the weekend before Deirdre went missing to take her car-shopping. He’d rented a motel room for his stay, and let Deirdre borrow his new car to go to a party that evening with friends.

Deirdre left the party sometime after three a.m. and hit a guardrail, totaling the new car. After the accident, the tow-truck driver dropped her off at Pat’s motel to spend the remainder of the night. This triggered all kinds of suspicions from people with limited practical experience. Twenty years later, they were still arguing about why Pat would allow his alcoholic daughter to borrow his car (Maybe because she wasn’t an alcoholic and her own car was unreliable?), the number of beds in the room (The motel was on record that all rooms in that wing had two beds.), how Deirdre could have gained access to Pat’s room (Pat was given two keys at check-in.), who had used Pat’s phone to call Tommy (Who the hell do you think?), and why Deirdre hadn’t asked the tow-truck

driver to take her back to her college dorm (Perhaps because she had some 'splaining to do to her dad in the morning?).

Though I saw the case the same way Hailey did, for the sake of argument, I said, "But her dad admitted he'd chewed her out after the crash."

"That's what dads do!"

I took another swallow of beer and wished I hadn't. My mouth was starting to taste of stale beer. It had been a long evening, and I'd started a lot of drinks even if I hadn't finished most of them.

I said, "And that she *was* upset."

"Hell yes, she was upset. She'd have been a sociopath if she wasn't remorseful about wrecking her dad's car."

I felt a weird shift in my equilibrium, as though my body suddenly, belatedly recognized a change in altitude. I tried to focus. "She was also upset about some things happening with her sister."

"Of course. She loved her sister. But if anyone was going to kill herself, wouldn't it be the sister?"

"Yeah, probably. I do think one reason she didn't tell her family she was taking off for the week was they were already worried about Eva. She wouldn't want to add to their worries."

Hailey said with asperity, "That and the fact that Deirdre was twenty-one and maybe wanted to sort some things out herself without having a bunch of input from other people who meant well but just didn't get it?"

“Been there, done that.” Speaking as a member of a close-knit family who just couldn’t help thinking they knew more about what I needed than I did.

“Back then, nobody thought she’d killed herself but the police, and even the police didn’t think it for long.”

“Right,” I said. All at once, I was having trouble caring. It was such a *long* time ago. It wasn’t like there was going to be a happy ending for the poor kid. I rubbed my forehead. I really should have had the coffee because I felt as tired as if I’d made the trip from Los Angeles on foot.

“Did you want another beer?”

I shook my head, blinked tiredly at her. She looked like she was sitting a mile away from me. “I think I’m going to bed.”

“It’s just a little after ten.”

“Yeah, but it’s late, and I’m meeting Pat in the morning.”

Hailey squeaked, “You’re *what?*”

One leg off the barstool, one leg still hooked over it, I squinted at her, trying to remember what I’d said.

Oh shit.

I put my hand up, crossing-guard style. “Forget I said what.”

She hissed, “You’re interviewing *Pat?* Pat’s agreed to see you?”

I waved discouragingly, then tried to unhook my leg, which seemed stuck over the barstool, by giving a little hop

backward. I managed to free myself, but the stool went over with a *bang* that had everyone in the place looking at me.

I blinked down at the stool.

“Skylar, are you okay?” Hailey asked. When I didn’t answer, she said, “How much did you have to drink?”

A lot? I couldn’t remember.

“Sky?”

“Shhhhhh... *Shhhhh*.” I looked around to see if anyone had noticed, and I spotted Simon sitting at the bar, talking to George. Only they weren’t talking. They were looking at me. Everyone was looking at me. I clamped my lips together to keep from bursting out laughing.

“How the hell drunk *are* you?” Hailey whispered.

I thought the whispering was hilarious. Like it was some big secret. I whispered back, “Pretty drunk.”

“Do you need help?”

That was the funniest thing she’d said yet. She was so *short*. She was like an inch tall. I was a giant compared to her. I shook my head, laughing, and started for the door.

The back exit doors, as it turned out.

I walked very, very carefully across the ice, and then, weaving side to side like I was on the Starship Enterprise and we’d just been hit by a photon torpedo, I body-slammed my way down the hallway and burst out through the fire doors into outer space.

The cold should have sobered me up. It was fucking *freezing*. I was pretty sure my lungs were icing over. I could

barely get my breath. And the lights were shooting all over the place.

I stumbled away from the pub and into the trees, and then I couldn't remember which of the dark cabins was supposed to be mine. They all looked alike when they were asleep. Which started me laughing so hard, I had to grab the nearest tree to stay upright.

“Can I have this dance?” Beneath my bare hands, the bark was rough and textured, and I leaned my face against it and breathed in the bittersweet, earthy scent of tree skin. I stopped laughing and just breathed with the tree. The endlessly spinning tree.

What the hell is happening?

A hand landed on my shoulder. “May I cut in?” someone asked.

I rolled over, but somehow that meant I was no longer leaning on the tree, no longer leaning on anything. I staggered backward, and the hand on my shoulder became two hands, hauling me back on my feet.

“Whoa,” Rory said.

I tossed my hair out of my face and nearly fell over again. “I know you.”

“You forgot your coat. And hat. And gloves. The good news is you still have your pants on.”

“You wish!” I shot back.

He gave a funny laugh. “Uh...well. It's not high on the list, but...”

I raised my hand and made a broad cutting motion—and found my arms full of my jacket, scarf, hat, and gloves.

“Would you like some help getting to your cabin?”

“Which one’s mine?”

“You got me there.”

“I got *myself* there.”

“Hey.” He patted my face with his gloved hand.

“Brennan?”

I ignored him, dropping my coat and things, patting my pockets for my keys. I frowned into his face. “Did I leave my keys inside?”

“No. Brennan, hey. Hello? Skylar? Sky? Still with me?”

I opened my eyes. Shook my head.

“How much did you have to drink?”

I held my hand up and began to count it out.

“You think? Because I was watching. It didn’t look to me like you had that much. Is it possible someone spiked your beer?”

“Who? You?”

Even in the shadowy light I could see he was taken aback. “*Me?* No. Not me.”

I said confidently, “I think it was you. I think you’re up to no good, Rory Whatever Your Name Is.”

“Rory is what my name is. And I am up to *completely* good.”

“*Nnnn*. That’s what they all say, Rory No Name.”

He gave an unsteady laugh. “Jesus. Let’s get you to your cabin, and then—”

“And *then* you’ll tell me your name.”

He made a sound of exasperation, stooped to grab my things, and pushed them back into my arms. “My name is Rory Torr,” he said crisply. “Special Agent Rory Torr to you.”

Chapter Five

After a moment, I asked suspiciously, “Why just to me?”

He looked up and said to the moon, “Never mind.”

So I said to the moon, “If he’s an FBI agent, he has identification.”

Rory said very quietly, “I *have* identification. When we get to your cabin, I’ll show it to you.”

“Yeah. No. Show me now.”

“*I’m* the one you’re worried about?”

“I’m not *worried* about you. I don’t trust you.”

He swore quietly, unzipped his jacket, felt around, and pulled out one of those flat leather badge wallet things. He flipped it open, held it under my nose, and said nothing.

The gold shield crested by an eagle with wings spread glinted in the flickering light.

I considered, nodded solemnly. “In God We Trust.”

“That’s not what it says. That’s on our currency. The FBI’s motto is Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity.”

“That’s not what it says. It says Federal Bureau of Investigation.” I squinted. “Department of Justice.”

He snapped shut the wallet, just missing the tip of my nose. “Can we please, *please* find your cabin before everyone in the county knows who I am?”

“Who are you?”

He gaped at me.

“*Oh.*” I laughed and patted his chest. “I thought you meant you were someone famous. Besides being...you know.” I turned around, studying the group of cabins that were also starting to spin. Like trying to walk across an in-motion Merry-Go-Round. “I...don’t think I can walk that far.”

“Which one is it?”

“I’m... Maybe on the left?”

It was not the cabin on the left. In fact, it took us three tries and waking two fellow and mightily unamused guests before we—Rory—managed to locate my cabin. At some point he also located my keys and managed to get the door open, but I was out for the count by then.

I vaguely recalled coming around as I climbed, with his help, in between the chilliest sheets this side of the Rockies—or that side of the Rockies—to ask Rory again if he’d doctored my drink.

“Absolutely not. Why the hell would I do such a thing?”

“You lied about being in the FBI.”

“*What?* I didn’t—” He pulled himself up short. “No. Nope. We’re not having this conversation until you’re back to normal. Well, in your case, back to usual.”

I pulled the bedclothes up to my chin and said, “I hope I’m not poisoned.”

He sucked in a sharp breath. “Do you think you’re poisoned? Should we try to get you medical assistance?”

“How should I know?”

“Well... But...”

I was giving it my careful consideration. “No. But I’m not knocked out either.”

He said darkly, “Not yet.”

I laughed manically and closed my eyes.

I was not laughing the next time I opened my eyes.

I blinked up at an unfamiliar wooden ceiling with an unfamiliar cobweb, and moaned, “The hell...?”

The good news was the bed, cabin, New Hampshire had stopped spinning. The bad news was the damage was done, and I barely had time to jackknife up and fling myself into the telephone-booth-sized restroom, where I was utterly, wholly, and absolutely sick.

It was brutal but fairly quick. When it was over, I rose shakily, relieved myself in the more usual fashion, splashed freezing-cold water on my face, rinsed my mouth, blinked at the bloodless, red-eyed, wild-haired reflection in the mirror, and lurched back toward the bed, where I got a worse shock.

Special Agent Rory Torr—I hadn’t dreamed that first part, right?—was sitting in my bed.

In my bed.

“How are you doing?” he inquired, which was surely a rhetorical question.

“W-what’s going on?”

Nothing fun, clearly, since he was completely dressed. And armed.

Rory, unreasonably composed for a man who’d slept in his clothes, never mind witnessing the ungodly vision of my return to consciousness, said gravely, “Good question. We should discuss it, if you’re feeling up to it.”

“Were you here all night?”

He nodded.

“*Why?*”

“That’s part of what we should discuss. How much of last night do you remember?”

My legs folded, and I sat down on the bed. “I remember... It’s a little fuzzy at the end, but I’ve still got most of it.”

He nodded once, consideringly. “I can’t say for sure, but I think your last drink was spiked.”

I frowned at him, trying to remember that final sequence of events.

“You think so too,” Rory said.

“I... But to what end?”

“To isolate and incapacitate you. At the least.”

I didn’t like the sound of that *at the least*.

“I didn’t think I’d had that much to drink either, but I could have had more than I realized. I was tired. The drinks could have hit me harder.”

I was trying to be objective—or maybe I just didn't want to believe what he was telling me. The truth was, I'd been pretty careful how much alcohol I'd consumed. I'd stuck to beer, and most rounds I'd cut the beer with ginger ale. There's nothing like anonymous threats to give you a case of situational awareness.

“Do you usually throw up your guts after drinking?”

“Thank you for noticing,” I said irritably. “No. Not since college. Well, and right after my divorce.”

His brows rose, but he said only, “You went from tired and mostly sober to falling down drunk in the space of *maybe* ten minutes.”

“That's how it felt,” I agreed.

“I don't think you'd have made it to your cabin last night, and that right there could have killed you.”

“*Killed me?*”

He shrugged. “It was well below freezing. Alcohol affects the blood vessels—”

“No, I know the *circumstances* could have proved fatal. I just don't understand why—”

“Don't you?”

The dark morning stubble and heavy-lidded eyes gave him a hard sexiness I hadn't previously noticed.

“Did you say you were FBI, or did I dream that?” I hastened to add, “Not that I dream about the FBI.”

“You wrote the Bureau asking for help, right?”

“I wrote everyone. I wrote New Hampshire State Police, Fish and Game, Grafton County Sheriff’s Department, Hastings Police Department, and yes, the FBI. Twice. Mostly I got form letters in response. I got nothing from the FBI.”

“You got me,” Rory said.

“Which, honestly, is more confusing.”

He said with a trace of apology, “The fact is, your letters were shuffled around for a bit before they landed on my boss’s desk.”

“Uh-huh. Excuse me.” I lay back on the mattress and closed my eyes, breathing slowly and carefully.

“You okay?”

“Probably.”

“Can I get you something?”

I moved my head in slight negation. He threw the ancient coverlet over my legs and feet, which got a twitchy smile from me.

“Maybe we should visit the nearest emergency room,” he said.

“Ugh.”

“Sure, but at the least they can give you IV therapy.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“Not for a hangover, no. But I’ve used to keep going when I’m under the weather, sure. You do what you have to do to get the job done.”

I muttered, “I wish to God I hadn’t come here.”

“I admit I was surprised to see you yesterday. Why *did* you come?”

I opened my eyes, glared at him. “Because no one answered. No one responded. I thought *somebody* should probably try to do something.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Not this!”

He laughed.

“Oh, thanks a lot,” I said bitterly.

He patted my feet beneath the coverlet. “Well, you did receive death threats. You had to know you might be a target for, at the least, mischief.” His sigh was unexpectedly weary. “On the other hand, it’s not like I’m doing such a bang-up job of keeping an eye on you.”

I opened my eyes. “Is that what you’re supposed to be doing?”

“It is now. Like I said, no one thought you’d be...you’d show up here.”

I translated his pause. “Be dumb enough? It was a last-minute decision. That I sincerely regret.”

He patted my feet again, which was unexpectedly comforting. Or maybe I was reassured by the fact that the nausea was once more receding.

I cautiously sat up and began hunting for my phone. “What time is it?”

Rory glanced at his watch. “Eight thirty.”

“Oh shit!”

“What’s the matter?”

