

A TARA STRONG MYSTERY--BOOK #4

**GIRL
WITHOUT A
NAME**

RYLIE DARK

G I R L
W I T H O U T
A
N A M E

(A Tara Strong Mystery—Book 4)

Rylie Dark

-

CONTENTS

[PROLOGUE](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY THREE](#)

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

PROLOGUE

Ben bit his lip, wiping his hands on the sides of his pants. They wouldn't stop sweating. It wasn't even that warm of a day, an overcast October morning, but they just wouldn't stop sweating. He wasn't particularly working hard to move up the hiking trail, but still—the sweat came.

Probably because it was neither heat nor exertion that was giving him sweaty palms, but the thought of what he was about to do.

He trained his eyes forward on Lucy's figure as she picked her way up the trail just ahead of him. She had more stamina than him this morning. Again, likely linked to the fact that she had no idea what was coming and he did. He didn't know whether it was reluctance, fear, or anticipation making his feet drag on the ground, but it felt like his whole body was buzzing—and at any given step, his knees might give out.

He wiped his palms on his legs again.

"Should we take a break?" Lucy asked, throwing the question over her shoulder at him. Her coppery-brown hair flicked in his direction as she turned back.

"No," he said, slightly panicked. They had to get to the spot he had picked out—nice and early, before anyone else came up the trail and interrupted them. They had to be alone. "Why?"

"You're lagging behind," she said, casting an inquisitive rather than critical glance at him with her wide brown eyes. "I thought you might need a rest. Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine," Ben said, coming across far too harshly in his haste to convince her. He swallowed and moderated his tone. "Just didn't sleep well, I guess. I'll be okay once

we've been moving for a while. I think the view might perk me up."

She smiled at him, slowing her pace a little to walk beside him. That was the opposite of what he wanted. He liked it more when she was in front and couldn't see how many times he had to wipe the sweat off his palms while they walked. What was he going to do now? Just drip?

"You want to stop at our favorite view?" she asked.

"Absolutely," he said, because that was the whole point of this, after all. Now that she was on board, it would be easier to convince her to do what he needed her to do. To walk at the right pace, climb the right branches of the trail, stop when he wanted to stop.

This was going to go fine. He told himself that over and over again in his mind, taking a swig of water from his bottle now and then to keep himself hydrated. He needed to be his very best self for this—alert, strong, physically fit, and able. Eloquent and persuasive. He needed to be ready.

God, he hoped he was ready, or this was going to go horribly wrong. What would he do if she ended up running away from him? Chase her? Stand there on the scenic overlook with the whole world spread out below his feet—or at least, the portion of the world that fell within Edgar County—and pretend he hadn't just ruined his own life?

It wasn't going to come to that—right?

Ben patted his pocket, making sure the thing he needed was still right where he had left it. He'd put on a thin windbreaker this morning and hidden the shape of it in his pocket so that it wouldn't stand out. The last thing he needed was for her to guess what it was and what he was going to do with it. That could spoil everything—if not the element of surprise, then the possibility of her even going up there with him in the first place.

He took a deep, steadying breath.

They were nearly at the overlook.

The closer they walked along the trail, the more of the view unfolded before them. This was their favorite trail, and the reason for it was this spot. They had come up here so many times together since they first started dating and discovered a mutual love of the outdoors. That was why it had to be here.

It had to be here.

And it had to be now.

Ben took another deep breath as Lucy took off her backpack and dropped it on the ground near the trail, stretching her arms high over her head in the morning sun. Her lithe, lean body seemed to glow as she stepped toward that view. He saw the smile on her face and reached for his pocket.

His fingers closed around the ring box, taking hold of it, ready to pull it out and drop down on one knee.

And Lucy screamed.

“Lucy?” Ben let go of the box, leaving it in his pocket. He rushed toward her, arms outstretched, ready to protect her even if he didn’t yet know from what.

“Oh my god,” Lucy said, her voice coming out in a rush, rising to another scream. “Oh my god, Ben!”

Ben turned, his instinct kicking him, driving him to rush toward her. To save her from whatever was wrong. From an attacker—from a mountain lion—from whatever it was that made her scream like that.

He turned—and promptly tripped over a rock, landing sprawled flat on his face.

He looked up desperately, Lucy’s screams still filling the air, searching for the danger—

And then he saw it, too.

A pair of legs sticking out from the brush on the trail ahead of them.

A pair of legs that couldn't possibly be attached to anyone who was okay—because all the screaming hadn't woken him at all. Slack legs, lying there at an angle that was somehow odd even though nothing looked broken, as if it was possible to tell that life had departed simply from the way someone slumped against the earth.

The legs of a dead man.

CHAPTER ONE

Tara Strong slumped in her chair at her sister's desk, feeling like a criminal.

That feeling probably came from the fact that she had, in fact, been marched back to the precinct by the sheriff herself—Sheriff Jessy Strong, who was currently talking on the phone with the witness who had demanded Tara's arrest. Tara was too far away to hear what she was saying, but she could read her older sister's body language: tension, anger, annoyance, frustration.

Tara felt like she was twelve years old again and Jessy, then fifteen, was telling their mom about some transgression Tara had committed. Or, worse—listening to Cassie, their youngest sister, telling Jessy about something Tara had done so Jessy could decide whether it was worth telling their parents and getting them all potentially in trouble. Like Jessy was the judge and jury on her case, and Tara didn't even have the option to present an appeal.

Jessy ended the call, pinched the bridge of her nose, and moved back over to her desk. She sat down in front of Tara and her nostrils flared. The one good thing about Jessy being the sheriff was that at least they were sitting in a private office right now and not the bullpen—because Tara had a feeling she was about to get the kind of dressing-down that she didn't want anyone else to hear.

“Okay,” Jessy said through gritted teeth, showing a remarkable amount of self-control in her voice. “Please explain to me what in the world you were doing standing on the doorstep of a woman in *my* county wearing your uniform.”

Tara glanced involuntarily down at her own khaki clothing, emblazoned with a logo declaring her to be the Deputy Sheriff of Edgar County. All of which would have been fine and good—if it weren't for the fact that she was presently sitting in Canto Rodado County.

"I just had a few questions for her," Tara muttered. "I didn't know she was going to call you."

That was not a good answer, and she knew it. In fact, if any other sheriff had picked her up—including her own boss—Tara would never have allowed herself to take on a tone that sounded so disrespectful. She'd have said *sir* or *ma'am* and made sure to explain herself fully within the justification of the case she was following.

But she was sitting in front of a sheriff who just so happened to be her own sister, and it was making her feel like a kid again or, at the very least, a moody teenager, so here they were.

Jessy's lips thinned and went pale as she bit her tongue so hard it was almost possible to see steam coming out of her ears. "Alex Colenova was well within her rights to call me. You are not a serving member of the sheriff's department in this county," Jessy said, sounding like she was going the opposite way to Tara: saying it as clearly and as professionally as she could, despite her personal anger. "I'm going to need you to explain to me exactly what case you are investigating, how Ms. Colenova ties into it, and why you thought you could come here and investigate a citizen of my county without talking to me first."

Tara groaned inwardly as the weight of it hit her all over again. She was going to be in so much trouble with Sheriff Braddock back at home. She'd already been called out for going into other counties and tracking suspects instead of following the correct guidelines for cooperation. Now she'd done it again, and she'd done it with her own sister—and Tara already knew Jessy wasn't the type to just let it go and not say a word. Tara

was going to be lucky to get away from this without formal disciplinary action.

“You’re not going to like it,” Tara sighed. She looked up and met Jessy’s eyes. “I’ll tell you everything, but you’re not going to like it at all.”

“I’m not super happy with it already,” Jessy half-growled. “Go on.”

Tara sighed. She looked down at her hands. Jessy was going to be furious, but there was nothing she could do but tell the truth. This really was like being a kid again.

“It’s about Cassie,” she said, her voice breaking just a tiny bit on the name as it often did.

A heavy, weighted silence followed her words. Both of them had their own thoughts and memories of Cassie, their own sadness to bear. But when their youngest sister had disappeared at the age of fifteen ten years ago, Tara had been the one to see her sneak out of the house and not tell their parents. She was the one who had carried the guilt of that for a decade.

Maybe that was why she was the one who hadn’t been able to let it go.

“What about Cassie?” Jessy asked. There was a new tone in her voice now, a new tension. Tara hated the fact that she was dragging all of this up again, bringing up that pain—but what else could she do? If there was any chance they might find her, alive or dead...

“I’ve been looking into her case again,” Tara admitted. “I reopened it. Not officially, but... I’ve been going through the files, checking all the evidence again. And this thing happened—totally a coincidence in terms of timing—but I couldn’t help but think...”