“I’ve got an interview with Pat O’Donnell at nine.” I jumped off the bed and began, in wobbly fashion, to try to locate my jeans. I found them neatly folded on the room’s battered dresser. My phone was still in my pocket, along with my wallet.

Rory threw back the bedclothes and, yes, he was completely dressed right down to his socks. “Right. Let’s meet for breakfast afterward.”

I gave a full body shudder. “We can meet, but I won’t be eating for the rest of the weekend.”

He laughed. “Okay, you can watch me have breakfast, then.”

I stopped ransacking my suitcase and gave him my full frowning attention. “And why are we getting together again?”

“Because we have a lot to talk about.”

“Do we? Because the FBI had almost twenty years to solve this case. I can’t see that much has changed since I first wrote you guys. Nor am I the first or only podcaster or blogger or YouTuber to get threatening emails about poking into Deirdre’s disappearance.”

He said patiently, “Like I said, it took a while for your letter to reach the right department.”

“Which is what? Department of Lost Causes?”

“BAU. Behavior Analysis Unit.”

That took me aback. “You think a serial killer grabbed Deirdre?”

“We deal with a lot more than serial killings. Our focus is the behavior and psychology of violent criminals, with the ultimate aim of prediction and prevention.”

“Is that a yes or a no?”

“It’s a no. We—my boss—is confident we’re not looking at a serial killer.”

“How often is your boss wrong?”

Rory gave a short laugh. “I’m sure he’s been wrong, but he hasn’t been wrong so long as I’ve been working with him.”

“Great. Because I don’t believe any serial killer is responsible for whatever happened to Deirdre.”

“See? We’re already on the same page.”

“Also, there’s a good chance that whoever doctored my drink last night—assuming that’s what happened and I’m not coming down with the flu or something—it isn’t necessarily connected to Deirdre. What I mean is, not directly connected. This particular internet community has a few...”

“Weirdos?”

“I was going to say idiosyncratic personalities.”

“It’s okay, you can say weirdos. You can also say you suspect one of the weirdos spiked your drink. I agree. I think there’s an even chance someone gave you a Mickey Finn out of spite or because they thought it would be funny.”

I believed he might be right, but he seemed to think I needed more convincing.

“You have a room full of immature and dysfunctional personalities drinking and arguing for hours on end. It’s not a complete surprise if someone acts out.”

“A little harsh, don’t you think?”

It seemed he did not. “Add to that the fact that you seem to get under the skin of a few of your online peers.”

Rory’s assessment was blunt and unflattering, but probably an accurate reflection of law enforcement’s view of amateur sleuths as a whole and the Deirdre O’Donnell community in particular.

I said, “I think partly it’s being a teacher. Not everyone leaves our educational systems with great experiences.” Or even an education. “You still have people mad at their ninth-grade home room teacher.”

“It’s the age of alternate facts,” Rory said. “Nobody likes anyone thinking they know more than they do, let alone having the audacity to openly challenge some dearly held belief. There seem to be a lot of dearly held beliefs in this case.”

No kidding. Including the one where space aliens grabbed Deirdre. Or the one where she’d been nabbed by a clan of roving survivalists hunting for womenfolk.

“Am I right in thinking Peter Weber is the accepted authority for a lot of web sleuths?”

“He’s a polarizing figure, but I’d say he’s got more supporters than detractors. Especially on the platforms.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning his staunchest supporters are other podcast hosts and bloggers and YouTubers.”

“Versus the average viewer/listener/audience member?”

“Exactly.”

“You never call him out by name, but a lot of your theories challenge his. That seems to be what riles people.”

Rory hadn’t been bullshitting about catching a few of my podcasts—and Weber’s too, it seemed.

“It’s because he’s a published author. The idea that a mainstream publisher would invest significant money in Weber’s theories lends credibility to those theories. For a lot of people that’s major validation. Not just for Weber. For the whole community.”

“I see.”

I moved toward the cabin door. “Look, I’d love to chat, but I *can’t* be late.”

“Right.” Rory shrugged into his coat. “Where are you meeting Pat O’Donnell?”

“The family’s staying at the Blue Bear Lodge. Some people think that’s where Deirdre was heading that night. It would have been a hike, but she could have easily made it.”

“Okay, what’s your cell number? I’ll send you my contact info, and you can phone me when you’re leaving the lodge.”

We zinged our info to each other, our phones pinged, and Rory gave me a half-smile.

Which for some reason led me to press my phone to my chest and declare, “I shall treasure it always!”

I don’t think he knew what to do with that. He was outside the door before he came up with, “I bet you say that to all the FBI agents.”

“Oh no, only the *special* agents,” I told him, and shut the door.

Chapter Six

Pat O'Donnell had aged considerably since the last interview he'd given.

That had been back in 2019. Pat was eighty-two now. Shorter, thinner. His red hair had turned silver. His blue eyes had faded to the color iron. But his handshake befitted a lifetime steelworker, and his voice was as strong as ever. He was still a force to be reckoned with.

The first twenty minutes our "interview" consisted of me listening to Pat rant on his favorite topics: the ineptitude of Hastings's police department, his rage at their refusal to release the (apparently little) information they had collected through the years, his disappointment with the New Hampshire Supreme Court for refusing to intervene, and his utter contempt for Peter Weber and his "so-called book."

If Pat *had* been capable of murder, I was pretty sure Weber would have been six feet under years ago.

"Do you have children?" Pat asked at last when he had worn even himself out.

"No." I'd wanted kids, but Eric had been adamantly opposed. As things turned out, that was probably just as well.

"I don't know if anyone who isn't a parent can understand what it's like to lose a child. And this. The not knowing what happened. You can't get over it. It's like trying to live with a knife in your chest. Even if you're lucky enough that you still have other children to love and take care of,

you're always, *always* conscious of the one who's missing. It's hard to think of anything else. You can't let it go. You have to go on and live your life, but you can never take a full breath again because that knife is in your chest."

"I'm so sorry."

"People tell me, no parent should have to bury their child, but I can't even do that. We didn't have her to bury." He let out a long, shaky breath. "Sometimes I think that's the worst part. But then I tell myself, Patrick, would you really rather have no hope at all?" He shook his head.

I said, "*Do* you still have hope Deirdre's alive?"

He stared at me. "I'm a lifelong Catholic. I believe in miracles."

So yes. And no.

"Can I ask why you were willing to talk to me?"

He gave a grim smile. "My daughter Grania watched your videos. She liked what you had to say about Deirdre."

Grania was the eldest of the O'Donnell sisters. A beautiful, fiftysomething blonde with piercing blue eyes. She'd opened the door to Pat's room, introduced me to her father, and immediately made herself scarce.

"I see."

"I stopped watching, stopped listening years ago. My God. The things people said. About me. About her. About our family. People who never knew her. Never knew any of us. Jesus Christ. All these cheap armchair psychologists. I guess

they forget she was a real person. That we're *all* real people, not characters in some TV crime show."

I couldn't help wincing. In some ways I was as guilty of the armchair psychology as the next true-crime podcaster. I admitted, "Sometimes the internet makes it easy to forget that we're talking and posting about people who can be truly harmed by our words."

His scowl was as formidable as ever. "No. Don't make excuses for him. If you're a scumbag on the internet, you're a scumbag in real life. You just hide it better because you don't want to get punched in the face."

Him. We were about to get derailed by another rant about Weber. I tried to head Pat off.

"What do you wish people new to the case understood about Deirdre?"

He gave me a pained look. After a moment he said, seemingly at a tangent, "You know what I miss? Her laugh. She was very funny. She could take a story about anything, about missing the bus or losing a ticket, and by the end of it, you'd be holding your sides, laughing. And she used to sing. In the car. In the kitchen. All the time. But she couldn't carry a tune to save her life." His mouth curved reminiscently.

I smiled sympathetically, waited.

"She was spunky. Feisty. She was a fighter. That's what I wish people understood. That girl had the heart of a champion. She wouldn't have walked into the woods and just...gone to sleep forever. She wouldn't have mixed pills and booze and killed herself in some motel either. That wasn't

Deirdre. Why would she? She had her whole life ahead of her. She was excited about the future. She wasn't *born* a victim. Maybe she died at the hands of a scumbag, but that wasn't her destiny."

"Destiny's an interesting word."

"She was the last person in the world something like this should have happened to."

Of course every victim's family and friends felt exactly the same. I didn't try to answer. "Do you think she was going to end the relationship with Tommy Aldrich?"

Pat hesitated. "They loved each other. She loved his family, and they loved her like a daughter. They paid for her cell phone. They paid for her Auto Club Membership. But Deedee and Tommy were going in different directions. I don't think they were ready to end it. Tommy wasn't ready to end it. But I feel like Deirdre knew they weren't going to be together forever after all."

That confirmed my thoughts. Not a dramatic blowup, but a slow, reluctant letting go. "Was there anyone else? Could she have been on her way to meet someone?"

Pat's gaze moved from me to a distance only he could see. "I've had almost twenty years to think about it. I don't believe there was. She had a fling with her coach, but that's all it was. It makes sense to me that she was going away to clear her head. Make her mind up about a few things."

"One of those things being Tommy?"

"Sure. But that wouldn't have been the only thing. It wouldn't necessarily have been the biggest decision she had to

make.”

“What would have been the biggest decision? Do you think she was, um, carrying a baby?”

Pat’s “No” was unhesitating, even scornful. “She was a smart girl. It wasn’t her first rodeo. No, but maybe she was having second thoughts about teaching.”

“About *teaching*?” That was not what I was expecting.

“Maybe. She was studying chemical engineering at West Point. We were all surprised when she switched to education. Now I wonder if she was having second thoughts. I’m not sure she belonged in a classroom. She wasn’t one of those girls in a rush to marry and have kids. Teaching might not have been challenging enough for her.”

I forbore taking offense at the idea that teaching wasn’t challenging enough for anyone.

“As far as the tandem driver theory—”

He burst out, “That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard. And that includes the space aliens grabbing her.”

“Okay. Well.”

“Who do these numbskulls imagine was the mysterious tandem driver who refused to come forward?”

“If the tandem driver was the person who harmed her...”

Pat made a sound of disgust. “The men in her life, not that there were so many, *all* had alibis. Maybe the internet thinks it’s an episode of *Columbo*, but everybody’s alibi was

checked and rechecked. The cops didn't do enough, but they did *that* much."

"It could have been a friend from UMass. A former roommate? A teammate?"

"And this former roommate teammate killed her? *Why?* It makes no sense. She wasn't the kind of girl other girls want to kill."

I kept my mouth firmly shut.

Pat kept talking, "And I don't believe a car hit her. She'd have been paying attention and watching the road. I don't believe the bus driver carried her off to parts unknown. Either the dogs got it wrong and she went into one of those houses along that road, or she climbed into the wrong car. My guess is she was trying to put distance between herself and the scene of the accident, so I think she got into the wrong car."

"Would she get into a stranger's car?"

His look was chiding. "She was at West Point for a year and a half. She had training in hand-to-hand combat. She worked as a security guard on campus. She wasn't a-a commando, but she knew how to handle herself. Deirdre liked people, and she was confident. Yes, she'd have gotten into a stranger's car. Especially if it was driven by a woman or someone her own age."

* * * * *

"Especially if it was driven by a woman or someone her own age."

I was still considering Pat's comment as I texted Rory after leaving the Blue Bear Lodge.

He answered immediately and sent directions to a small restaurant called Kathy's Korner in the heart of Woodlark.

I was feeling less rocky by that point, and the idea of coffee that didn't come from a motel mini drip was all the incentive I needed. Also, I was looking forward to, er, jousting with Rory again.

Kathy's Korner turned out to be a large and comfortable family restaurant filled to capacity at ten thirty in the morning.

Rory, now shaved and showered, looked his usual calm and capable self as he left the cluster of people waiting outside the large cabin-style building and came to meet me. He held up one of those restaurant beeper things.

"We've got about a ten-minute wait."

"That's fine."

"Want to see the sights while we wait?"

"Why not?"

As it turned out, there were not a whole lot of sights to see. To the south was a hydro and aquatic therapy studio, and to the northwest was Woodlark Elementary School. And nothing but empty lots and trees in between. But maybe that was the idea. No prying eyes, no pricking ears.

"What did Pat have to say?" Rory asked as we hiked along the wide, largely empty highway. The sun was shining, the snow was melting. The air was crisp and cold and invigorating. It felt good to be walking. It felt good to be alive.

“Nothing unexpected. The same things he’s been saying for nearly twenty years: that Hastings PD seriously screwed up the investigation from the start, and that people on the internet are assholes and someone should do something about Peter Weber. And he believes Deirdre is dead.”

Rory nodded thoughtfully.

I said, “I mean, at this late date it’s unlikely he’s going to remember some vital clue or put together some connection he never made before.”

“No, true, though I’m sure it’s never far from his mind.”

“You have to go on and live your life, but you can never take a full breath again because that knife is in your chest.”

“No. Even if he wanted to forget, this case took on a life of its own on social media.”

No comment from Rory.

“I really do believe that most of us who engage in online sleuthing want to help, that we have the best intentions. And I do believe that web sleuths have been helpful in cracking a number of cases that might not have been solved otherwise.”

“Sure, there are exceptions to every rule.”

“I know you disagree.”

He gave me a sideways look. “I think it’s possible that online sleuthing can be helpful in some cases. It’s probably less helpful when it comes to high-profile investigations, investigations that have attracted huge media attention. Deirdre’s case attracts a disproportionate number of trolls and nuts.”

As much as I wanted to argue, what Rory said was true. Unpleasant but true. But it was also true that online sleuths had helped to generate a lot of the media attention that had pushed law enforcement to pursue avenues they might have otherwise ignored or failed to notice. No, none of those leads had ultimately panned out, but eliminating possibilities was helpful in its own way.

When I didn't respond, Rory gave me another of those sideway glances. "I'm not lumping you in with the nuts and the trolls."

"Sure about that?"

"No. I mean, *yes*. You've got a degree in criminal justice. You teach courses in criminology, you've consulted with your local police and sheriff's departments on cases, you've published a couple of well-received papers, and your podcast is highly regarded by law-enforcement professionals."

I stopped walking. "Somebody sure did his homework."

Rory stopped walking too. His gray eyes met mine unwaveringly. "Hell yes, I did my homework. You think the Bureau sends agents jetting around the country because some random guy on the internet receives a nasty letter? I'm here because of who you are. You're a known quantity. You're a professional. You're credible." He added, "I—we—take you seriously."

Rory sounded sincere, which went a ways toward smoothing my ruffled feelings. Even when you've got nothing to hide, being investigated without your knowledge leaves a bad taste.

I made a fusty professorish, “Hmm.”

He gave that appealing half-grin. “Although, I have to tell you, my boss disapproves of your decision to attend the conference. He said he assumed you had better sense.”

“I know that’s supposed to be a crushing criticism, but I have zero interest in what your boss thinks.”

Rory gave a funny laugh.

“And by the way, it’s a vigil, not a conference.”

“You could have fooled me.”

Fair enough. Before I could respond, the restaurant beeper went off, and we turned and headed back to Kathy’s Korner.

The restaurant was even more crowded by then, and they were in the process of giving our table away when we reached the hostess station, out of breath and adamant we *had* to have breakfast. I half expected Rory to flash his badge, but summoning the full weight of the federal government proved unnecessary.

We were led by a slightly exasperated waitress through the sea of chairs and tables and milling people to a wooden booth by a large window overlooking the snowy highway. A huge stone fireplace burned cheerily at the far end of the room, and the comforting smells of fresh coffee and homemade bread filled the room.

Menus were delivered with an air of *let that be a lesson to you!* and for the next minute or two Rory and I devoted ourselves to the all-absorbing task of figuring out what we were going to eat. I was surprised to find I was actually hungry

—starving, in fact. But then it had been almost twenty-four hours since my last meal.

The busboy arrived with coffee. Rory ordered MUD\WTR, which went over about as you would expect. He tried for matcha coffee, chicory coffee, and eventually took mercy on the poor kid and ordered Earl Grey.

“I guess you don’t get out of the office much,” I commented.

“Are you kidding? I live out of my suitcase.”

“I’ve heard rent’s pretty high in DC.”

He grinned. “True. But I live in Stafford.”

“If you say so.”

As I flipped through page after gravy-stained page, I sucked in a breath of wonder. “They have chicken fried steak!”

Rory was amused. “That stuff will kill you.”

“It might be worth it. Homemade biscuits and gravy, chicken fried steak? Enough said.” I closed my menu.

Rory continued to peruse the pages. I gazed out the window for a minute or two, but then I got that itchy awareness at the back of my neck, a feeling that was becoming all too familiar this weekend. The feeling someone’s watching you. I glanced around the packed room, and eventually spotted a stout man in a too-small fedora at a long, crowded table against the far wall.

Our eyes met, and the man in the fedora looked away. He made some laughing comment to his companions. Several people glanced our way, and the entire table began to buzz.

I glanced at Rory, who was studying me. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. Peter Weber’s here with his fan boys.”

“Ah.” He glanced past me, leaned back against the wall of the booth. “This should be interesting.”

“What should?”

No need for Rory to reply. The next moment, Weber had reached our booth.

Chapter Seven

“Doctor Brennan?” Peter Weber inquired.

Weber was in his forties. Medium height, chunky, and a bit florid-faced. He had small dark eyes like a watchful mouse and a scruffy blond beard.

I rose, offered my hand. “It’s not Doctor. Just call me Skylar. And you, of course, are Peter Weber.”

“Of course,” Peter said cheerfully, shaking hands energetically. “I guess my reputation precedes me.”

“Not at all. I recognize you from your book-jacket photo.”

“Oh-*ho!*” Weber’s smile was sly. “But *you* haven’t read my book!”

Rory cleared his throat.

I said, “But I’ve read all your blog posts and seen all your interviews about Deirdre.” I turned to Rory. “This is my friend Rory.”

Rory half rose, shook hands, sat back down.

Weber beamed. “Good to meet you, Rory. Are you a true-crime fan or a Professor Brennan fan?”

“Both.” Rory’s smile was brief and businesslike.

Weber said, “I’m also a fan.” He turned his attention to me. “What do you think so far?”

“Uh...about what?”

“Everything. Us. The entire setup.”

The question was all-encompassing, the *us* confusing, and I wasn't sure how to answer. “It's really beautiful. The trees. The mountains. I don't get a lot of that where I live.”

“Los Angeles.”

“Yes.” Santa Barbara, actually, but life on the internet had taught me to be cautious with the details I share.

Weber lowered his voice. “If you like your privacy, this is the place. Remote. Isolated. They don't trust outsiders. They don't *like* outsiders.”

“In fairness, we're not here to go skiing.”

Weber ignored that, smiled. “Are you coming to my reading this afternoon?”

“I didn't know you were having a reading.”

“Yes! I'm going to be at the Woodlark Free Public Library on School House Lane. The reading starts at two, so we'll be done in plenty of time to attend the candlelight vigil.”

“That sounds...like a plan.” Not a plan I necessarily wanted to follow, but a plan.

“Come early so you can get a seat. It's always standing-room only. Maybe we can grab a drink afterward.” He gave me another of those beaming smiles, patted my arm, and left us, threading his way back to his table—a slow process as he was stopped every foot or so by someone saying hello or asking him to sign a napkin.

The fan boys at his table continued to watch Rory and me and whisper.

I sat back down in the booth and gave Rory an inquiring look.

“No question who the main act is,” Rory said.

“Nope.”

“Are you going to his reading?”

“Maybe? Probably.”

Our waitress arrived then, and we ordered breakfast. Chicken fried steak, scrambled eggs, and biscuits and gravy for me. A veggie omelet and fruit cup for Rory.

When the waitress had departed with our orders, Rory asked, “What else did you have planned for today?”

Was that professional interest? I couldn't deny I was enjoying Rory's company, so if he was at a loose end... Were FBI agents ever at a loose end?

“I was going to play it by ear. I thought I might go by the local newspaper and see if I can read through their archives.”

“Wouldn't anything useful have been picked up by the AP?”

“Probably. I'm more interested in subtext. You know, local opinion, attitudes.”

“Rumors?”

I answered indirectly. “Reading between the lines can be revealing.”

He nodded absently. “About last night.”

“You know, I feel pretty much back to normal. I’m wondering if it was just jet lag maybe, combined with some kind of twenty-four-hour bug.”

“Probably not.”

I studied his face uneasily. “Meaning?”

“I don’t want to worry you unduly.”

I frowned. “*Unduly?* Okay, now I’m *truly* worried.”

“Someone tried to gain access to your cabin last night.”

After a long moment, I said, “You mean aside from us.” That was just me stalling as I tried to absorb the unwelcome implications.

“Besides us,” Rory agreed.

“What happened?” The words came automatically, as dry and dusty as something spit out of an unused vending machine.

“About three twenty-ish, an unknown subject attempted to pry open the window. I tried to get out the door and around the side of the cabin, but they must’ve heard me coming. By the time I reached the window, there was no sign of anyone.”

“Maybe—”

He shook his head. “There were pry marks around the frame.”

I didn’t know what to say. I’d realized there was possible risk in showing up for the vigil, showing up in Woodlark at all, but I’d considered it to be low. What was the point in coming after me? It’s not like I actually knew anything. I was just another voice crying out in the wilderness

of the world wide web. I wasn't even the only podcaster to receive death threats. Why decide to make good on the threats directed at me? I was late to the game and had a relatively small subscriber base.

Rory was saying, "I probably should have let him get in and then—"

"*Get in?*"

He eyed me, said still calm, still quiet, "Yes, my concern was you. Not knowing what our unsub had in mind—and not knowing your feelings on the subject—I opted for prevention over apprehension."

I propped my elbow on the table and rubbed my forehead. "Jesus. This is...a lot."

"I know."

"Should I file a police report? I didn't witness the attempted break-in, but—"

"I spoke to Hastings PD after I left you this morning."

"You...did?"

Rory nodded. "It's unlikely anything will come of it, so don't hope for too much."

"No. I realize. But thank you. And thank you for not letting me freeze to death last night."

He made a sound that fell somewhere between a snort and an *aw shucks*.

So much had happened over the last twelve hours that I'd almost forgotten my troublingly close encounter with the

hooded figure who'd seemed to be following when I'd left the Swiftwater Pub to stretch my legs.

I filled Rory in on that episode, and I could see he thought I was crazy for not mentioning it sooner.

“You couldn't take a guess as to who was following you?”

“I could take a guess, but that's all it would be. He was never close enough to identify.”

“But it was a he? You're sure of that?”

“I'd say so, given his general size and the way he moved.” I was relieved to be able to give him that much.

“Tall? Short? Thin? Wide?”

“I'm not trying to be unhelpful. He was literally one more shadow in a night full of shadows.”

Rory continued to gaze at me as though I was sure to pull a rabbit out of a hat if he just waited long enough.

I said finally, “Well, he seemed to know his way around.”

Rory nodded encouragingly.

I tried to think it through. “He didn't run. He was confident of his surroundings; confident he could disappear before I'd be able to catch up to him. I'm not sure that means he's from around here. It could mean he's attended these get-togethers before. Or it could mean he's used to getting away with...murder.”

Not literally murder.

Or maybe yes literally.

Rory said, “Given the circumstances, it might be wise if we stayed close this weekend.”

“Meaning what?” I spoke automatically, still trying to make sense of the last three minutes.

“Just that.” He studied my expression. Maybe I didn’t look too excited at the idea of staying close because he said, “If you feel like I’m liable to cramp your style, so be it, but I think it would be a good idea to, for example, allow me to track your phone, and maybe arrange to check in with each other every hour or so?”

I let out a long, slightly shaky breath. “Yeah. Sure.”

He continued to regard me in that steady, serious way. “Look, even last night could have been nothing more than an attempt to scare you. You’ve got some real jokers in this community. The online community, I mean. That said, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

“Is that according to your boss?”

Rory’s mouth quirked. “No. He’s not much of a slogans or adages guy. Other than *Do it right the first time, or I’ll have your head on a platter.*”

“I don’t think that’s an adage.”

Our meals arrived, and the next few minutes were spent exchanging dirty silverware for clean, asking for condiments, and refilling our cups.

When we had our booth to ourselves again, I said, “The problem with the theory that someone was just fooling around,

pretending to break into my cabin, is that person would have known I was down for the count and would miss their performance.”

“If the would-be intruder was the same person who slipped you the Mickey Finn.”

I eyed him with exasperation. “I know I’ve got a few online critics, but not *everyone* in the community is out to get me.”

He offered that half-grin. “No, I know. And the odds are, your would-be intruder *is* the same person who doctored your beer. Which is why I’d prefer we worked together.”

“Well, that brings me to my next question. Since you didn’t expect to see me here and weren’t planning to play bodyguard, what *were* you supposed to be doing this weekend?”

“Same thing as you. Poke around, get a feel for the scene and the players—”

“You weren’t planning to talk to local law enforcement?”

“I already did that.”

“*Oh.*”

He laughed. “There’s this newfangled contraption called the telephone. We use it a lot in my line of work. Also computers. Those can be helpful sometimes.”

“Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit.”

“Is it, though? Because you’re pretty sarcastic yourself, Professor Brennan.”

I didn't dignify that with an answer. "What did you find out?"

He looked thoughtful.

"Or can you not say?"

Rory said slowly, "This is not for public consumption. Right? This is not to be shared on any form of media *or* in conversation with anyone."

"Understood."

"I'm dead serious."

"You have my word."

Since we were strangers, that probably didn't mean much to him, but after a moment, he nodded curtly. "The case is technically still open; however, Hastings PD believes they've identified Deirdre's killer and that he's deceased."

"*Deceased?*" I whispered.

Rory nodded.

"Who is—was—it?"

He shook his head.

"You don't know?"

"They declined to say."

"They *declined?*"

"They don't have to share that information. Or any information. It's not a federal case. I have no authority to insist."

"Sure, but professional courtesy..."

Rory grimaced. “Maybe. If it was any other case, probably. But Hastings PD has taken a lot of heat over this case through the years. A lot of abuse. And, while mistakes were made early in the investigation, not all the criticism was justified.”

Not all, no. Some of it, yes. But HPD was a small, rural outpost, and they had neither the experience nor the training to deal with a case like Deirdre’s.

He said, “Part of their decision is based on consideration for the family.”

“Whose family? Not Deirdre’s, clearly.”

“No. The suspect’s family.”

I struggled with the idea that the suspect’s family deserved consideration. But after all, this person was simply a suspect. And in any case, the family wasn’t guilty of any crime. Even if they had known or suspected this person’s involvement, it’s our instinct as humans to protect the people we love. I *thought* I knew what I’d do faced with such a situation, but I’ve never been anywhere near that kind of situation.

“Was this information shared with Pat?”

“Apparently, it’s still under debate.”

“So no. The answer is no.”

“Before you get too outraged on Pat’s behalf, keep in mind that Hastings’s prime suspect is just that. The case never went to trial. No one was ever convicted.”

“What’s that have to do with anything? Pat deserves to know a suspect was at least identified.”