“What thing happened?” Jessy asked. Her teeth were gritted again.

Tara swallowed. “When we were searching the caves on the mountain—when Glenn and I were attacked by

that mountain lion—we found some evidence in the cave.”

Jessy stared at her. “You mean the mountain lion that *I rescued you from.*”

The implications were clear: Jessy had been with Tara right there, on the site. She hadn’t said a word about any of it until today. Tara nodded guiltily, looking down at her hands. “I found some evidence in the cave. Old clothes and food wrappers. I wouldn’t have thought anything of it, but... one of the brands doesn’t exist anymore, and it did back then. That dated them. I had our forensics department look into them and check them for DNA.”

The forensic department for the Edgar County Sheriff’s Office was actually just one woman—Lindsie Hobbs. She’d done Tara a favor by looking into this evidence, especially given that it wasn’t officially linked to a particular case yet. Tara didn’t want to throw her to the wolves by naming her as her accomplice in all of this. She had no doubt Sheriff Braddock would easily figure out who had helped her, but she didn’t need to put the name in Jessy’s mouth for the angry phone call that was no doubt about to cross their county lines.

“And?” Jessy asked. There was a tension in her face, a kind of stiff, taut stillness. It was like she was afraid to move in case she showed some form of emotion. As far as Cassie was concerned, she’d always tried to remain strong.

Tara wondered, maybe for the first time, if she wasn’t really as strong as she was pretending to be after all.

Tara sighed. She wished she had more to share. “There was one set of DNA that we could find,” she said. “It was linked to a woman with a prior record in the system. Alexina Colenova.”

“No trace of Cassie?” Jessy asked. It seemed to Tara that she was holding her breath until she had the confirmation.

Tara slowly shook her head. The movement stung.

Jessy sighed and rubbed her hands over her face. She looked old all of a sudden—not like the sister Tara had always known. She'd grown up—both of them had—but it hadn't ever really been something Tara had thought about before. Now she saw Jessy for the woman she was: in her early thirties, perpetually tired because of her job, crow's feet steadily growing from the corners of her eyes where she spent so much time squinting across streets and fields and mountainsides, frown lines starting to become permanent on her forehead from all the thought and worry.

They weren't teenagers anymore.

Except for Cassie, who was still frozen in time in Tara's head, always fifteen years old.

"Tara," Jessy said, and from her voice now Tara knew she was speaking to her as an older sister, not a sheriff. "You've got to stop."

Tara blinked. "Stop?" she repeated, blurting the word out, unable to believe what she had heard.

"This isn't helping anyone," Jessy said. There was an edge to her voice, like she was trying to be gentle but didn't have enough practice to really know how. "You've got to let it go. You're not going to find anything new."

"But this lead," Tara protested.

"You said yourself there's no trace of Cassie," Jessy said. Her voice, too, trembled slightly on the name. "You're just seeing faces on the moon—making links where there are none. I know how desperately you want to know what happened to her. I do, too."

"You do?" Tara asked. She was having serious doubts. Would Jessy really be telling her to stop if she felt that way?

"I do." Jessy nodded. She sighed again. "But we're never going to find her. It was too long ago—too many years. The leads are cold. People have died, moved

away, moved on. Memories have faded. Even if there was something to find—and I truly think the sheriff did all he could back then—the chances of finding it now would be infinitesimal.”

Tara wanted to argue. Was that a reason to give up? Was the fact that it was hard a good enough reason to stop looking?

If she was lost and no one was looking for her, Tara couldn't imagine how cold that would feel. How lonely. And even if all she was looking for was an unmarked grave, she liked to think that Cassie would know she was looking.

“I've convinced Ms. Colenova not to press charges,” Jessy said. She obviously thought that part of the conversation was over. She was on to business now. “Due to the... personal nature of this incident, I'm not going to call Sheriff Braddock.”

Tara looked up in surprise. “You're not?”

“You don't need to lose your job over this,” Jessy said. There was some measure of sympathy in her voice despite everything. Her eyes, a darker shade of blue than Tara's, seemed like reflecting pools showing her how stupid she had been to take such an action—but it was almost as though Jessy wasn't actually judging her for it. “So long as you don't go anywhere near Ms. Colenova again—and I mean not even in the same building or, preferably, the same town as her—we'll be alright.”

“Thank you,” Tara said. But... still. This didn't sit right with her. It was like Jessy was trading Tara's career and the chance of disciplinary action against the search for Cassie. Tara's job helped her to search, sure, but if she had to choose between fulfilling her own dream of becoming a sheriff and finding Cassie...

It wasn't even a choice.

She had been the one to watch Cassie go out of the house that night, sneaking in the dark. She'd given her fashion advice and told her to have fun.

Tara couldn't give up now that she'd finally returned to what should have been her duty all along—finding her sister.

She opened her mouth to argue—

Right at the same moment her cell phone started buzzing and ringing, dancing toward the edge of the table under the power of the vibrate.

Tara snatched it up before it fell, noting the station's number on her caller ID a second before answering it. "Hello, Deputy Sheriff Strong."

"It's me, Tara," Deputy Glenn Grayson, her partner, answered. "We've got a body on one of the hiking trails. Where are you? You want me to pick you up?"

"I'm... visiting Jessy in Canto Rodado County," Tara said, with a sideways glance at her sister. "I have a car with me. I'll meet you there."

"I'll text you the address," Glenn said, and hung up.

"Duty calls," Jessy said. It wasn't a question.

"Yeah." Tara nodded all the same. She stood and hesitated for just a moment, the tips of her fingers brushing the wood of the desk.

There was so much left unsaid.

She gave Jessy a nod and turned to hurry out to her car. There was a body. A dead person.

A person with a family and friends—a life—people who loved them.

The least she could do right now would be to give them the respect they deserved and investigate what had killed them, so their friends and family didn't have to spend a decade waiting and wondering—like she had.

CHAPTER TWO

Tara got out of her car, parking it next to Glenn's, and shaded her eyes against the sun—bright despite the cooler weather—as she looked up the trail.

The one downside to being part of the sheriff's department in such a wide, sparsely populated county was that you had to hike everywhere. On a bright, clear day, with nothing else on her schedule, Tara loved nothing more than to hike an easy trail and enjoy the views of this place where she lived, which was spectacular in so many ways.

But there was always a trail between her and the body, and sometimes that wore a little thin.

Tara pushed her shoulders back and started the climb. Glenn's car was empty, by which she understood that he was already up there, waiting for her with the body. There was only one other car parked up in the small area at the foot of the trail—there were so many trails in the county that it was easy enough to find one that was quiet just by staying away from the main tourist attractions. This trail was part of the state park, a hilly and forested area with some beautiful trails that gave wonderful views of the county—but since it wasn't as high or as spectacular as the mountain range that butted into Edgar County, or illustrious enough to be a national park, this amount of foot traffic was about what she expected.

The quiet walk actually invigorated her a little, despite her reluctance to begin it. As Tara climbed steadily higher up the hill—a tall hill which missed classification as a mountain by only a small margin—she found herself taking deep breaths of fresh air, listening to the birds in the trees, watching the branches sway slightly in response to the breeze. It wasn't so bad. Just so long as

she didn't have to face off with a mountain lion again this time, it wasn't so bad at all.

Until she crested the ridge of one of the steeper parts of the trail and looked up to see Glenn waiting for her—and remembered why she was here in the first place.

Death.

There were two people sitting off to one side on one of the larger rocks that littered the area—a man with his arm around a woman, both of whom seemed shaken. Tara took them to be their witnesses, but she hurried toward Glenn first.

The sight of him this morning was bittersweet. He was his usual self, erring on the side of cheerful even in the face of the worst of human nature and grief, lifting a hand in greeting and flashing her a warm—if respectfully reserved—smile. His brown curls gave an almost heart-shaped frame to the top of his face, his brown eyes offering her a space she could easily melt into.

Except she couldn't—not even a little bit. Because they were partners. *Professional* partners whose only focus was solving crimes.

And she'd also turned him down when he'd asked her for a date, following which he had found himself a new girlfriend.

So now he was not only off-limits but also taken, and Tara hated the fact that all of this had not stopped her from coming to the far-too-late realization that she actually really did like him quite a lot.

She sighed inwardly, steeling herself. Now was not the time for any of those kinds of thoughts—and the sooner she could cut them off for good, the better. She and Glenn had to work together. There was already a veneer of awkwardness over their working relationship ever since he'd asked her out. She didn't want it to get even worse.

“Tara,” he said, stepping toward her. “It's this way.”

Tara followed him, noting the careful distance at which he'd set the young couple. The body loomed up in front of them as they approached some low-lying shrubs, appearing first as a pair of legs sticking out across the trail and then emerging as a whole body the nearer they got. It was far enough away that the couple couldn't see the body from where they sat; close enough that Glenn could keep an eye on both from where he stood.