“Pat’s a controversial figure in all this. While there’s a lot of local sympathy for him, there’s also resentment, even anger at his allegations of incompetence and corruption and conspiracy. And those charges weren’t only aimed at the police. I watched some of Pat’s interviews, and for a few years there he sounded like he thought Woodlark was Salem’s Lot.”

I wrinkled my nose, but couldn’t really argue. A decade into Deirdre’s disappearance, Pat’s grief had turned to rage. He’d mellowed since then, but for three or four years, he’d never missed an opportunity to say some pretty horrible things about everyone and everything related to the entire state of New Hampshire.

Rory asked, “If that information were to be shared with Pat, what do you think the chances are he’d go public with it?”

I said wryly, “One hundred percent.”

“Yeah. I think so too.”

“How long ago did HPD decide they had identified a suspect?”

“Ten years ago.”

“*Ten*— Jesus!”

Rory sighed.

I considered everything he’d told me. “There should be some way to share with the O’Donnells law enforcement’s belief that Deirdre’s killer is dead. They deserve to know that much, even if it comes with the caveat that this person’s guilt

isn't certain. You know, Pat's in his eighties now. He's not going to be around forever. The man deserves some comfort."

Rory's gray eyes were sympathetic, even kind. "I agree. But it's not my call. It's not your call."

I pushed my plate away, stared out the window.

"It likely won't be too much longer before local authorities share their theories," Rory offered. "The current chief is retiring this year, the sheriff retired last year. Maybe the family will have some news before next year's vigil."

"Is that what you think or what you hope?"

"Both."

Neither of us had anything to say for a few minutes. Rory finished his omelet. I drank my coffee. Weber and his crew departed, as noisy and boisterous as a high-school football team heading out for practice. The dining room felt a lot emptier after they left.

Finally, I said, "If the prevailing opinion is that Deirdre's case has already been solved, I'm not sure what you're doing here."

Rory prayer-styled his napkin across his mouth. Then he neatly laid the napkin and silverware on his plate and moved the plate out of the way. "Because sending death threats, whether through email or phone or the goddamned pony express, *is* a federal crime. My boss looked over every single piece of information you sent us, and he felt that the threat was credible. He also felt that, while the person making the threats might not be Deirdre's killer, it's someone with a powerful, even vested interest in the case."

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that person might or might not be local, but there’s a high probability they’re going to be here for the vigil.”

Chapter Eight

“Is Jason your boyfriend?”

We were in the archives, a.k.a. storage room, of the *Woodlark Weekly*, viewing microfiche slides of local obituaries. Simon Overhiser had not been in the office, but the young woman at the front desk was friendly and helpful and showed no hesitation in giving us access to the fifteen-years’ worth of back issues.

The newspaper had one scanner and reader designated for public use, so Rory and I had been sitting shoulder to shoulder on hard wooden chairs, peering at the computer monitor for what felt like hours.

Probably because it had *been* hours.

I had learned a couple of things about Rory during that time. He wore reading glasses—the kind with retro, square, black frames—and he made little faces, shook his head, and made murmurs of amusement as he read, which he did more slowly than me. His phone rang, well, vibrated, *a lot*.

I liked how engaged he was in the process of absorbing information. I liked how patient he was with the constant interruptions. And I liked his aftershave.

“Jason?” he repeated blankly.

“You were on the phone to him last night.”

Rory still looked blank. Maybe, probably, because this was absolutely none of my business? But I was almost positive

Rory was gay, and I needed to know so that I didn't misinterpret any of the signs I believed I was picking up.

I prompted, "When I was checking the rear entrance to the Swiftwater."

He thought back, and his face lightened. "Oh, *Jason*." He laughed. "God no. He's my boss's boyfriend."

"*Oh*."

"My boyfriend and I broke up about six months ago." He looked into my eyes and smiled, and my heart fluttered around in my chest like a butterfly on the first day of spring.

"Your boss too? There must be something in the watercooler. I just assumed the FBI would be pretty homophobic."

"I can't argue some ground's been lost over the last couple of years, but for the last decade the Bureau's made a conscious effort toward inclusiveness. In fact, I'm not the only gay agent in our unit."

I nodded, turned my attention back to the monitor. I took a closer look. "Here we go," I said. "Rusty Bailey's obit."

"Rusty wasn't living locally when he died. He was in Canada."

"Correct, but he'd lived here most of his life. He still had strong connections to the community. You heard Simon on our hike to the crash site."

"Yep. Pretty defensive."

"Maybe with good reason. I'm sure you've seen the online speculation regarding Rusty."

Rory nodded. “The fact that he moved away three years after Deirdre went missing didn’t help his cause. Nor did committing suicide two years later.”

No. And it also didn’t help that Rusty had been a bit of an oddball. With his wispy long hair, missing teeth, and *what-the-hell-accent-is-that*, he looked like every TV-movie-of-the-week backwoods serial killer. The internet had not been kind.

I bit my lip, reading the *Weekly*’s surprisingly lengthy—and glowing—obituary. “I read a fictionalized account of the case, and the asshole author not only openly blames Bailey, he promoted the book by continuing to accuse him and berate anyone who disagreed.”

Rory said neutrally, “Not nice, I agree. But the book was written long after Bailey was dead.”

I stared at his profile. “You weren’t kidding about doing your homework.”

“Due diligence is the name of the game.”

I sat back in my chair. “We’ve got a several people dying of cancer, a couple of drug overdoses, an eleven-year-old accidentally shooting himself, one *maybe* accidental death —”

“Overhiser’s brother? The one who struggled with depression?”

“Right. There’s no obituary for anyone besides Rusty who’s remotely connected with Deirdre’s case. Should we assume HPD considers Rusty their prime suspect?”

Rory removed his glasses, wiped them on his forest-green plaid flannel shirt, slid them back into place. “It’s never

safe to assume.”

“Yeah, but ninety-nine percent of these obituaries are people dying of old age.”

“You’ve got a large population of retirees up here. It’s not impossible that one of them hit the kid by accident when she was walking down the road. Maybe that person panicked and disposed of her body.”

“So the alternate theory is Mr. Magoo mows Deirdre down, dumps her body somewhere, and goes on to live a long and otherwise blameless life?”

“The hit-and-run isn’t a new theory.”

No. It wasn’t. I’d never liked that theory, though. Partly for the reason that hit-and-runs are noisy and messy, and surely someone in one of those nearby houses would have heard it. Partly because my impression of small rural communities was that these people tended to trust the local law, which meant they were more likely to report that kind of accident with the expectation of not being blamed unfairly.

“Did Rusty leave a secret suicide note?”

“No.”

“Was there any mention of a deathbed confession in connection with another suspect?”

“No.”

“Then Rusty has to be their guy.”

Rory continued to study the screen. “You don’t like the theory that Rusty is our unsub. Why? As far as we know, he was the last person to see her alive. He had a vehicle on scene.

He lived right down the road. He was encouraged by Deputy Dempsey to take part in the initial searches for her that evening, which he conducted completely on his own.”

“If Rusty intended harm to Deirdre, why did he call the accident in?”

“To cover his tracks. Given the location of the crash, he could safely assume someone else was sure to call it in.”

“Okay. This middle-aged guy, who, as far as anyone knows, up until now has led a completely blameless life—he was an ex-cop, in fact—is on his way home from work. He’s tired, his wife’s waiting with supper, and he comes across a crashed car and a stranded girl, knows everyone living along the road has probably seen the crash and knows the girl is there, knows the cops are probably going to show up any minute, but he twirls his mustache and thinks, *Bwahaha! My chance has come!*”

Rory opened his mouth, and I said, “And yes, I know the predator always has a plan, but doesn’t that seem far-fetched?”

I’m not sure why I was arguing so hard for Rusty’s innocence when he was my own alternate pick for Deirdre’s killer. I believed she’d accepted a ride from the wrong person. I just found it hard to believe that person was Rusty. Was that professional instinct or egotistical reluctance to let go of a pet theory?

“I don’t know. I do know that whatever did happen to Deirdre happened under those exact same unpromising circumstances.”

He was right. I frowned over it for a minute or two.

Rory smiled faintly, watching me. “Very often these types of crimes are about impulse and opportunity.”

“I know. I’m the guy who teaches criminology, remember?”

“I remember. But there’s a difference between theory and practical application.”

“Granted, but there are so many *practical*, logistical problems with that theory. Like, how did he get Deirdre on the bus? How did he keep his wife quiet all those years? What did he do with Deirdre’s body?”

“She’d have willingly gotten on the bus. If I’m not wrong, that’s another theory. Deirdre told him she couldn’t risk a DUI, begged him for help, and he drove her somewhere, dropped her off, and kept his mouth shut about it.”

“And then what? Is he supposed to have dropped her in the middle of nowhere? Wouldn’t the idea be to drop her off somewhere where she’d be safe?”

“You’d think. And maybe he did. Maybe something happened to her way out of his ken and our crime-scene radius.”

“Also, this guy’s a *school bus driver*. Is he really going to risk losing his job—and maybe losing his wife her job too because they *both* drove school buses—by using his bus to help this strange girl, who might or might not have been drinking, flee the scene of an accident?”

“Clearly, you don’t think so.”

“I really don’t. I think most people are not looking for the chance to behave like a character in a mystery novel.”

“But you have to agree Bailey is the guy with opportunity and means.”

“And his motive is that he’s a secret psycho?”

“You know as well as I do that motive can be hard to discern even when you have a solid suspect.”

There was no arguing with that, so I tried another angle. “I agree he had opportunity. I don’t know that he had the means. He wasn’t in good health, and he doesn’t appear to have owned a gun.”

Rory said flatly, “Everybody up here owns a gun. He was an ex-cop. He owned a gun.”

I retorted, “I’m pretty sure he wasn’t carrying it on the school bus.”

He shrugged. “We’re now in the realm of speculation.”

Hadn’t we been the whole time?

“Speaking of the realm of speculation...” I glanced at my phone. “If I’m going to catch Weber’s reading, I should probably leave now.”

“*Are* you going to the reading?”

“It’s liable to look pointed if I don’t.”

“And that matters because?”

“Because I don’t actually need or want to go to war with anyone. Plus, it’s probably the closest we’ll get to a drawing room with all the suspects.”

Rory looked confused.

I prompted, “You know. Like in an old-fashioned murder mystery where at the end of the book, the detective gathers all the suspects and then explains why everyone could or couldn’t have done the crime, before he reveals who the real murderer is.”

“Right. Got it. Except Weber’s book already revealed who he thinks the murderer is.”

“Yeah. I still think it might be useful to go.” I added tentatively, “Did you want to meet afterward? Maybe grab something to eat or have a drink before the vigil?”

“Meet afterward? No.” Before I had a chance to register my disappointment, Rory said, “I’m coming with you.”

That made me way too happy. I liked Rory. I thought he was really attractive, more attractive than I’d found anyone in over a year. But there was a high probability I’d never see him again after this weekend, so I wasn’t going to let myself get more interested than I already was. Which was too interested.

I said lightly, “You’ll make Weber’s day. Maybe he’ll even sign a copy of his book for you.”

* * * * *

It was standing-room only at the Woodlark Free Public Library.

Rory and I crowded in, lining up against the back wall with the other latecomers. I spotted Hailey in deep conversation with Iliana and a few of the murder-and-makeup crowd. I recognized Blake and Tony’s toques bobbing in the

front row of chairs lined a few feet from the long book-signing table where Weber was chatting with a slight, earnest-looking woman. Their mics kept feeding back as someone to the side of the room tried to figure out the sound system.

Rory's phone buzzed. He checked it, murmured, "I'll be right back," and squeezed out of formation.

I shrugged out of my coat. It was already getting very warm inside the crowded room. There was some tapping of mics, more feedback, and finally the earnest-looking woman rose and introduced herself as Head Librarian Sandy Reve. This got a round of applause from the small contingent of local attendees.

Sandy smiled nervously and proceeded to read a long and effusive introduction I couldn't help thinking Peter Weber had written himself. It left out the part where he'd been fired as an investigative journalist from the *New Hampshire Inquirer* for making up sources. As well as the part where he'd been sued successfully by the family of the subject of one of his true-crime books. The rest of it was true, though, if slightly inflated. His memoir of his deep dive into the Deirdre O'Donnell case really had spent an entire week on the *New York Times* Bestseller list, and Weber really was viewed by many as the ultimate expert on Deirdre.

Weber beamed all the way through the introduction and, when it was his turn to speak, proceeded to give *another* introduction, this time about what had drawn him to the case, why he was uniquely qualified to investigate Deirdre's disappearance, and why, when it came to his theories, we should accept no substitutes.

I was vaguely aware of the rustle of papers as someone brushed against the bulletin board to the side of me, and then someone whispered in my ear, “Maybe I owe you an apology.”

I jumped, because strange voices whispering in my ear does that to me, and stared.

Late forties-early fifties. Average height. Average build. Sandy hair, red, watery eyes, flushed face.

“Sorry?” I whispered.

“Last night. I think I was an asshole.”

Recognition dawned. Blue T-shirt.

“That’s okay. We all had a lot to drink.”

He nodded. “I hate know-it-alls.”

We were getting some disapproving looks from the people around us. I tried to silently communicate apology. I whispered, “Right. Thanks for apologizing.”

Blue T-Shirt addressed an older man who was glaring at us, “This is a private conversation.”

The man huffed, “Take your conversation outside.”

“Fuck off,” Blue T-Shirt replied cordially. He said to me, “I’m thinking of starting my own podcast. Do you mind if I pick your brain?”

I couldn’t help thinking he probably meant literally.

“Another time? I want to hear Weber.”

His face screwed up with scorn. “Don’t waste your time. What a poser.”

“Do you *mind?*” A woman hissed from down the length of the wall.

“Do you mind fucking off?” Blue T-Shirt returned.

Up at the front of the room, Weber had started reading from his book.

Rusty Bailey recognized trouble when he saw it, and the shivering young woman with the trembling smile was in trouble.

Not from him. Sure, at 350 pounds, with his long hair and stained handlebar mustache, Rusty looked like a roughneck, but those days were long behind him. He was a solid citizen now. In fact, he spent his days carting kiddies in his bus up and down the mountain to school and back.

“You okay?” He looked again at the black Saturn stuck in the snowbank. The flashers on the ground blinked blood red, briefly illuminating the cracked windshield, the blown airbags, the Massachusetts plates.

“I’m okay. Just shook up.”

“Happens on this curve a lot this time of year. I’ll call it into the sheriffs’.”

“Oh no,” she said quickly. “That’s okay. I already called Triple A. They’re on the way.”

A funny thing to lie about. There was no cell service this far up the mountain, which she had to know if she’d tried calling anyone at all.

Rusty said, “Okey dokey. You want to wait at our house? We’re right over there.” He pointed a little way down the road,

but she shook her head.

“It’s all under control.”

Sure it is, honey. But he left her there, walking up and down beside her car, and drove the remaining hundred feet or so to his driveway. He parked beside the garage so he could keep an eye on her, went inside to tell his wife to call the sheriff, and returned to the bus to fill out the day’s paperwork.

When Deputy Col Dempsey arrived seven minutes later, the girl was gone. Vanished like a ghost in the night. The only sign she had ever been there, the—

“You *know* all this,” Blue T-Shirt said impatiently.
“Let’s go somewhere we can talk.”

“I don’t—”

“Sorry about that,” Rory said briskly, wedging himself between me and Blue T-Shirt. “What did I miss?”

I opened my mouth to say—well, I couldn’t say what I was thinking, which was *Thank God*. Blue T-Shirt beat me to it.

“*Jeez, buddy!*”

“Problem?” Rory opened his jacket ever so slightly, and Blue T-Shirt blanched. He backed up, turned, and started pushing through the crowd.

Rory stared after him, smiling sardonically. He glanced at me, his eyes crinkled at the corners. He put his arm around my shoulders—and that warm weight felt all too natural, all too right—gave me a friendly squeeze, and proceeded to give Weber his full attention.

Chapter Nine

“I’ve got a pretty good idea who’s been sending you death threats,” Rory said.

“The guy at the library?”

We were having Irish coffees at a cozy little bar within walking distance of the library. Most of the true-crime crowd had headed over to the Swiftwater, but I was starting to feel tired and out of sorts. It had been a long weekend, and it was only Saturday afternoon. Or maybe it was the aftereffects of having been drugged kicking in.

“His name’s Frank Davenport. He’s a graphic designer from Michigan. Divorced. No kids. No wants or warrants. However, his in-laws have a PPO on him, as does his ex-girlfriend.”

“What’s a PPO?”

“Personal Protection Order. Basically, a restraining order.”

“A PPO but no criminal record? No stalking or harassment charges?”

“Evidence of stalking and harassment was provided, though charges were never filed.”

“Okay. Well.”

Rory cocked his head, studying me. “You don’t think he’s your guy?”

I didn't, but it wasn't a logical deduction or anything. Davenport's interactions, though obnoxious, didn't have the same threatening feel as the emails. But then, they wouldn't, would they? Tone in email is tricky. Very often an email sounds very different than the sender intended. Not that there's a lot of nuances to IF YOU KEEP LOOKING, YOU'LL END UP LIKE HER.

I shrugged. "No clue. He's odd, and he's aggressive, but he hasn't threatened me."

"He'd have to be pretty dumb to threaten you in public."

"True."

He was clearly trying to cheer me up when he offered, "Also, our cyber division's made some progress on tracking the IP on the emails you received. Your stalker is using TOR."

"I'm not sure what that is. Some kind of VPN?"

"Open-source software that enables anonymous communication. It's extremely effective at concealing an IP address from network surveillance or traffic analysis."

"So that's good news? Isn't that technology pretty much untraceable?"

Rory did a little maybe-yes-maybe-no head bob. "Let's just say the Bureau has certain resources we don't advertise."

"Right." I finished my coffee.

"Another?"

"I don't know. Maybe just regular coffee. I need the caffeine, but I don't want to get plastered before the vigil."

He nodded, but asked seriously, “Are you feeling okay? You seem a little...”

I raised my brows when he didn’t finish it.

He smiled that attractive half-smile. “I don’t know you well enough to say. You do seem tired. You also seem maybe a little...down?”

I wasn’t sure whether to be flattered or put his attentiveness down to professional vigilance.

“Yeah. That’s probably right. Well, despite the party atmosphere, it’s not a cheerful occasion. This kid’s been missing nearly twenty years. There’s no happy ending here. Local law enforcement thinks they know who’s responsible, and maybe they’re right, and maybe hearing that news eventually will bring some peace to the family. I don’t know how much comfort it’ll give them.”

“In my experience, not knowing for sure is harder on people.”

“Probably.”

He was silent for a moment, before adding, “Although, frankly, *not* knowing the details is sometimes a blessing.”

Our eyes met. I understood what he meant, understood he had seen some truly terrible things. And not from a safe and academic distance.

“How do you do it?” I asked.

Rory seemed to weigh and discard a couple of answers. “Some cases are harder than others. Some of them do get to you. I try to focus on the people we’re protecting, the lives

we're ultimately saving. I can't change the past, but if I'm doing my job right, I have the power to help shape the future."

"That seems like a healthy way to think about it."

"I think it's a realistic approach. The end goal is always prevention and protection. It's the same with you and what you do. Criminology is the study of crime and criminals with an eye to understanding and preventing."

"The non-legal aspects of crime and criminals, yes. But it's a lot less dramatic than what you do."

"It's all the same in the end."

I laughed. "Probably not. But I appreciate the pep talk."

"Is that what this is?" Then, once again, Rory went off-script. "What happened with your marriage, if you don't mind my asking?"

I considered whether I minded. Nope. Not at all.

"I don't want to give the cliché answer that we just grew apart, but that's what happened. He—Eric—really, *really* disliked the true-crime-as-a-hobby aspect of my work."

"*A hobby?*"

"Not the teaching or lecturing or traditional publishing, although he often said he wished I'd chosen any field besides criminal justice. He felt that the podcasting and blogging were morbid and unnecessary, catering to people who viewed terrible acts of violence as entertainment—and there's probably a certain amount of truth to that. He felt I spent too much time on what he considered unhealthy extracurricular activities."

“Jesus.”

“Also, I wanted kids, and he didn’t.”

“Ah.” Rory regarded me for a moment and smiled.

“Yeah. I can see you with kids. I bet you’d be a great dad.”

For some reason that actually made me a little sad, though I wasn’t sure why. It was a nice thing to have said.

“Anyway, maybe we could have worked things out, but he slept with another faculty member.”

Rory said nothing.

“I think it really was a slip, and I believe he was sincerely sorry, but I just...couldn’t forgive it. Eric said that if I truly loved him, I’d be able to let it go.”

Rory opened his mouth and closed it.

I said, “And I realized he was probably right. That I didn’t love him enough. So that was that.”

Rory’s attention was now focused entirely on the glass mug before him. “And that was two years ago?”

“Yes.”

“And you were together for six years.” It wasn’t a question. His smile was odd. “That had to be pretty painful. Have you sworn off relationships forever?”

My heart picked up tempo, though I was half convinced I was misreading his cues. Were they cues? Or were we just confiding things you only confide to strangers you’re never going to see again?

“No. I haven’t sworn off relationships. I’m not actively looking, but I hope eventually to meet someone.”

He said nothing, so to fill the silence, I said briskly, “What about you? How come there’s no boyfriend?”

He smiled, relaxed again. “There are boyfriends now and then. Mostly then. I have the kind of job that makes it difficult to maintain a relationship. At least with someone outside the Bureau.”

“You travel a lot. Clearly.”

“A lot. And we’re always on call. It’s not a nine-to-five job. Even when you’re off, you’re still partly on. You’re thinking about cases, working things out in the back of your mind. It can be hard to let it go, to be in the moment with someone, to give someone your full and undivided attention. Even if you want to. Does that make sense?”

“Sure. *Don’t touch that dial.*” I was joking, but I understood what he was saying. I was a workaholic too.

“I figured you for an analog guy.” He smiled, but his gaze was serious again as it met mine. “But yeah, I get lonely. I like sex. I’d like a relationship that lasted more than a few weeks. Companionship. Sex.”

“Sex and more sex,” I commented lightly. I also liked sex.

“Did I mention sex?”

“You *may* have mentioned sex.”

“I’d like all those things, but like I said, it’s not easy to maintain relationships in my line of work. Especially romantic

relationships.”

“You know what? It’s not easy to maintain relationships, especially romantic relationships, in *any* line of work. Relationships take time and effort and...generosity of spirit. And romantic relationships take all that times ten.”

He looked surprised. “That’s a good point.”

“I know it is. If I ever get tired of people murdering each other, I’m going to start a podcast where I give relationship advice.”

He laughed and rose. “Another Irish coffee?”

I leaned back in my chair and stretched. “Why the hell not?”

* * * * *

The vigil was held promptly at 7:45 in front of the old oak tree where Deirdre had crashed her Saturn.

It was the exact moment when Deirdre had gone missing nineteen years earlier, and it was a vivid reminder of how dark it had been when she climbed out of that car. The shadows of the trees stretched across the highway. The light from the candles we held seemed slight and unsubstantial flickering against the snowbanks. The full moon—the snow moon—hung low over the forbidding spires of the deep woods just a few feet from the road.

Somewhere, off in the distance, a dog was howling.

There were about fifty of us. I was surprised at how few of the true-crime crowd showed up for the vigil. Hailey was

there, and a handful of others, but there was no sign of Weber, which—given Pat’s feelings—was probably a relief to everyone.

Mostly, the attendees seemed to be local people. Simon Overhiser was there snapping photos for the *Woodlark Weekly*.

The family was all in attendance. Deirdre’s mother had died ten years earlier, but Deirdre’s sisters, looking as beautiful and solemn as ancient Irish priestesses, formed a half-circle around their father.

Pat thanked friends, family, and everyone dedicated to finding Deirdre for coming, thanked the people of Woodlark for their continuing patience and kindness over the years, thanked law enforcement for their ongoing efforts.

“We still believe that someone out there knows something, and that the time will come when that person will no longer be able to bear the burden of silence. The burden of guilt. Because silence is complicity. We’re sure that every day brings us closer to resolution. Thank you all for your unwavering love and support. We couldn’t have made it without you.”

Little cards were handed out with Deirdre’s smiling photo on one side and the address of the Blue Bear Lodge, where the family had rented a room for a reception following the vigil.

The vigil concluded with a prayer and then a few lines from one of Deirdre’s favorite poems.

And she is swallow-fleet, and free

From mortal bonds and bars.

She laughs, because eternity

Blossoms for her with stars!

The pale face of the snow moon gazed down
enigmatically.

Chapter Ten

George the bartender hailed us when we entered the Swiftwater Pub after the vigil.

“The police were here this afternoon. They said there was a break-in at your cabin? Was anything stolen?”

“Attempted break-in, and no,” I said.

His bleak gaze seemed to take in the entire room, as usual packed with people talking and laughing at the top of their lungs. “There’s always trouble with this crowd.”

Rory asked, “Is there?”

“Hell yes. They always leave nasty reviews because we can’t give them five-star accommodations. They spend the whole weekend running around taking photos and filming without ever asking permission, demanding interviews with the folks in the houses next to the highway—half of ’em weren’t even living here at the time!—tramping over people’s property, digging up people’s land. A group of them were out there today with shovels!”

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one feeling like it had been a long weekend. George had been in a much better mood Friday night.

“Hopefully, it’s good for business at least,” I said. Simon Overhiser had seemed to think so.

“It depends on the business,” George said darkly. “We do okay out of it, but not everyone thinks it’s worth the

headache. Last year a group of girls nearly burned down one of our cabins with their curling irons.” He sighed. “I know. Not your problem. What did you two want to drink?”

I ordered ginger ale. Rory ordered tonic and lime. George raised his brows and went to get our drinks.

“Hey, stranger.” Hailey draped her arm around my neck. “Where’ve you been all day?” She eyed Rory without particular warmth. “I feel like I know you from somewhere.”

“You look familiar,” he agreed straight-faced.

She tossed her head back and laughed. I saw that somewhere along the line she’d lost one of her nose piercings.

I said, “I saw you at Weber’s reading. It was too crowded to come over and say hi.”

“What did you think?”

I lifted a shoulder.

Hailey said, “We all came here for drinks afterward, and your name came up.”

I wrinkled my forehead. “Why would it?”

“Weber heard Pat gave you an interview.” She chuckled. “He was *not* happy.”

“I can’t control who Pat chooses to talk to.”

“Oh, *I* know. But you know how long Weber’s been trying to interview Pat?”

The three of us were scrunched up against the bar. Rory was close behind me—and given the press of people around us, *very* close behind me. In fact, I was acutely, distractingly

aware of his crotch in direct proximity to my ass. I could feel his warmth all the length of my back, feel his breath on my nape.

I said, “The problem with Weber using Deirdre’s case as the basis of his personal memoir is that her story became Weber’s story. I’m guessing Pat is sensitive about the idea of anyone trying to profit off their family tragedy.”

Also, I knew what Pat would think of a guy who wore a fedora, let alone a fedora that was two sizes too small for him. Sometimes it’s the little things.