"Any ID yet?" Tara asked. It was clearly a male, older with gray hair and just slightly out of shape; perhaps in his sixties. He was lying flat on the ground almost as though he'd just gone to sleep right there and hadn't woken up, but his positioning was more than a little odd. If that was really the case, he would be off to the side and probably sheltered by the rocks, not lying across the trail.

"Wallet in his pocket," Glenn said. He kept his voice quiet so it wouldn't carry. "His name is George Daly."

Tara nodded, looking the body over with a seasoned eye. He was stiff with rigor mortis, but aside from all that, he almost looked peaceful. "Heart attack?" she guessed.

"It looks that way." Glenn nodded. "I've called Lindsie already to come and take a look."

Tara looked down at the dead man for a moment longer, considering. He looked exactly like many of the others she'd seen in the same position. His hands weren't clutching at his chest, but they had probably dropped to the side when he fell. There was no pain on his face, but death could smooth those lines away.

Heart attacks were the most frequent cause of death out here in the parks, on the trails and up the mountains. It was a combination of things: people who weren't used to exercise taking on a difficult climb, body weight and age, the elevation of the trails and how they made it harder for the body to function and breathe. Sometimes the person's heart was just ready to give out.

Heart attacks were so much easier to deal with than murders.

There was a small purple flower in the pocket of his shirt, as if he'd plucked it from the ground and popped it in there right before he died. Somehow, it reminded her of a flower laid down at a funeral.

Tara took a calming breath and turned back to look at the couple. "Have you spoken to the witnesses?"

"Not at length." Glenn shrugged. "I got here, checked the scene over, and called Lindsie—and then you arrived. Their names are Ben and Lucy."

At least her detour into Canto Rodado hadn't caused her too much of a delay. "Then let's talk to them now," Tara suggested, leading him over there. She raised her voice as she got nearer to them. "Good morning—or, I suppose, just morning. You were the ones who made the nine-one-one call?"

"That's right." The man of the pair, Ben, nodded. "We found him when we were taking a break in our hike. We've always loved the view from this spot."

Lucy shivered involuntarily and his arm tightened around her shoulders. Tara looked up, taking it in for a minute. You could see out over the town of Wyatt from here, as well as over to the mountain—St. Bridget Peak, where that cave and that mountain lion still haunted Tara's imagination—and the lakes beyond, a slim silver reflection here and there glinting between the trees. It was a beautiful view.

Too bad this couple was probably never going to enjoy it again.

"Tell me about what you found," Tara said.

"We were just walking along, and then I—I saw him," Lucy said with another shudder. "He was just lying there."

"Did you see anyone else around at any point of your hike, or when you were driving up?" Tara asked.

“No,” Ben said, shaking his head. His voice was lost—like he wanted her to give him the answers to help him understand this.

“We were the first up here,” Lucy said, then gestured toward the body with a horrified look. “I mean, except for...”

“Alright.” Tara nodded. She’d heard enough. The man was up here alone, there hadn’t been anyone else around, and she knew the look of him. It was a heart attack, plain and simple. They still needed Lindsie to confirm it—after all, this was a death on state land—but Tara had little doubt of what she would find. “Thank you for your cooperation. I know it’s been a terrible morning for you.”

“Not as bad as his,” Ben muttered. He had a miserable look to him. They were probably in their mid-twenties; it was likely the first time either of them had seen death. Tara forgot, sometimes, that the average layman didn’t see this kind of thing every week like she did.

“It looks like natural causes,” Tara said, thinking this information might give them a small measure of peace. “He wouldn’t have suffered much.”

“Really?” Lucy asked, and Tara nodded.

That seemed to soothe her a little, as intended.

“You can go on home now,” Tara said gently. “Maybe stay with each other until the shock wears off, at least.”

Ben nodded, keeping his arm around Lucy as he slipped to the ground, supporting her as she stood. “Thanks,” he said, clearly relieved to be able to get away from the body.

It was a tragedy. A simple tragedy.

A large part of Tara’s work was dealing with dead bodies. Since she had to deal with them either way, she now knew from experience that she was much better off dealing with a tragedy than a killer.

They just needed Lindsie to confirm that was all it was, and they would be able to wrap this one up quickly.

“I think I see Lindsie’s van,” Glenn said, shading his eyes to look out toward the thin ribbon that represented the road winding through the park.

“Great,” Tara said. She took a breath, then looked back at the view.

There was a lot going on in her head. Being close to Glenn was a huge distraction right now, and she was trying very hard for it not to be. Then there were Jessy and Cassie, her two sisters. She wanted to honor them both, ideally. She wanted to be a good sister.

But one of them was out there alone waiting to be found, and the other didn’t want Tara to even look, and it felt like whatever she did would be letting one of them down.

She felt her eyes misting for a second as she looked out over the county. Her county. They’d all grown up here. Jessy had moved to Canto Rodado for the opportunity to be sheriff, but Tara couldn’t help but think that it also had something to do with never having to look at the lake. That gleam of silver off in the distance could have been the last thing Cassie ever saw. If Tara was wrong about her going up the mountain, maybe she was still out there—under the water, maybe, or buried near the shore.

They had played down there as children. Summer breaks spent cooling off their feet in the water or building castles in the sandy mud. If Tara closed her eyes she could almost be there again: Cassie toddling around with a bucket as big as she was, Jessy ordering them all around to build a castle to her own specifications.

Maybe Jessy was right. Maybe it was time to stop. Leave her memories of Cassie as happy ones in the past, instead of letting her become a ghost that would haunt Tara for the rest of her life.

“Here she is,” Glenn said, calling Tara’s attention back to the trail and Lindsie Hobbs walking up it.

“Right,” Tara said. “Can you go and inform the deceased’s next of kin while I preserve the scene?” Someone had to stand there and make sure no one interrupted Lindsie, after all.

“Of course,” Glenn said, instead of arguing with her and objecting to being given the worst job. That in itself made her feel even guiltier about palming it off on him—but she wasn’t in a good frame of mind just now.

“Morning!” Lindsie called out, walking over to them with a case full of equipment weighing down her right hand.

“Morning,” Tara replied. “Let’s get this one proven as a heart attack so we can get him back to his family.”

“Careful,” Lindsie warned her, a twinkle in her eyes under her pixie-cropped hair. She held up a gloved finger of caution. “No influencing my findings, please. If this isn’t natural causes, then I’m going to find out.”

Please, God, Tara thought to herself, let it be natural causes.

That flower in his pocket weighed on her mind for reasons she couldn’t place, and a heavy feeling settled in her stomach.

CHAPTER THREE

Jamie leaned on the sign to look out over the side of the hill, down across the state park. It was beautiful up here. He took a few minutes just looking, turning his head from side to side.

This was an excellent vantage point for the park as a whole. He could see the welcome center he had driven through a few hours ago, right up by the exit onto the highway, and the small track that led off toward the campgrounds. The tents and motorhomes looked small from here, like the little toy sets his nephew loved playing with.

Across the other side of the park he could see the ranger's station, as well as nature trails that from here actually cut quite clearly through the different areas of vegetation. He could see where tons of people had passed through, smoothing the trails out and stopping anything from growing in those narrow corridors. They moved up toward the steep side of the hill that was laid out in front of him—a different trail from the easier one he'd taken.

All of it was laid out under the beautiful golden light that occurred just after dawn. Hiking up here in the dark had been worth it. He was fairly sure he'd even beaten most of the rangers here, but the view was just as good as his buddy had told him it would be.

Jamie stretched, glancing around. He couldn't see anyone else nearby. It was a shame. He would have liked a shot of himself with that amazing backdrop behind him. Still, maybe he could manage a selfie.

He glanced down at the sign—a warning about not walking across the flowers sprinkled over the grass in front of him, because they were rare and delicate and didn't grow back easily—and didn't see anything about

the edge of the cliff being dangerous. There probably wasn't any risk of it crumbling under him, so long as he didn't stand too close to the edge.

Jamie moved around the sign, digging his cell phone out of his pocket. He lifted it up and moved it around a little until the screen showed his own face with the view behind him, then tried a few different grins and more serious expressions, pressing the shutter a few times. He dropped the phone down to a more comfortable level and scrolled through the results, chuckling to himself. He looked like a goon. There was one shot that was good enough to post to his social media accounts once he got back down to the car and had service again. That would do.

He glanced down and bit his lip. He'd crushed one of the flowers when he walked over here. He could see it—the petals were all crushed down like the juice had been stamped out of them. It was pretty easy to make out the lines that he recognized as the pattern on the underside of his brand new hiking boots.

Welp. No one had been around to see.