“Oh, *totes*,” Hailey said. “Even if Pat considered talking to Weber at one time, he’d never give him the time of day after Weber basically accused him of molesting his daughter.”

“Jesus,” Rory said.

“Did you miss that part?” I asked.

“I guess so.”

“In fairness, Weber’s backed off that theory in the last few years.”

“Still hoping for an interview,” Hailey said cynically.

“Maybe. I tend to give him credit for recognizing it was a stupid theory to start with. There’s absolutely zero evidence to support it. Quite the opposite.”

Rory said, “I was focused on the idea of a tandem driver.”

Hailey and I both groaned, and Hailey said, “I gotta go pee.”

She disappeared into the crowd, and I turned to face Rory, which meant we were practically nose to nose. He smiled into my eyes.

That smile. That smile did things to me.

I refocused my thoughts, said, “I really like Hailey. Which is why I don’t like the idea that she had the best opportunity of drugging me. She even mentioned guarding my drink for me.”

“Did she?” Rory considered. “She had opportunity. So did Overhiser. He stayed at your table for a couple of minutes after you left.”

“I just can’t see what the motive for either of them would be.”

“As previously discussed, motive is subjective.”

“Was Davenport around my drink at any time?”

Rory seemed to look inward at the evening’s replay. “Not while I was watching. But I feel like I spent half the evening trying to get through on the pay phone.”

Cheers and laughter rose from the opposite side of the room, where the Weber contingent had commandeered a group of smaller tables and pushed them into one long barricade.

We eyed them for a moment, and I said, “I think I’m sleeping in my car tonight. I’ll drive into the village and park in the church lot. No way am I spending another night in that cabin.”

Rory said, “I have a better idea. Why don’t you stay with me in my hotel?”

“That’s very generous, but...” But nothing. I absolutely wanted to spend the night with Rory. Assuming we were talking about the same thing. Even if we weren’t, I preferred sharing a platonic bed with Rory to trying to sleep in my rental car in sixteen-degree temperatures.

“We’re either spending the night at my hotel, or I’m going to be parked beside you behind that church. I think we’d both be more comfortable in my hotel.”

He was smiling that irresistible smile, and I thought, *why not?* I liked him, he liked me, and if this was all we were going to have, so be it. Whatever it was, I wanted it.

I wanted *him*.

And I was pretty sure he wanted me.

It took no time at all to throw my things in my suitcase. I carried my bag to my car, threw it in the trunk, and followed the red taillights of Rory’s rental car down the dark, wet highway to Hastings Corner and the Gideon House.

The charming 1850 Greek Revival building was set in the center of the village green, surrounded by landscaped gardens, including a lily pond and fountain. Dollops of snow blanketed the shrubs and hedges and provided scanty covering for the marble nymph balancing a glowing pink orb beside the frozen pond. The scene looked like an old-fashioned Christmas card or a painting by Thomas Kincaid.

The vintage charm continued inside. The parlor, empty of any guests but ourselves, featured old-fashioned wallpaper,

window seats with cushions embroidered with homey sayings like *Home is where the heart is*, and oval-framed silhouette portraits.

“This is *nice*.” I carried my bags, following Rory up the elegant staircase to the second story.

Rory’s “*Mm*” sounded peculiarly unenthusiastic.

“No?”

“I wouldn’t know. I haven’t spent a night here yet. It’s hellishly expensive, that’s for sure. But it was the only thing I could get by the time I tried to book a place to stay.”

“Boss not happy?”

“There’s only one thing that makes my boss happy, and he’s spending the weekend with him right now.”

I smiled to myself. I was still smiling when Rory unlocked and opened his room door, offering a glimpse of a large, airy space complete with fireplace and a sleigh bed big enough to accommodate us, the driver of the sleigh, and a horse or two.

From the lace-edged draperies to the ornate ceiling medallions, everything was the epitome of cozy perfection.

“Just throw your stuff anywhere,” Rory instructed. “Do you want to have dinner? If we can find a place still open?”

“I could eat something.”

We ended up back at Kathy’s Korner. In the same booth, in fact.

It was a lot quieter than it had been that morning, and the diners seemed to be locals.

I had the bruschetta haddock. Rory ordered the Tuscan salmon. We both drank coffee.

When our meals had been served and no one was paying us further attention, Rory said, “Your theory is that after the accident, someone offered Deirdre a ride, she accepted, and at some point after that, things went seriously wrong and Deirdre ended up dead.”

“Yes.”

“But that’s not an original theory. So why do you think you’re getting threats?”

“A lot of us have had threats.”

“Generic threats. Yes. You’re the first person we’re aware of who received specific threats—along with coordinates to the supposed hiding place of Deirdre’s body.”

“Most of the theories posit the idea of someone passing through Hastings—a serial killer—or someone outside the immediate area. People had tried to draw a link between Deirdre and the disappearance of Brianna Maitland in Vermont. My theory is that Deirdre was most likely taken by someone local.”

“Even that’s not an entirely new suggestion.” Before I could respond, he added, “Actually, I watched a lot of your videos and I don’t recall you specifying you thought Deirdre was taken by someone local.”

“I edited out those references when the emails started.”

“You...”

“I’d obviously struck a nerve. I thought it would be smarter to, well, keep some of my thoughts to myself. I shared my theories with law enforcement.”

And, on the rare occasion I’d received any response at all, was told my theories were nothing new.

Rory seemed to be thinking this new information over. He said at last, “But you don’t believe she accepted the ride within the twenty-minute window between when the accident was called in and the deputy arrived on scene.”

“No. I think she went into the trees and waited.”

“But there’s no indication she ever left the road. There were no footprints, and according to the Fish and Game guy, there had to have been.”

“Right. So here’s what I think, given Deirdre’s love of hiking, camping, and outdoors lore, as well as her brief but legit military training. I think she grabbed a fallen branch from one of the many surrounding trees and simply wiped out her footsteps.”

Rory stared. “You’re kidding.”

“No. She was smart, she was imaginative, and I think she was dead-set on not getting into any more legal trouble. Learning how to recognize but also *hide* footprints is basic field craft. It’s the kind of thing you learn in military school.”

Rory gave a short laugh. “That’s...not a theory I heard before.”

I shrugged.

“But wouldn’t the Fish and Game people be able to tell the snow had been smoothed over?”

“Maybe if someone was particularly looking for that? The deputy sure wasn’t. And it was thirty-six hours before any real search was conducted by people who knew what they were doing. I think Deirdre could have easily managed it.”

“Okay. Let’s say Deirdre put her Pathfinder skills to good use and covered her tracks into the tree line. How long do you think she waited there?”

“As long as she could stand it. She might have waited till her car was towed. Maybe not. She’d certainly have waited until the deputy and Rusty Bailey stopped driving around actively looking for her.”

“Why didn’t the dogs follow her scent into the trees?”

“There’s debate about that. I think that trail—it wouldn’t have been much of a trail because I don’t think she went more than a few feet from the road—was abandoned in favor of the more recent track heading down the highway. That second track ends in the middle of the street, which is where I think she got a lift from someone.”

Rory said slowly, “Do you have a suspect in mind?”

“I don’t have names. One of the original rumors was about a group of local boys driving back from skiing at Loon Mountain Resort who might have stopped for her. It’s about a forty-minute drive from here to the lodge.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Interestingly, that story drops out of the narrative early on. It’s only mentioned in the earliest reports.”

“Maybe because it isn’t true.”

“Maybe. Or maybe because the implications for these local sons terrified the people of Woodlark.”

Rory put his fork down. Picked up his coffee cup. “I mean, it’s an interesting theory. I’ll give you that.”

“I’ve been trying for years to get the names of the boys.” I shook my head. “It’s like hitting a wall. I know there were supposed to be three in the car and that they were college age. Maybe they worked at the lodge. Maybe they were just up there skiing. Maybe they were on their way home. Or *maybe* they were on their way to a party.”

“There are a whole lot of maybes in there.”

“I know. And yet someone *really* didn’t like me speculating about any of that.”

He made a sound of acknowledgement. “If they existed at all, it shouldn’t be that hard to pin down who they were.”

“I agree. Which is why I’m here.” I made a face. “Getting nowhere fast.”

“You think there’s a conspiracy of silence?”

“I can’t say, but it sure feels that way. People around here are willing to discuss all kinds of things about Deirdre’s disappearance. But they won’t talk about Rusty Bailey—which I think is understandable, given the way he was remorselessly hounded by the media—and they play dumb if you bring up the rumor about the boys from Loon Mountain.”

“Hm.” Rory contemplatively chewed his salmon. “Because they don’t know what the hell you’re talking about?”

I let that pass.

“Something else that may or may not be relevant. Before there was the *Woodlark Weekly*, there was the *Hastings Howler*, which was owned and managed by Shiloh Overhiser. Simon’s father. Unfortunately, there’s no way to access the *Howler*’s archives because a fire destroyed all the back issues before they could be digitized.”

Rory put a hand to the back of his neck as though he was experiencing whiplash. “Okay. Sorry. I don’t see the significance.”

“Control the flow of information?”

“What about it?”

“Maybe the Overhisers had a particular and personal reason to control the flow of information, especially regarding anything to do with Deirdre.”

“I can see you think this is leading somewhere.”

I swallowed my impatience. “You don’t remember that one of the non-age-related deaths in the *Weekly*’s obituaries was for Simon’s brother Milo?”

Rory’s brows knotted. “I remember. But we were looking for names connected to Deirdre. Where’s the connection?”

“There isn’t one.”

He crossed his eyes.

Which made me laugh. “No, you’re right. I don’t know there’s a connection. I made a mental note because of Milo’s age and the fact that there seemed to be some question about

whether his death was accidental. He drove off a bridge ten years ago.”

Rory said slowly, “Which is when Hastings PD believed they’d identified their suspect in the case.”

“*Yes*. Exactly! Ten years ago. And no, there’s no known connection to Deirdre, but Milo was in his thirties when he died, which means he’d have been in his twenties at the time Deirdre went missing. And his obit mentioned he was an avid skier.”

Rory was silent.

“What do you think?”

He said, “It’s all circumstantial. You know that.”

“I know.”

“*Highly* circumstantial.”

“Yep. But?”

“But...I mean, it’s not *bad*. In fact...”

“In fact?”

Rory met my eyes and smiled. “It’s pretty damned good, Professor.”

Chapter Eleven

When we got back to Rory's hotel room, it was after ten, and we were both yawning.

We'd been relaxed and easy together all day, so I'm not sure why the mood suddenly shifted, but I was definitely feeling self-conscious and a little nervous as that pristine white door closed behind us with a discreet *bang*.

Who was I kidding? Of course I knew why I was suddenly self-conscious and nervous. We were about to share a bed. I was about to share the sheets with the first man I'd been interested in, in God knew how long, and I had no clue if we were going to just...sleep.

Rory unwrapped his scarf, unzipped his jacket, saying, "Did you want to watch TV or—?"

"Honestly, I'd love a shower."

"Help yourself."

I retreated to the bathroom, scrubbed myself top to bottom till I was a lovely parboiled pink, brushed my teeth, towel-dried my hair, and exited on a rolling cloud of shower-gel-scented steam.

"It's all yours," I announced.

Rory, sitting in bed, naked—or at least naked to his waist—smiled in welcome and held out his arm to me. "*That* sounds promising."

I laughed.

It was that easy.

I joined him in the giant sleigh bed, Rory tugged me forward, I let myself go with it, off balance and falling into his arms. It was lovely being held by Rory, lovely being naked with Rory, the warmth and strength of his muscular arms around me, and the steady beat of his heart against mine.

He kissed me. I kissed him back and felt that bloom of discovery. *So this is what you taste like...*

His lips were surprisingly soft, and he tasted a bit like breath mints. I suspected the judicious application of peppermint ChapStick and Tic Tacs, which made me smile against his mouth.

Rory cupped my face in his hands, not pushing me back exactly, but so he could look into my eyes. “I *really* like you, Skylar.”

“I really like you.” I was fervently hoping there wasn’t about to be a *but*.

“It’s funny because I didn’t want this assignment. We’re working some huge cases right now, and I thought, *why me?* Why am *I* being sent to Siberia?” He brushed his mouth gently against mine. “And now I’m thinking this is one of the best things that’s happened to me in a long time.”

“Same.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah.” I dipped my head, nibbled his lower lip, which made him smile again. Rory smiled a lot, laughed easily. I really, *really* liked that about him. He was a pleasant,

good-natured man in a job that was almost guaranteed to knock all the good-natured pleasantries out of you.

He pulled me close again, and it felt surprisingly like a hug, which caught me off-sides emotionally, made my eyes tear a little, because it was so genuinely affectionate. I hadn't realized until then how much I missed affection in a relationship, how little affection there had been between Eric and me. There had been sex, and there had been love, but there hadn't been *affection*. I suddenly understood how underrated affection was.

We hugged and kissed, and the kisses grew hotter, and our grip on each other changed and grew more exploratory, discovering each other's little secrets through tongue and fingertips and pushes and thrusts, learning the small mysteries of hollows and crevices and peaks and valleys. Investigating the beauty of bare skin and soft hair and the dark and humid questions.

The questions to which Rory's answer was always *yes*. To which my answer was always *yes*.

The flicker of eyelashes, the brush of noses, the tease of lips. We took our time in the tender, aureate glow of lamplight. We took our sweet, very sweet time.

Until the urgency began to build, and need turned caresses into torture.

"Oh God, I want you," Rory panted between kisses.

I gulped. "Right here. Right now..." Spreading my legs, welcoming that hard jab and press, thrusting blindly back against his hip, groin.