Jamie stepped back to the path and shrugged, slipping his phone back into his pocket. No harm, no foul. It was only a little plant, and he hadn't been caught. It was probably more a warning for kids who would run around playing ball games up there when their parents weren't watching or something. He'd only stood on one.

Jamie cleared his throat and started walking back up the trail, continuing on the path up. There was another vantage point on the other side of the hill that would give him a view in the opposite direction. Maybe he could get both of them and post them up side by side.

There was a rustle in some of the trees, taller trees to the right-hand side of the trail, and he looked over sharply. Was that some kind of animal? He knew they had mountain lions and stuff like that out here. Bears,

probably. There hadn't been a warning about this part of the state park. Or had he missed it?

He couldn't see anything in the trees. Jamie swallowed hard and carried on walking, shoving his hands in his pockets. It was a squirrel or something, he guessed. Some tiny little animal that he could hear but not see. They probably made a ton of noise even when you couldn't see them because of how rustle-prone all the needles on the fir trees were.

Yeah, right. Just a squirrel.

He blew out a breath, feeling kind of embarrassed about how worked up he'd been for a second there. Staring into trees like he was playing a magic eye game. Or looking for a ghost. At least he'd had the good sense to come hiking up here alone. No one to see how dumb he was just then.

Anyway, the plan was to walk up the other side of the trail and then—

Ah!

What was that?

Jamie clapped his hand onto the back of his neck, wincing. It felt like an insect bite. Like, a really big insect with a pin for a mouth. He spun around, wondering if there was a cloud of them—

And stopped, his eyes going wide.

“What the hell...?” Jamie said, staring at the person who was standing behind him.

The person wearing a plastic bear mask over his face, human eyes regarding him calmly and coolly.

“Hey, man,” Jamie said, frowning. “Did you scratch me or something?”

What the hell was going on? The guy was—was just looking at him and—or, no, he was kind of swaying... wait...

Maybe Jamie was swaying?

Was he... were there two of them now?

Watching him?

This bear mask, just silently staring back at him?

Why was it spinning?

Why was it moving around so much?

Jamie put his arms out for balance, trying to take a step back, but the ground was somehow uneven and spongy now. It was like walking in a funhouse, the earth moving away from him before he managed to put his foot on it, but it couldn't be like that because they were outside and there couldn't be anything mechanical here. Jamie looked down and noticed that the earth was a lot closer than he thought—so close he could see it really in detail, although the grass and the soil seemed to be spinning and dancing around his head...

He looked up and saw the bear standing over him and for a second he felt a shock of fear so strong—so terrifying—thinking about the bear about to attack him, maul him, bite his arm off—

Jamie felt a shuddering pain start in his chest, pain in his right arm, spinning in his head...

The last thing he saw was the bear, leaning over him and right into his face, and he could swear it somehow had human eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Billy Westfoot was more ornery than usual today,” Tara remarked.

It wasn't exactly an earth-shattering observation. The town's habitual drunk—a regular feature of their morning patrols, in which they had to scrape him off the ground outside one bar or another around the break of dawn—had protested every step of the way this time. It had taken both her and Glenn straining with all their might to get him out of the car and back into his own house, where his wife was waiting with both a stern and worried look.

Tara got back into the driver's seat of the car, where she'd parked it outside the Westfoot house. Glenn slumped into the passenger's seat next to her, snapping down the sun visor against the rising morning sun and then putting his head back against the rest.

“We'll see him again tomorrow,” Glenn said, panting slightly as he recovered. He adjusted the DEPUTY GRAYSON badge on his chest, lining it back up from where it had been knocked askew by their efforts.

Tara groaned. “Don't,” she said. “If there's one thing that makes me feel like we're not making a difference with this job, it's Billy Westfoot.”

She started the car and began to move out slowly back onto the street.

“What do you mean?” Glenn asked with a frown. The tone in his voice was so startled that Tara actually turned to look at him before glancing back at the road ahead.

“Well, no matter what we do or how many times we have to drop him back here, he'll still get drunk again tomorrow night,” Tara said. “He'll still forget where he is and fall asleep outside or in the backseat of his own car,

and we'll still have to take a call from his worried wife. You know, I think he's actually started doing it *more* often in the past year or so, not less."

"But his wife," Glenn said. When she gave him another puzzled glance, he continued. "She's worried about her husband every time he doesn't come home at night. And every time, we go out there and find him and bring him home to her. We soothe her fears and make sure her husband survives every morning. Isn't that the definition of making a difference?"

Tara had to pause and think. "I never saw it like that," she admitted at last.

She didn't have to look at Glenn this time to hear the grin in his voice. "Well, Deputy Sheriff Strong, maybe you're not the only smart person in Edgar County after all."

Tara snorted. "Of course not. Lindsie's smart. And Sheriff Braddock, too."

"And Deputy Grayson?" Glenn asked, a slight pleading edge to his voice.

Tara pretended to think about it for just a moment too long. "Hmmm..."

"Hey!" Glenn said, all mock hurt, and they both laughed, and it felt like nothing had changed between them after all.

That was why it was so painful that when their laughter faded out, Glenn apparently wanted to talk about his love life—though why with her, Tara had no idea at all.

"I, uh, had a bit of a fight with Beth," he said, shifting in his seat.

Tara purposefully kept her eyes straight ahead, not looking at him at all. She couldn't. She knew Beth was his new girlfriend. She couldn't let him see the hope in her eyes—the hope that they were going to break up so Tara could have another chance.

It was a selfish thought that she wasn't proud of.

"Oh?" was all she said, tightening her grip on the steering wheel. She was supposed to tell him not to talk about his personal life. That's the line she had followed until now. But suddenly, she wanted to know more. She wanted to hear that things were bad between them.

"Yeah," Glenn sighed. "It's hard for other people to understand this job, I guess. I happened to tell her some of what happened on recent cases and she got upset. Says I'm risking my life."

"Well, you are risking your life," Tara said. "We all do. That's the job."

"Right." Glenn nodded. "I tried to explain that to her. That it's the price we pay for being in a position to save people's lives. She doesn't really get it."

Tara swallowed. "You're not thinking of quitting, are you?"

"What?" Glenn shook his head so vehemently she could see it even in her peripheral vision. "No. No way. I love this job. I love—I enjoy being your partner and making a difference like this. Even just with Billy Westfoot. But even more so when we're saving lives."

Tara nodded cautiously. "I feel the same way," she admitted. "This job is important."

Glenn sighed. "I just don't know what to tell her."

After a pause. Tara realized what he was asking.

He wanted her to give him the answer.

To help him keep his girlfriend.

It would have been a dilemma—an ethical problem she had to face up to. A choice between doing the right thing and being selfish.

It would have been... if she'd had any idea how to fix it for him.

“I don’t know,” she said, relieved that she could be honest. “It’s a tough one, Glenn. Something we all have to struggle with in our relationships.”

Except, of course, she wouldn’t have had to—and he wouldn’t have had to—if she’d just accepted when he asked her out in the first place.

Once again, she cursed her own fear, the irrational knee-jerk reaction to seeing Glenn in danger that had made her want to put him as far away from her as possible. If she’d only had the benefit of rational thought at the time, she wouldn’t be in this mess.

“Yeah,” Glenn mused. He looked out the passenger side window. “I’ll figure it out.”

Tara bit her lip, casting about for something else to say. Reassurance? Further commiseration? An anecdote about a relationship she’d been in before? Or simply a change of subject?

The radio in the central console of the patrol car buzzed to life, and even before she heard what their dispatcher was about to say, Tara thanked her lucky stars for the distraction.

“Patrol car five, come in.”

“We’re here, dispatch,” Glenn said, grabbing the radio automatically to reply. “You have a call for us?”

“We have a 10-62 in the state park.”

Glenn glanced at Tara. She mirrored his look.

A 10-62 was a dead body.

There was another one?

“Dispatch, please advise,” Glenn replied. “This is a new call? Dated this morning?”

“Yes, a new call. Unrelated to yesterday’s incident.”

Glenn paused, thinking. He looked at Tara and shrugged. “Okay. Please advise of coordinates.”

He grabbed their map and marked it as the dispatcher rattled them off, giving them an exact spot to get to in the state park. Without the normal street names or buildings to navigate by, finding a place in the parks or by the mountains could often be a lot more difficult than navigating the streets of a town or city.

“It’s on a hiking trail,” Glenn said to Tara, putting the radio back into its holder on the dash. “Pretty similar to the last one. Easy trail to walk, low level of elevation, not too far from the parking lot.”

“Should be relatively low risk for heart attacks.” Tara frowned. She was already turning the car in the direction of the park, going across neighborhoods to get out of Wyatt.

“Maybe this one isn’t a heart attack,” Glenn pointed out.

He had a good point.

They had no way of knowing what this call was about until they got there. Although sometimes people got excited, the usual protocol was not to share specific details over the radio... after all, civilians could have police scanners.

They were just going to have to get there to find out what the hell was going on.

Tara pushed the gas pedal to the floor, speeding out of Wyatt with the intention of getting there as soon as physically possible.

The scene could have been a carbon copy of what they’d found yesterday. Tara took in the shaken hiker standing off to one side immediately as they approached, turning her head and finding the body they were looking for a short distance away. The man who

called it in had obviously wanted to stand as far away from it as possible, while still being able to keep an eye on it if he needed to.

“Sir?” Tara called out, which was apparently as much invitation as he needed to move toward them and start talking.

“Hello, yes, I called you,” he confirmed. There was a hastiness about him, like he wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. Tara couldn’t blame him for that. “I was just—just walking, and I found him. I almost tripped over him.”

Tara glanced around. They were by another vantage point, a view out over the park looking down toward the campgrounds and the welcome center. A good view. There was a sign warning visitors not to go any closer to the edge to avoid trampling on a rare species of flower that grew beyond—they were in bloom, small speckles of bright purple against the green grass.

The dead man was sprawled across the path just inside the sign, as if he had been reading it when he dropped.

“Did you see anyone else on your hike this morning?” Tara asked.

“No—well, yes. The rangers at the welcome center,” he said. “And I saw a ranger on one of the lower nature trails. But not once I got onto this specific trail.”

Tara nodded, thinking. It was all the same. An early-morning visitor, one of the first to hit the trails, finding a dead body. “Can you give your info to Deputy Grayson here?” she asked, moving her chin in Glenn’s direction. “We may need to speak to you again later, but if you didn’t see anything else suspicious, I think you can head off home.”

“Thank you,” he said, his voice effusive with the relief at getting away from the body, and Tara tuned him out as he started telling Glenn his name and contact details.

The body was what was important now.

She moved carefully closer, scanning the ground all the while, and squatted next to him. He was a male, Caucasian, fairly young—probably in his early twenties. He wasn't bloated or marked in any way. The very fact that he hadn't been disturbed by animal scavengers had to mean he hadn't been here long.

Two victims, each of whom was up here way before anyone else. Two viewing spots on two easy hiking trails.

Now... two heart attacks?

She couldn't see any visible cause of death. There was no blood anywhere, no marks on his neck, nothing that would give her a good reason for this young man to be dead on the trail. They were going to have to wait for Lindsie's expert opinion on what had happened to him—and she was still, as far as Tara knew, finishing up the first autopsy.

"What do you think?" Glenn asked, walking up behind her. His voice was low—respectful.

"I don't know about this," Tara muttered. "The circumstances are too similar. And look at him—he should be in the peak of his health."

"He's not our usual heart attack victim," Glenn conceded.

"We need Lindsie," Tara said, straightening up. "There's no way that this is a coincidence. Two heart attacks in two days—I'm not buying it. This has to be caused by something else."

"Like what?" Glenn asked. His tone was curious, not disbelieving. He was with her on the theory.

She just wished she had an answer.

Poison gas released from the earth? Some kind of insect attack?

Murder?

Tara pulled her phone out of her pocket. "Let's hope Lindsie can tell us," she said grimly, starting to dial.

CHAPTER FIVE

“So,” Tara said, flicking through the files she’d just printed off. “At least we have names.”

“George Daly and Jamie Heron,” Glenn read aloud. “No relation, and it looks like they worked at different places.”

“I’m not really seeing any similarities between them,” Tara admitted. “We’ve got a sixty-two-year-old and a twenty-five-year-old. Both male, but that’s about the only thing they seem to have in common.”

“What about where they live?”

Tara shook her head. “Daly was from here in Wyatt, but Heron was from a town a couple of counties over. It looks like he drove here pretty early in the morning—about an hour and a half away. I’ve got his parents coming down to formally identify the body, so we should be able to speak to them soon.”

“They were both hikers,” Glenn pointed out. “Maybe that’s something. Some kind of online community?”

Tara hummed as she looked at the files, trying to think. They had so little information to go on. Both of the men had clean records. All she really knew was their age, home address, and date of birth. “We need to go talk to Daly’s family,” she said. “We notified a daughter yesterday. Maybe it’s time to pay her a visit.”

“She’s local?” Glenn asked.

“Right,” Tara said. “We can go swing by there now.”

She packed the files together and lined them up on her desk for later, grabbing her things and standing up. Glenn was already rattling his car keys, finding the right one and walking out of the sheriff’s station. She followed him with the address in her hand, glancing over at Lindsie’s office—a separate building right next door—as

she did. There was no sign of anyone coming out, but Tara knew their forensics expert and coroner was hard at work in there.

“Do you really think this case could be something?” Glenn asked Tara as she got into the passenger seat of the patrol car, buckling herself in.

“I don’t know, but it smells wrong,” Tara said. “I don’t have an explanation for it yet. It just smells wrong.”

“I agree,” Glenn said, inclining his head as he started the engine. His tone was cautious. “I just don’t know what point we have to hand the case over.”

“What?” Tara asked, startled. Why would they have to...?

Oh.

It was a state park. Of course. Why hadn’t she thought of that before? She was so focused on trying to find out what was weird about this second body, she hadn’t thought things through to their logical conclusion.

“The state police will be pretty annoyed with us if they think we’ve been holding back case information,” Glenn said, pulling out of the parking lot and heading onto the road. “When should we tell them we’re investigating?”

Tara thought about it. “There’s no point in saying anything yet,” she said. “We’ll just make trouble and bring more paperwork down on our heads. Let’s wait at least until we’ve spoken to the families and gotten Lindsie’s reports. Then we’ll know if we actually have something here.”

“That makes sense.” Glenn nodded slowly. “And when do you think we should tell Sheriff Braddock?”

Tara hid a smile, glad he was focusing on the road and not looking at her face. She realized that Glenn was trying, in his own subtle way, to work out how much trouble they were going to get into for talking to the families like this. “You should have more faith in my procedural ability,” she said. “I already notified the sheriff.”

He's out somewhere, so I left a copy of the files with a note explaining everything on his desk."

"Oh," Glenn said, nodding again. "Right. No, I expected that."

Tara laughed out loud this time. "You thought I was just doing whatever I wanted without following the chain of command?"

"Well," Glenn said, a light pink flush starting to appear along his cheekbones. "You do have a bit of a record for, you know. Ignoring protocol."

That thought was a sobering one, reminding her as it did of what had happened yesterday. She had indeed broken protocol—and she'd almost lost her job, if it wasn't for the kindness of her sister in overlooking her actions.

Sometimes, at moments like this, Tara thought that maybe she was altogether too harsh on Jessy. Her big sister really did have a soft spot, even if she didn't ever admit it out loud. But she'd saved Tara's bacon—and it wasn't the first time.

"We're not far off," Glenn said, glancing down at the GPS in the central display. It wasn't in guidance mode—both of them knew Wyatt well enough that they could get to almost any address in town without directions, so long as it wasn't down some small and obscure cul-de-sac they'd never had cause to visit before. But the map display showed where they were, and the address they had on file for George Daly's daughter was only a block away.

"Great," Tara said. Her mind was racing, trying to think of how they could get the answers they needed. How did you subtly try to ask someone if their father was possibly murdered by a possibly undetectable method—or whether he had something in common with a young man, which was almost as creepy?

They pulled up outside of the house before Tara had really fully formulated an answer to her own question, but they needed to know. If there was a chance that George Daly's death was related in any way to Jamie Heron's death, and if there was a chance that something other than heart failure killed them, they would benefit hugely from hitting the ground running now instead of leaving it until a few days had passed.

One thing Tara knew about police work was that leads grew colder the longer you waited to act on them. It was a thing she knew horribly intimately—thanks to Cassie.

They got out of the car and walked toward the house. There were children's toys in the front yard—a sight that almost made Tara quail. She hated dealing with families. Thankfully, today they weren't going to tell someone that their child was dead—or a parent of a young child. Those were the worst cases. This time, their interviewee already knew her father was dead, although that wouldn't lessen her grief.

Tara took the lead to knock on the door and then waited, respectfully folding her hands in front of herself and trying to make sure her face was arranged in an appropriately empathetic manner.

The woman who answered the door looked frazzled; her eyes were rimmed with red, her hair was a mess half-spilled out of a ponytail, and her clothes were rumpled. Tara didn't need to ask how her night had been.

"Hello," she said, trying to inject warmth into her voice. "We're looking for George Daly's daughter."

"That's me," she said, sniffing. She looked at Tara with sharp observation. "I recognize your voice. You spoke to me on the phone yesterday."