Clumsy with hunger and unfamiliarity and the understanding that this was a limited engagement. Limited in a number of ways. Which didn't make it any less sweet, any less hot. We rocked against each other, rocked and rolled and writhed and squirmed, trying not to be too rough, too pushy, but absolutely, desperately needing to *come*...

Naked abandon.

And I wasn't there yet, it always took me a little while to get there—another thing Eric had a problem with. *Jesus, don't think about Eric now*. Which had made it all so much harder in all the wrong ways.

“Please don't stop, please don't stop,” I begged. Tears sprang to my eyes. I was that afraid he'd finish and be done and I'd be left with want and desire screaming through my veins and no release.

“Not stopping...”

I could feel moisture from his cock pearling against mine. I writhed and wriggled, trying too hard and losing my rhythm, losing the cadence. I moaned my frustration, bit his shoulder.

And then something crazy and unexpected happened. Rory loosened his grip on my hip, slid his hand down my ass, and slipped his finger with a dirty, delicate accuracy into my anus.

It was startling, shocking, transfixing. My cock sprang erect, rock hard, and then...then orgasm boiled up and over, surging through me from the tips of my toes to the ends of my

hair. Physical pleasure so intense, so extreme, it was almost excruciating.

I screamed hoarsely into Rory's shoulder as it pulsed through me, wave after wave, blind and helpless in the wake of an orgasm like nothing I'd ever felt before.

"I've got you, Sky," Rory breathed against my ear.

From a tumbling distance, I knew he was coming too, could feel his arch and thrust, his hips jerking as the wet spurts of his ejaculation mingled with mine, soaking us both.

Sounds I'd never made before were tearing out of my throat, and I couldn't stop them. Rory smothered them with kisses, murmuring sweet, wordless things. He was shaking too, and I held him hard.

As rocked as I was, I couldn't help wondering, if *this* was like *that*, what the hell would *that* be like?

Eventually we calmed down, quieted. Rory dragged the bedclothes over us, turned out the lamp, settled into my arms.

"This is the first time I've been warm all weekend," I mumbled. I felt limp, wrung out, but yes, warm. Contented. My ass tingled in faint reminder.

Rory kissed my temple. "Same."

I closed my eyes. Let sleep take me.

"What time's your flight tomorrow?" he asked lazily.

It was some time later. The moon was shining brightly through the opening in the lace-edged curtains. I wasn't sure who woke first, but it had been a gentle coming back to consciousness. We cuddled and caressed, but there was no urgency now.

“Evening. Eight-thirty. When's yours?”

“Ten a.m.”

I grimaced, nodded.

Rory twined his fingers in my hair, said huskily, “Hey, am I going to see you again?”

Happiness blossomed in my chest. I'd forgotten what that felt like.

“I hope so. How often do you get to California?”

“Not as often as I would if there was some particular reason for visiting.”

I smiled. Kissed the underside of his stubbly jaw. “I could probably come up with a few particular reasons.”

“Yeah?”

“The weather is *fantastic*...”

He made a sound of amusement. “Have you ever been to Virginia?”

“No. But I go to DC once or twice a year for conferences and symposiums.”

He said, “I think we can work this out.”

“Yeah?”

“I never had much faith in long-distance relationships, but I know people who seem to be making it work.”

I nodded thoughtfully.

“What do you think?”

I said, “It’s kind of crazy. We’ve known each other, like, twenty-four hours. But...yes. I would. I’d like to see where this goes. I haven’t felt like this in a long time.”

Frankly, I wasn’t sure I’d *ever* felt like this.

“I know. I agree. But I feel this strong connection. I can tell you feel it too.”

“Yes.” I added wryly, “Hopefully, we still feel this way in the cold light of day.”

We were quiet then, starting to doze.

Rory said abruptly, “Why don’t you change your flight and we can leave together?”

“I wish. I have to take the rental car back. Plus, Simon’s taking me up to Blackbird Ridge.”

“Ah.” He blinked sleepily, and then I felt him still, thinking that over. His eyes jerked open. “Wait. What?”

“44.1644° North,” I reminded him.

“Right. The subject header on the final email. Which you think could be the location of Deirdre’s body.”

We were both wide awake now.

I said crisply, “Which it isn’t, because no one is going to haul a body up a mountain when there are a million other places to hide it.”

“Then why are you planning to hike up there?”

“Because someone wants me to.”

“I’m sorry. *What?*”

“It’s clearly a hoax. Someone with a sick sense of humor gets a kick out of the idea of seeing me tramping up and down that mountain with nothing to show for it.”

“If you know it’s a hoax, why are you going up there? Especially now, when we think Simon Overhiser might be connected to all this.”

“He couldn’t have had a direct connection. He’d have been sixteen or so.”

“What does that have to do with the price of beans? We suspect his brother was one of your Loon Mountain Three. Are you pretending you’re not aware that the majority of juvenile offenders are age sixteen and seventeen?”

“I’m aware.”

“And?”

“It seems to me like a pretty good opportunity to talk to him.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Rory sat up, dislodging me. “Light,” he warned crisply, and turned on the lamp.

I put my hand up, wincing. “Seriously?” I sat up too. “Do we really have to do this now?”

“I’m leaving first thing in the morning. Yes. We have to do this now.”

“Rory, listen. What would be the point of harming me? Those emails I got didn’t sound like Simon.”

“You’ve met the man once.”

“Simon is not the right...profile.”

“You’re not a profiler!”

“Okay, you’re on the BAU. Do you think Simon fits the profile?”

“I know almost nothing about the guy.”

“Then please trust me on this. Even if I’m wrong, even if Simon confessed to murdering Deirdre himself, I wouldn’t have any actual proof. And he knows that. And he knows that if he did harm me, that’s just going to create endless problems for himself. Especially now when you know everything I do.”

“Did you not hear anything I said about my boss believing the threat against you was credible?”

“I thought you were convinced Davenport was behind the emails?”

“And what if Davenport is waiting on the mountain for you?”

“What, he’s just going to spend tomorrow hanging out on Blackbird Ridge in case I show up?”

“Isn’t that your theory? Someone with a sick sense of humor wants to see you busting your butt climbing up that mountain for nothing?”

“I don’t think the plan is to suffer with me.”

“You have zero idea what the plan is. Maybe your pen pal is escalating. He could have an agenda you know nothing about. Or maybe he’s making it up as he goes along. Once you’re up there on your own, you’re liable to run out of options fast.”

“I don’t think Davenport is emailing me coordinates to a local mountain top. That seems a lot more likely to come from someone in the area. Someone familiar with the mountain.”

“You mean someone like Simon Overhiser?”

It was late, and we didn’t seem to be getting anywhere. I said slowly, “Are we having our first argument?”

He was silent for a moment, then said, “Yes. I guess we are. I think this is a terrible idea, and I don’t want you to do it. I am advising you in my professional capacity not to continue with this plan. And I’m also asking you as someone trying to have a relationship with you, not to proceed.”

“Is it a deal breaker?” I inquired. Because if it was a deal breaker for him, it was definitely going to be a deal breaker for me. I was never again going to make concessions I didn’t believe in or agree with simply to pacify someone giving me ultimatums.

“No,” he said without hesitation. “Not unless you get yourself killed.”

I rested my hand against his bristly jaw. “It’s late. We can talk again in the morning. I would just ask that you trust me.”

“This isn’t about trust.” He pulled my hand down, but then kissed my palm.

I drew my hand away, but gently. “It is, though. I’d like you to trust that I’m also a professional, and that I wouldn’t be going up there unless I was confident in my understanding of the situation. And, if I *am* wrong, I’d like to ask, as someone trying to have a relationship with *you*, that you allow me to make my own mistakes.”

Rory opened his mouth, considered and then rejected what he wanted to say. He shook his head, turned, and snapped out the lamp.

The room plunged back into silver-limned darkness.

We resettled in the sheets and blankets. After a moment, I tentatively reached for Rory, and he reached back.

We fell asleep in each other’s arms.

Chapter Twelve

Peter Weber, minus his fedora, was in the dining room when Rory and I came down to breakfast.

He energetically waved us over and insisted we join him, and as much as I didn't want to, there didn't seem to be a polite way to decline.

"I had no idea you two were staying here," Weber greeted us. "I thought you were staying in the cabins behind the Swiftwater."

An elderly waitress arrived with coffee. Rory asked for MUD\WTR, and they went down the list of available options while Weber and I waited politely. Rory settled at last on English Breakfast tea, and we ordered our cooked-to-order omelets.

"How late did the party last?" I asked Weber once the waitress left with our orders.

"We closed the place down." He added, "I saw you two sneak out early."

"Sneak," Rory repeated.

"We were starving. It was a long day," I said.

"I imagine so. What did you think of the vigil?"

"I thought it was very touching."

Weber nodded, sipped his coffee, said with an edge in his voice, "Can I ask you managed to get Pat O'Donnell to

“speak to you?”

“I asked. He said yes.”

That seemed to further annoy him. “Really? That easy, was it?”

“I guess the oldest girl, Grania, listened to some of my podcasts.”

Weber rolled his eyes. “Of course. The theory of the stranger in the car.” He shook his head.

“I know you lean toward the theory of the tandem driver.”

Weber said, “I don’t *lean* toward it. It’s the *only* viable theory. Everything else is smoke and mirrors. There was no stranger in a car. No frat guys followed her from UMass. Rusty Bailey didn’t kidnap her or set her adrift in the wilderness. Deputy Dempsey didn’t do away with her for reasons unknown. Tommy didn’t kill her. Pat certainly didn’t kill her. There was no serial killer. She didn’t run into the woods and die of exposure. For God’s sake. The poor woman’s not even *dead*. She’s living her best life in Canada and no doubt wishing everyone would just forget about her.”

“Huh? You now think she’s *alive*?”

“I’ve known she was alive for years.”

I felt like my head was spinning.

Rory asked, “Who was the tandem driver?”

“Pat, probably.”

At my expression, Weber said, “Yes, I admit I initially thought Pat might be responsible for her death. His behavior

was highly suspicious.”

“You mean because he didn’t want to talk to you?”

Weber’s small eyes narrowed. “No. Because everything he told the police was *obviously* a lie. There was never any car-shopping. The four thousand dollars Pat pulled out of his bank account was to finance Deirdre’s getaway. They planned it together for weeks, from the moment she realized she was pregnant.”

Rory’s cell buzzed. He glanced at his phone and excused himself. As he vanished through the dining room entrance, I felt a little pang. I was already missing him, and he hadn’t even left yet.

I returned my attention to Weber. “Four thousand dollars isn’t a lot to finance a new life in a foreign country.”

“These aren’t wealthy people.”

“True.”

Weber scrutinized me. “Deirdre was much more complex than people realize. After she disappeared, everyone from the media to her family wanted to canonize her, but she had a dark side. As we all do. The lying, the drinking, the shoplifting, the credit-card fraud, the promiscuity, the reckless driving. She was smart and beautiful, but she was also very troubled. She may have been bipolar.”

“You think?”

“*I know.*”

I said, “She was a kid. She made a lot of the mistakes that kids do as they’re pushing boundaries, trying to find their

place in the world.”

Plus, there was no evidence Deirdre had been promiscuous, a drunk, or a reckless driver. She had certainly lied about a death in the family, she’d been allowed to resign from West Point after a shoplifting incident so trivial, it was in itself baffling, and she had used a dorm-mate’s credit card to order food on separate occasions, knowing full well it was bound to come to light. There were puzzling contradictions in her behavior, no question. But she was not the first young adult to exhibit puzzling behaviors.

Weber made a pained sound. “No more armchair psychology. Please.”

It was tempting, but I let it go.

Our omelets arrived. I forked off a bite, asked Weber, “Is it true you’ve received email death threats?”

He smirked. “Every time I publish a new bestseller, I get death threats. Writers are a jealous breed.”

“You think other writers are sending you death threats?”

“Of course.”

“Have you ever received death threats in connection to Deirdre’s case?”

“One or two. I didn’t take them seriously.”

“Did you ever find out who sent them?”

“Who cares? Some joker. Some random asshole with too much time on his hands and no life of his own.”

“I see.”

He scowled. “Why? Has someone sent *you* threats?”

“Yes.”

That seemed to irritate him even more than Pat O’Donnell agreeing to speak with me. “Why would they? You fell over Deirdre’s disappearance barely more than a year ago. You’ve literally not shared *one* original thought. I’ve been working this case for fifteen years.”

“You’re certainly viewed online as the expert.”

“Not just *online*—” He broke off as Rory returned to the table.

Rory sat down. “This looks great.” He stretched his arm along the back of my chair.

Weber frowned at him, asked abruptly, “Are you FBI?”

Well, chalk one up to Weber.

Rory gave him a level look. “Yep. Why?”

“I’m wondering why you’re here. Or is it just for him?” He nodded in my direction.

Rory smiled at me. “Oh, I’m *definitely* here for him.” He took a bite of his omelet.

“And you wouldn’t tell me anyway.”

“Nope.”

I said to Weber, “Since you *are* the expert on this case, do you remember hearing a theory about three local kids who might have worked at the Loon Mountain Resort?”

“Oh my God.” He threw his head back and laughed. “The Loon Mountain Three? Is that who you imagine picked

her up that night? That's your angle? Three ski bums? I debunked that theory years ago. There was no Loon Mountain Three. *They never existed.*" His good humor appeared restored. "Amateurs. Well, you have fun chasing those ghosts, Professor." He gave another chuckle. "I can't wait to read *your* book."

* * * * *

No denying it, the view from Blackbird Ridge was beautiful.

It was not an easy hike. It probably wasn't easy at any time of year, but in the winter, even in just partial snow and ice, it was particularly taxing.