"That's right," Tara said. "May we come inside, ma'am?"

“What is it?” she asked, her head snapping from side to side as she looked at Tara and Glenn for some sign she could read. “Has something happened with my father’s body?”

“No, no,” Tara said, holding her hands up. “In fact, our coroner is still working on his autopsy. We haven’t heard anything further yet.”

“Oh.” She paused. “Then what’s going on?”

“It’s just a few routine questions,” Tara said. “If you wouldn’t mind...?”

The woman—Patsy, Tara remembered from their call—swallowed and stepped aside. This wasn’t going to be easy, Tara thought. So much for keeping it subtle. Patsy was clearly sharp, even in her grief, and their questions were going to be too obvious a marker that something wasn’t right.

The only thing Tara was going to be able to do was grit her teeth and get through it, trying not to exacerbate the grief.

“So, what is it?” Patsy asked, slumping down on a sofa in a cozy living room. It was clearly a family home. Photographs of school-aged children on the walls and a husband in a suit explained where the rest of them were this morning.

“We just wanted to know about your father’s health,” Tara began, because it was the least suspicious starting point she could think of. She took a seat in a soft, slouchy armchair while Glenn walked over to a wall of photos to examine them. “Has he had any health concerns recently?”

“No,” Patsy replied, her voice rising higher. She sounded a little lost. Like a young girl confused as to why her parent was never coming back. Grief, Tara had observed, had a way of reducing the mental age for a temporary period—making us want our parents and the security of a hug. “He was really fit and healthy. He’d

started hiking recently to get out in the fresh air a little more.”

“So, this was a recent change in his level of activity?” Tara asked, seizing on that. It could be indicative that he was in a high-risk group for heart attacks: seniors who pushed themselves too hard or went too far, not knowing their bodies couldn’t handle it.

“Not really.” Patsy shrugged. “He used to walk a lot in town. He never bought a car, my dad. Always walked to work and back—for his whole life. He’s always lived in Wyatt and always walked.”

Tara raised her eyebrows. “That’s impressive,” she said. She hadn’t come across George Daly before, but then again, he had no criminal history. It wasn’t unusual that she might not know someone even if they had lived there for their whole lives. Some people—like the infamous Lydia Peablossom, the town gossip—would approach law enforcement specifically to chat even when they hadn’t been in any way connected to a crime. Others liked to keep to themselves.

“He was super fit,” Patsy said, covering her face for a moment. “Much fitter than me. This shouldn’t have happened.” Patsy was in good shape herself—certainly on the fitter end of the spectrum for a working mother; she clearly found time somewhere in her schedule to work out herself.

“I understand this is hard to process,” Tara said. She kept her voice as gentle as possible. “Our coroner will be able to give us some answers as to what happened to your father and why.”

“It just couldn’t be a heart attack,” Patsy burst out, her distress level seeming to rise by the second.

“Unfortunately, the body can surprise us sometimes,” Glenn said softly. He had wandered around the whole room and now stood behind Tara. Even though Tara wasn’t sure it was true in this case, she nodded agreement with him. It was true in general. They’d seen

heart attack cases in all kinds of hikers and climbers. “Even when it appears to be fit and healthy, there can sometimes be a defect or weakness just below the surface.”

Patsy just sighed in response, a juddering sigh that seemed to come from her toes and pour through her whole body.

She wasn't in a good place—that much was clear.

“Was your father a member of any groups or clubs?” Tara asked. That was somewhat common with the older generation, and it could help them explain how he was connected to Jamie Heron—if he was. A man who only walked everywhere and never even owned a car wasn't likely to show up two counties away—but they already knew Jamie had traveled here.

“He was a squash player,” Patsy said, wiping her nose on a tissue. “And he was a member of a baking group that met at each other's houses once a month for a baking party. It was kind of silly, but I think it helped him make new connections ever since Mom died. He did it in her honor.”

“That's lovely,” Tara murmured. She looked down at her notebook in her hand. She was sinking uncomfortably into the cushions of the chair, which was somewhat deflated from overuse. It was taking all her energy to stay upright instead of falling backwards toward the backrest, and she wanted to stay forward so she could get up easily. It felt like she hadn't had enough time to think this whole thing through, but she needed to ask. This was the question they had come here for. “Are you at all aware of a man named Jamie Heron? Maybe someone your father knew?”

Patsy frowned immediately. “No,” she said. “Who is that?”

“Oh, perhaps no one,” Tara said, shutting her notebook and trying to brush it off. She got up from the chair, needing one false start before she could get

enough leverage on the ground and the arms of the chair to pull herself off the quicksand-like cushion. “Thank you, you’ve been very helpful. We’re sorry to have disturbed you at this difficult time.”

“Who is he?” Patsy asked again. “What was it you said—Heron?”

Tara sighed halfway to the door, knowing she wasn’t going to make it without having to say something.

“He’s also deceased, I’m afraid,” she said. She quickly held up her hands in a gesture to ward off any panic. “It may be complete coincidence. All signs so far are pointing to them both being natural deaths. We just have to be thorough.”

“Right,” Patsy said, but Tara could see how suspicious she was.

A ping on her cell phone proved a welcome distraction.

“We have to head out now,” Tara said, for Glenn’s benefit as much as Patsy’s. “We’ve just been informed that the coroner has prepared her report. We’ll be in touch as soon as possible with the findings.”

She stepped out the front door before Patsy could give any objection, giving the (rightful) impression that they were now in a serious hurry.

Tara wanted to know what that autopsy report said—because if it said anything like what she was suspecting, they were about to have to call in the state police... or somehow convince them that Tara and Glenn could handle a killer on their own.

CHAPTER SIX

Tara rushed into Lindsie's lab without pausing. She was familiar enough with the sterile white space, all unpainted walls and stainless steel equipment, not to balk at it. She had only handled a small number of murder cases—or murderers, at least—but the lab was in use constantly for falls, heart attacks, animal attacks, and so on. Whenever someone died in the state park or over by the mountain or lakes, Lindsie Hobbs had to make sure it wasn't suspicious.

"Lindsie," Tara called out as she entered through the main doors of the lab, seeing the woman she was looking for on the far side of the room at her computer. "What have you got for us?"

"Aha," Lindsie said, springing out of her seat with an impish look. The work she did was sometimes difficult, often disgusting, and usually tragic, but Lindsie was the kind of woman who appreciated a puzzle. Providing the solution was obviously her favorite part. She tucked her short hair behind her ears and moved over to the metal drawers that took up one side of the room, sliding out one of them.

George Daly was there on the slab, laid out with his eyes closed and a white sheet tucked up to his chin—almost as though Lindsie had made sure he was comfortable for his long sleep.

"This is George Daly," Lindsie said, unnecessarily; she knew Tara and Glenn had been the ones to attend the scene. But she had her flair about her, and Tara wasn't going to interrupt. "Poor man. Very fit and healthy, but what he didn't know was that he had a congenital heart weakness. It was only slight and he'd lasted a long time with it—probably because he did keep his fitness levels so high—but it finally got him."

Tara frowned. “So, this is definitely a heart attack?”

“Oh, yep.” Lindsie gripped the tray to push it back inside, then paused. “He has a daughter, right? Not a son?”

“That’s right,” Tara nodded.

“Excellent, because this particular defect can only be passed down through male descendants,” Lindsie said, sliding the drawer shut. “I’d call that one all wrapped up.”

“Right,” Tara said, though she felt a bit unsettled by it. It was that easy? Really? He just... had a heart attack, the day before someone else did, in the same area and under the same circumstances?

“Don’t look so glum,” Lindsie said, a tiny bit too cheerfully for Tara’s mood. “Death comes for us all in the end, but what matters is how you spend your life. From what his body tells me, this man led a very active and hectic lifestyle.”

Tara nodded. It was all she could manage to muster up.

“What about this morning’s body?” Glenn asked.

“Ah, I’m so glad you asked,” Lindsie said, moving over to another drawer and sliding it open. There was Jamie Heron, treated in just the same manner as Daly. “Now, this young man is a bit of an enigma. He seems perfectly healthy, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Apart from being dead,” Tara observed.

“Well, yes, apart from that,” Lindsie conceded.

“Wait—you’ve had time to check him over already?” Glenn asked.

“Yes and no,” Lindsie said. She moved back over to her computer; the side-desk next to it bore a stand holding several samples in different bottles. They looked like blood samples. “I still have a number of tests to send off. We’re not going to be able to process them here—I need to send them to the state lab.”

“Why?” Tara asked, her interest piqued immediately.

“His organs are all clean and healthy—barely a mark on any of them,” Lindsie said. She returned to the body, carefully lifting the head and turning it toward herself—away from Tara and Glenn on the other side. “But, can you see here?”

Tara squinted. “Is that an injection site in his neck?”

“Sure is,” Lindsie said, beaming as though Tara was her favorite student and she’d just gotten a question right in class. “We’re going to have to do a full toxicology work-up. As I stand here today, though, I would be willing to bet that the deceased was given some kind of poison or toxin.”

“He was murdered,” Tara breathed.

She’d been right—and it felt awful.

“Wait, so you’re certain there’s no injection site on George Daly?” Glenn asked.

“Not a scratch on him. His heart, though, was a complete mess,” Lindsie replied. “I’m confident of cause of death in his case. We have one natural causes—and one murder.”

“Can you make a guess as to what kind of poison?” Tara asked.

“No, except to say it’s a poison or toxin which has very little external sign,” Lindsie said. “It’s either something that fades quickly or something almost undetectable, aside from the heart attack. There’s no telltale coloring in his skin or eyes, no foaming or frothing, and no visible effect on his blood or organs. We’ll see what the state lab says.”

The state lab. Tara bit her lip. They were going to have to tell the state police.

“Right,” she said, taking a deep breath and trying to imbue herself with Lindsie’s cheerful energy before she made a call she really didn’t want to make. The state

police were going to treat her like a hick, and try to take over the case, and probably deflate her sense of self-worth about as far as it could possibly go in the space of one call. “Thanks, Lindsie. I’ll go inform Sheriff Braddock and then call the state police.”

“Rather you than me,” Lindsie said, making a face which summed up exactly how Tara felt.

Tara almost jumped out of her chair when the voice finally spoke down the line.

“This is Captain Lymon,” he said. “I’m talking to...?”

“Deputy Sheriff Tara Strong,” Tara replied, trying to catch her breath. She’d been on hold waiting for him for so long that she’d almost forgotten why she was on the phone in the first place.

“You have a case in the state park, correct?”

“That’s it,” Tara said, glad that at least some of the information she’d given his assistant had managed to get through. “We’re unsure at this stage of the specifics, but it looks like it could be a murder. A perfectly healthy man in his mid-twenties dropped down of an apparent heart attack, except our coroner found an injection site in his neck. We’re requesting use of the state lab to analyze his blood.”

“We should be the ones requesting that,” Captain Lymon said, with somewhat of a grumpy tone. “This sounds like a state case.”

“It may be, sir,” Tara said, biting her tongue and telling herself to speak respectfully. Even though they worked in different organizations, Captain Lymon did have a higher rank than her—and the kind of power to get her dismissed from her position if he thought she was incompetent. “Until we had the examination

completed, we weren't sure if this was a suspicious death or not. Now that we know, I'm calling you."

"I see," he said sternly. "Well, then this is a state case."

"Are you sending someone to take over?" Tara asked, feeling heavy. It wasn't that she cherished murder cases or wanted so badly to work on one. In fact, she would now be quite happy if murder never came to Edgar County again. But now that they had one, she wanted to work it. She'd been there for the initial find, she'd been the one to suspect foul play, and the thought of handing it over to someone else was almost painful.

"Eventually," Lymon responded, which set a spark of hope inside her. "We're a little thin on the ground at the moment—we have a big case in the north of the state that has a lot of our personnel tied up. But we'll be sending someone as soon as they're available."

"Okay," Tara said cautiously. "And in the meantime...?"

"We can't just let the case lie. You can continue to investigate for now," Lymon told her, as if he was giving her some great boon. "I will expect your full cooperation through the case. You will report directly to me on a regular basis—preferably daily, or more often if a major breakthrough happens—and you will keep all of your files in a state of preparation to be handed over. As soon as we have someone to send your way, I'll expect you to give up the case without any grumbles."

Grumbles? Tara gritted her teeth. She wanted to tell this man exactly where he could stick his grumbles. To tell him that just because he was a state captain and she was only a local deputy sheriff did not mean she was any less professional than he was.

But that, of course, would have proven him right.

"Yes, sir," was all she said instead. "I'll send you reports every day and will keep you informed of major

changes. At the moment, there's nothing more to add."

"Alright." There was a brief pause. "Then get on with it and investigate the case, Deputy Sheriff Strong."

Tara cleared her throat to keep herself from saying something rude. "Yes, sir," she said, and put the phone down.

She figured he would at least approve of the fact that she was getting on with the case, as he put it, instead of waiting for a ceremonial goodbye.

"Tara," Glenn said from behind her. He had clearly been waiting for her to finish the call, given how quickly afterwards he caught her attention. She turned to look at him. "We've got Heron's family here. His parents."

Tara swallowed. Great. First all this pressure from the state, and now she had to deal with grieving parents. This was just wonderful.

"Have they seen the body?" she asked.

Glenn nodded solemnly. "Tracy took them over to Lindsie as soon as they arrived," he said. "They confirmed ID. I've got them waiting in one of the interview rooms so they're at least a bit isolated from it all."

Tara nodded. That was probably the best course of action—away from anything that they might overhear between Tara and Glenn or any of the other deputies. It was always best to treat the family of the deceased with as much care as possible. They were delicate, after all, and they were experiencing the worst time of their lives. Tara could only hope someone would do the same for her if anything worse than her sister's disappearance happened now that she was an adult.

Tara joined Glenn on the short walk to the interview room, mentally teeing herself up. Another conversation with another grieving family. It wasn't her favorite part of the job by a long shot.

At least when they were deep in investigation, they were able to separate the real, tragic person from the case. But when you were confronted by grieving parents, the sadness of it all could get to you as well.

She took a deep breath before she opened the door.

Mr. and Mrs. Heron were cowering together on two chairs at the table in the middle of the room. Jamie's father had his arms around his wife, who was leaning her head on his shoulder. It was clear that both of them had been crying. When they looked up, startled, at the opening of the door, Tara had the guilty feeling of disturbing a private moment.

"I'm Deputy Sheriff Strong," Tara introduced herself, walking around carefully to sit opposite them at the table. "We're very sorry for your loss."

"Deputy Grayson," Glenn said softly, nodding at them and taking the seat next to her.

"What happened to him?" Mrs. Heron asked, her voice hoarse. "The coroner and the deputy who took us over there wouldn't say."

"We're still working to establish that," Tara said, choosing her words carefully. "It's not that we're trying to hide the truth from you in any way—we simply don't have the answers yet."

"But it must be suspicious, or you wouldn't want to investigate it," Mr. Heron objected. "You're the sheriff's department."

Tara hesitated for only a moment. "Well, sir, we do investigate all deaths in the parks and hiking trails. Most of the time we find a simple explanation. In this case, we just need to do a bit of testing which we don't have the capacity for here in Edgar County. In the meantime, a few questions might help speed things up so we can get you those answers."

"What?" Mrs. Heron asked, sniffing but clearly eager to get to the bottom of things. She probably thought that

the quicker she gave them the information, the sooner she would know what really happened to her baby boy—and the better she would be doing in her duty as a mother. Tara’s heart went out to her.

But she still had to ask the difficult questions.

“What was your son doing on the trail?” she asked. “Did you know he was heading there?”

“We didn’t know, but he doesn’t tell us everything,” the father grunted. “He lives alone, he has his own life. But I’d assume he was going to sightsee. He likes hiking. He’s spent a lot of time looking at the views around our county and taking pictures of them for his social media page.”

Tara’s interest was piqued by that. They needed to check out that social media page and the victim’s phone, see if there were any photographs taken this morning. “He started branching out more recently, or has he traveled here before?”

“He never mentioned coming this way,” Mrs. Heron said. She dabbed at her face with a crumpled tissue. “Oh, I was always so worried about him. He’s always going too far for the pictures. Climbing over barriers and scaling rocks... was that what happened? Did he fall?”

“He didn’t fall,” Tara said, holding her hands up in quick assurance. His being a daredevil was interesting, but she didn’t know if it had any bearing here. The fact he’d never been here before was another complication. They would be able to verify it further if he really did post all of his trips online, of course. Tara let that question slide for now. “Do you know a man named George Daly, or know if he has any connection with your son?” There was still a chance that they were linked somehow. She wasn’t sure what it would mean, but she needed to ask the people who knew him best—just in case.

Both parents frowned.

“What’s this about?” Mr. Heron demanded. Tara could see she was losing them. They were getting exasperated, suspicious. They thought something was going on.

“If you could just answer the question,” she said, hoping they would do it before they had to stop the interview.

“Did he kill my son?” Mr. Heron asked, looking like he was on the verge of rising to his feet. His knuckles were white where he gripped the side of the table.

“No,” Tara said, knowing honesty was the best bet here. She couldn’t have an avenging father rampaging the county. “He’s also deceased.”