But if Deirdre had been disposed of on Blackbird Ridge, it would have been under these same conditions.

Which is why it was perfectly obvious from the minute Simon and I started climbing that no one had taken Deirdre, alive or dead, up this mountain.

The sun was shining, but once we were beneath the canopy of trees, the light dimmed and the temperature dropped sharply. It was very quiet, the only sounds our boots crunching grit and ice, the occasional *crack* of a branch beneath snow, and, less frequently, the *buzz* of an aircraft disappearing into the distance.

Every time I heard a plane, I thought of Rory on his way back to Virginia. I'd promised to phone him as soon as I got back from my hike. Our goodbyes had been brief, and I was already wondering when we would see each other again.

The air was so clear and sharp, it seemed to cut through my chest. I was in pretty good shape. Simon seemed to be in excellent shape. But hiking in snow takes longer and requires more energy. It was a little after one by the time we reached the summit.

Simon had little to say when we started our journey, and hadn't spoken in over two hours. We walked out onto Blackbird Ridge, sat on boulders overlooking the drop to the trees far below, and drank water and ate Kind bars. It was sunny on the ridge, though not much warmer. There was no shelter from the wind up here.

I was hoping that we might have reached the point of friendly comradery by then, but Simon seemed more reserved, more closed off, than on Friday night.

He finished his bar, tucked the wrapper in his jacket, and said shortly, "Well?"

I took my sunglasses off. "Well, what?"

His face was hard and unfriendly. "What did you want to know?"

I shrugged. "What did you want to tell me?"

"We both know you didn't climb up here for the view."

I smiled, glanced across at the tree covered hillside.

"It's a terrific view, but no. The truth is, I got an anonymous email about a month ago with partial coordinates, and this was the closest I could calculate to the possible location."

"Location of?"

“Deirdre’s body.”

He stared at me for what felt like a long time.

Then he shook his head. “Well, here you are. Where do you think she is?”

“Not up here.”

His smile was dry. “No.”

“It’s a weird kind of joke.”

“Yes.” His smile was not particularly pleasant. “A lot of people don’t like you internet hounds.”

“I’ll try not to let it hurt my feelings.”

“Fifteen minutes into this hike you had to realize no one would have tried to haul her up here.”

I said ruefully, “I realized it the first glimpse I ever got of this mountain.”

“Obviously, you had some other reason for dragging me up here.”

“If you’ll recall, George was the one who suggested you be my guide. I’d never heard of you until this weekend.”

I think Simon had forgotten that. He was silent. Then he said, “I know you and your friend were digging through the *Weekly*’s archives yesterday. So? What did you want to know?”

Instead of answering, I said, “Did you know Hastings PD thinks they’ve identified Deirdre’s killer—and that they believe that person is dead?”

He turned his head, staring out across the vast emptiness of sky. “I know.”

I wasn't completely surprised. “Are they right?”

“About Milo?” Simon seemed to think it over. “I don't know. I hope not.”

That *did* surprise me.

“You never formed any opinion over all these years?”

“He was a good son and a good brother. That's all I know. That's all I want to know.”

I said gently, “He was just a kid himself when it all happened.”

That seemed to unlock the wellspring. Simon said hotly, “He *was* a kid. He wouldn't have hurt her. He wouldn't have hurt anyone. Not knowingly. Not deliberately. Whatever happened, happened. I can tell you this: it ruined his life. It haunted him.”

It ruined a lot of peoples' lives. Including Deirdre's. I didn't say that. I said, “What *did* happen?”

Simon shook his head. “I told you. I don't know. I don't know the details. Milo never talked about it. Any of it.”

Okay, that had to be a lie. Maybe Milo hadn't sat down and given his kid brother a blow-by-blow, but obviously there had been some conversation with family members. I didn't call Simon on it, though. Didn't say anything.

Simon said quietly, “I don't know if he drove off that bridge on purpose. I do know he never got over it. Maybe it would have been better if he *had* been arrested.”

“Maybe.” I gave him a minute. “Was he working at the Loon Mountain resort? I know there were rumors.”

“The Loon Mountain Three.” His smile was bleak. “I haven’t heard that in years. I didn’t think anyone remembered. Yes. He worked at the resort. At the lodge.”

Who else was in the car that night?”

“No one.”

“Then why did people think there were three boys coming back from the resort?”

“Why do people think any of the things they do? I don’t know. No one else was in the car.”

“Are you sure? Because if you weren’t there, how do—”

“*Me?* Hell, no, I wasn’t there. Winter break was over. I was in school.”

“Then how can you be sure there was no one else in the car? Maybe your brother lied to protect someone else?”

“No.”

“Did he have a best friend?”

Simon said impatiently, “What does that have to do with anything? My brother had a lot of friends.”

“Did he have a particular friend at the lodge?”

He said coldly, “I don’t know anything more than I’ve already told you.”

The winter wind whispered down the back of my neck. I shivered.

“The rumor is that three boys who were either working at the resort or were skiing there that week—”

He jumped to his feet. “I know! I don’t give a good goddamn about any rumors. I told you everything I know. Now, unless you plan on sleeping up here, you better get your ass in gear. It’s a long hike down, and it gets dark fast in winter.”

He wasn’t exaggerating. Sunset in February was five pm. We’d have to move fast to reach the bottom before we lost the daylight.

Simon didn’t speak again. But I could almost hear him thinking.

I didn’t press him because I knew enough now to get the answers I needed. I had my starting point, and it was only a matter of time and patience. I’d start with the resort records and go from there. Nineteen years was a little tricky as far as locating personnel files, but not impossible.

So long as you don’t lose your balance, it’s always faster going downhill than it is climbing up, and we made good time.

Halfway down the mountain, we spotted someone coming up the path toward us. Someone in an olive-green army jacket with a rifle slung over his shoulder.

Was February hunting season in New Hampshire? I didn’t know.

Simon swore softly.

The man raised his hand in greeting, and I recognized George the bartender from the Swiftwater Pub.

My heart sank as the pieces fell into place. Some of the pieces. Because George, like Simon, had been in his teens at the time of Deirdre's accident. But George had arranged for Simon to lead me up this mountain, George had the best chance of anyone of drugging my drink Friday night, and George knew exactly what cabin I'd be sleeping in—assuming I made it that far.

He was smiling as he approached us, and Simon stepped in front of me and yelled, "Are you out of your goddamned mind?"

George, bright-eyed and cheerful, brought up his rifle and called, "Get out of the way, Simon."

"He doesn't know anything!"

"He does now," George pointed out, which was true.

"You are *not* doing this," Simon told him.

"Get out of the way, or I'll shoot you too."

Simon spluttered, "You're going to shoot *me*? You really *are* out of your mind."

"Your choice." George continued to level the rifle at us.

My heart was banging in my chest as I weighed my chances of making it into the trees before he fired. I didn't think they were high. But I was also afraid George was going to lose patience with Simon any second now and shoot us both.

I called, "Why did you send me that letter? Did you want to get caught?"

“Are you— That was a *warning!* Which you should have listened to!”

“Why the hell would you be so worried about me? I don’t know anything Hastings PD doesn’t know.” Which probably wasn’t true, since according to Rory, HPD had said the suspect in Deirdre’s case was dead.

Meaning HPD believed there was only one suspect.

They’d got it wrong before. No reason to believe they didn’t continue to get it wrong.

“Bullshit,” George called back. “Nobody knows I was there that night. It’s not like *I* worked there.”

“Will you *shut up*,” Simon cried. “He only knows about Milo.”

“Uh...hello?” George retorted. “I think he’s got a clue now.”

“How do you think you’re going to explain this?” I asked. “At least five people know I came up here with Simon.”

George said promptly, “Hunting accident. You won’t be the first to get mistaken for a deer.”

“George, this isn’t going to work,” Simon said desperately. “The chief knows about Milo, which means he has to have suspected Chris.”

“The only reason he suspected Milo is Milo drove off that fucking bridge. Which started people thinking. Chris died of cancer. Nobody’s thinking *anything* about my brother.”

“It started them thinking about Milo and Chris working at the resort. Everyone knows they always drove together.

They *always* drove back and forth together. There isn't any hiding that. The rumors have been flying around for years anyway. But like you said, Milo is dead, Chris is dead, and no one knew you drove up with them to go skiing that day. If you don't do anything dumb, no one can prove you were ever there."

"I know it was an accident," I said. "But this isn't, and no one's going to believe it was."

"It *was* an accident," George insisted.

Until he spoke, I'd figured it probably was. But the way George said it—the empty look in his eyes, the angry flush on his face—no. They hadn't planned on killing her, but somewhere along the way, the decision had been made.

"What happened?" My hand was in my pocket, resting on my phone. There was no signal, no way to call for help, but maybe I could record our conversation. George might be too far away for his voice to be picked up clearly, but Simon and I would be. And like Rory said, the FBI had technological resources no one else did.

Better not to think of Rory now. Better not to think I might never see him again.

"It's as much her fault as anyone's." George's tone was aggrieved. "Nobody made her get in the car. We didn't kidnap her."

"No, of course not."

"She was more than willing. My brother told her he had to stop by his house, and she was fine with that too."

Simon groaned softly. "*George.*"

“We stopped by Chris’s cabin, and everything was cool. We had a few drinks. She was carrying a goddamned bar in that black backpack of hers! We were having fun. *She* was having fun. We smoked a little dope. No big deal. We were just relaxing. We were *all* relaxing. But she started to get impatient, started saying she had to call her dad, call her boyfriend. She said she’d walk to the Blue Bear, being bitchy about it, you know? So Chris said, *Go ahead!* And she did. She walked out. And Chris got mad. What the hell, right? We were doing *her* a favor. So Chris went after her, and she started running. Through the woods. Like she thought we were going to rape her or something.”

He stopped.

I felt sick.

“What happened?”

He shrugged, steadied the rifle at low ready. “I don’t know. I wasn’t there. I stayed with Milo.”

Like hell.

George stared at me, seemed to remember Simon, and said to him, “She hit her head on a rock. That’s my guess.”

“What did you do with her body?”

Silence.

George’s sudden laugh echoed through the trees. “Woodchipper.”

Simon’s knees seem to give out and he sank to the ground.

I was staring at George, but I was seeing a girl running through the night, running blind, running for her life...

My knees felt weak, as though all the blood was draining out of me before I'd ever been shot. But that was coming. I turned to run, and out of the corner of my eye, saw George bring the rifle up.

"Don't fucking move."

I froze. But that wasn't George. The words weren't directed at me. That unfamiliar roar came from a familiar figure in a navy-blue Patagonia jacket I knew practically as well as my own.

Rory.

Smiling, easygoing Rory, now stone-faced and holding a pistol leveled unwaveringly at George.

George swung the rifle toward Rory, and Rory fired.

Boom. The sound seemed to roll off the mountains and ricochet back to us. One shot.

It happened so fast, I couldn't seem to take it in.

George stumbled back, fired the rifle into the trees, and landed on his back, face upturned, eyes staring at the blue vault of the sky. Blood turned the powdery snow around him scarlet.

Black spots danced in front of my eyes. I closed them.

When I opened them again, George was still motionless in the snow and grass, and Simon was huddled in the middle of the trail, crying and swearing.

I watched Rory walk the miles between us. It seemed to take a lifetime before he put his arms around me.

“Okay?”

“I thought you were in Virginia.”

He gave a brief shake of his head. “Sometimes you’ve got to go with your gut.”

I said shakily, “Yeah. But thank you for allowing me to make my own mistakes.” I dropped my head on his shoulder.

His laugh was equally shaky. “Hey. I’m okay with you making your own mistakes so long as you’re okay with me following my instincts.”

“Deal.” The word was muffled against his coat.

“Hey, Sky?”

I raised my head, stared into his gray eyes.

“This is as cold as the light of day gets,” Rory said.
“And I’m not changing my mind.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

True-crime aficionados will recognize the still unsolved mystery of the 2004 disappearance of UMass nursing student Maura Murray as primary inspiration for this novella. This case has haunted me since I first learned of it over a decade ago.

Because I've incorporated so many actual real-life details into this work of fiction, I want to emphasize that *all* the characters are completely my own and should not be confused with any real persons living or dead. Like every other online sleuth, I have theories. And that is *all* I have. I am not suggesting nor even insinuating that any particular person or persons is behind Maura's disappearance.

As always, I want to thank my dear editor Keren Reed, the ever-adorkable Office Elf, and, of course, my dearly beloved and much-neglected SO.

Finally, thank *you*, Dear Reader. There would not be much point in this creative exercise if I couldn't share it with you.

For a free audiobook download sign up for [Josh's Newsletter](#) now!

About the Author

Author of nearly ninety titles of classic Male/Male fiction featuring twisty mystery, kickass adventure, and unapologetic man-on-man romance, JOSH LANYON'S work has been translated into eleven languages. Her FBI thriller *Fair Game* was the first Male/Male title to be published by Harlequin Mondadori, then the largest romance publisher in Italy. *Stranger on the Shore* (Harper Collins Italia) was the first M/M title to be published in print. In 2016 *Fatal Shadows* placed #5 in Japan's annual Boy Love novel list (the first and only title by a foreign author to place on the list). The Adrien English series was awarded the All Time Favorite Couple by the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. In 2019, *Fatal Shadows* became the first LGBTQ mobile game created by *Moments: Choose Your Story*.

She is an EPIC Award winner, a four-time Lambda Literary Award finalist (twice for Gay Mystery), an Edgar nominee, and the first ever recipient of the Goodreads All Time Favorite M/M Author award.

Josh is married and lives in Southern California.

Find other Josh Lanyon titles at www.joshlanyon.com

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