There was a moment of quiet. Both parents looked stunned. Tara couldn’t blame them. They were experiencing one of the worst moments of their lives, and all of this wasn’t helping.

“No,” Mrs. Heron said faintly. “I don’t recognize the name.”

Tara decided enough was enough. “Thank you,” she said, rising to her feet. “We’ll be in touch when we have any more updates for you. Once again, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“But what do we do now?” Mrs. Heron asked, bewildered.

Tara hesitated. She wished she had a good answer for them.

“Wait,” she said. “We’ll be in touch. Take the time to process and grieve. Inform your family. For now, I’m sorry—there’s nothing else you can do.”

At least they had a body, she thought as she left the room—something her parents had never had for Cassie.

They’d never known when the time was right to memorialize her, to call her dead. Once so much time had passed that hope had faded, it seemed almost like

failure to admit that a funeral should have been held years ago.

The Herons wouldn't have that awful wait, but they still needed answers.

And Tara was going to get them—today, if she could. Because she didn't want that family to go through any more pain than it already had to.

She wasn't going to let this case go cold without finding the answers they needed—whatever it took.

CHAPTER SEVEN

He stood in front of the tank, looking in through the glass, watching her.

She was beautiful, his rattler. She didn't have a name, because he didn't think that was appropriate—names were a human thing. If she did have a name, it would be something composed of a sibilant series of hisses, rattles from her tail or her tongue. Snake language. Most likely, she just went by whatever the general rattlesnake language was for being. If the language even worked that way.

These kinds of rabbit holes were enjoyable to go down, but not quite as satisfying as the real thing. Rabbit holes, snake tracks, bear dens—these were the kinds of things he enjoyed exploring the most.

He'd been watching the trails, following a different track entirely, when he'd found her. She'd obviously been in a fight with one of the other hunters in the park and come off badly. She was hurt. If she was left in the wild, she would die. She hadn't even had the ability to attack him when he grabbed her and picked her up.

He didn't believe in caging animals or stopping them from roaming free. He didn't even believe in interfering in the natural order of things, so long as you stopped other humans from interfering as well.

But in this case...

In this case, he'd seen an opportunity for this beautiful, vulnerable rattler to have a purpose beyond her natural life. To be able to continue living in service of a very specific goal. He thought the deal was a good one. Life much longer than her natural allotment in a comfortable space, with all the food she could want—in exchange for just a little syringe now and then of something she produced automatically anyway.

She was his own little secret. A pet he should never have taken from the wild. He hadn't reported her. He knew they would look at him and judge him even for the good work of saving her life—just as he would for anyone else. He didn't want to get in trouble.

And it was far better, for his purposes, if no one ever knew she was there—because no one would suspect him. That way, his work could continue.

She was a little shaken, retreating to the far end of her tank and hissing and rattling at him. That was normal. She always got that way after he'd milked her.

He looked at the cup in his hand, holding it up to the light. She'd bitten down on the membrane stretched over it so obediently, draining her venom from her fangs into the container. He'd managed to get a good amount out of her this time, though it seemed that she could only give smaller quantities when he was harvesting her this regularly. She was getting easier to handle, although that was more down to his increased experience than any kind of acceptance on her part. Still, this was a decent amount. It would keep him going for a night.

He moved over to where he kept the syringes and selected one. He kept them in a nondescript black plastic case—something that could easily have contained anything. Especially medicine. Not many people would object to you carrying a syringe full of life-saving medicine if you had some kind of disease they'd never heard of that could go off at any minute. That was the excuse he planned to give if anyone ever asked him.

He was almost disappointed that no one yet had.

"Alright, darlin'," he said, raising his hand when the rattlesnake rattled at him from across the room. She was furious still. But you had to be alive to be furious, so he still counted her as being on the winning side here.

He carefully extracted enough of the venom to fill a new syringe and then put the cup aside, storing it where it wouldn't be easily identified. He placed the syringe into

the case, taking his time so he didn't risk damaging or breaking it, and then tucked the case into his inner pocket where it sat comfortably.

He was ready for the next one.

So long as the next one didn't just stumble back in fright when he approached them in his mask and fall to the ground with a heart attack, like the first one had. If that happened, at least he would have more venom to add to his syringe tomorrow.

The fact that there would be a next one was no longer something that he was fighting or struggling with. He had accepted that much.

There would be a next one.

It was better to be prepared.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tara needed to breathe for a moment before she got out of the car. Glenn's phone buzzed with a call and he swiped off the screen, clearly not interested in answering. Was it Beth, or just a cold caller? Selfishly, Tara hoped it was his girlfriend and that they were still fighting.

The impulsive thought only made her feel worse—about herself and about the situation.

“Are you ready?” Glenn asked, glancing over at her, his hand on the door handle. He was hesitating in response to her hesitation. Normally, Tara would be the first one to leap out of the car as soon as they arrived at the scene, ready to take action.

“Yeah,” she said, looking out the car's window at the state park trails heading up into the distance and then looking around again. Not quite directly at Glenn, but at least letting him see her face. “This one just hit a little harder, for some reason.”

“Because of the parents,” Glenn said decisively. “Their grief—it's so raw. It's hard not to feel it.”

Tara nodded slowly. She didn't mention the other thing—the way everything, nowadays, made her think about Cassie. It had always been that way, really, but now that she was reinvestigating the case the whole thing seemed to be magnified. Like the pain was more visceral now because she was bringing back her own memories of that time. The worry that turned to fear, the fear that turned to misery and uncertainty, the pain that came from never knowing the answers.

It was all hitting her again, all the time, and every grieving face she saw only made it all come back stronger.

“We should talk to as many campers and hikers as we can find who were here yesterday evening or this morning,” she said. “Anyone who stayed overnight would be perfect. They might have had the chance to see Jamie go up there with someone.”

“Got it.” Glenn nodded. “Are we still asking about George Daly?”

Tara considered it for a moment. “No,” she said at last. “He really did die of natural causes. Since it’s just a coincidence they died on consecutive days, we should probably stop asking about him. Unless someone says they remember seeing Jamie Heron with an older man, in which case we should dig into it.”

“Understood,” Glenn said. “You want to split up or go out together?”

Tara hesitated. There was a lot of ground to cover. The state park had a fairly sizeable campground area, and someone would need to look out for hikers coming and going. “We should split up,” she said. “You go hit the campground. I’ll look for hikers.”

Glenn nodded, opened the car door, and got out—leaving her alone with her thoughts for a moment.

Except alone with her thoughts was the last thing Tara ever wanted to be, so she quickly got out of the car after him and started walking toward the trails.

It was a pleasant day. The weather was still turning, and it was warm and sunny with just enough of a breeze to keep it from feeling oppressive. Shading her eyes, Tara could see a number of people already on the trails, walking up or down them. She aimed herself in the direction of the trail where Jamie Heron had been found and slipped a pair of sunglasses on, looking out for anyone coming back her way.

The first hiker she came across was an older man. She stopped him with a wave. “Excuse me, sir,” she

said. “Were you here in the state park early this morning or yesterday?”

“No,” he said, with a mystified look. “Just got here an hour ago.”

“Alright, thank you,” she said, giving him a nod and letting him go on his way.

The next people were a couple, strolling hand in hand. Tara caught up with them as they were heading up the trail, rather than the other way around. She moved around them so they could see her and then interrupted their walk.

“Hi, I’m sorry,” she said, immediately feeling annoyed with herself for apologizing. That put her in a weaker position, and she was doing her job—a job that came with the responsibility of saving lives. “Were you in the state park early this morning or yesterday?”

“We’re staying in the campground down there,” the male of the pair said, glancing at what Tara assumed was his girlfriend. “Has something happened?”

“I’m afraid there’s been a death in the park,” Tara said. She held up a photograph of Jamie Heron they’d printed from his file—the photograph from his driver’s license. It was a plain shot, but it resembled him very well as he had been when he died—enough that they didn’t need a more recent update. “Do you recognize this man?”

“Did he die?” the woman gasped. She shook her head, her eyes wide. “Oh my god—that’s awful!”

“I don’t recognize him,” the man said. “Do you, sweetie?”

She shook her head again. “Oh, how awful!”

“Have you seen anything strange or suspicious today?” Tara asked. “Maybe someone coming off the trails in a hurry early this morning, around or just after dawn?”

“We weren’t awake then,” he said with a sheepish shrug. “Sorry.”

“But there was that man,” the woman said, turning to look up at her boyfriend for his confirmation. “You know, the weird guy.”

“Oh, that guy.” He nodded slowly. “Yeah, now that I think about it, that could be relevant to what you’re asking about. He was kind of hanging around the tents last night and I saw him again not long ago.”

“What was weird about him?” Tara asked. She knew people had all kinds of definitions for “weird.” She didn’t want to get caught up in a wild goose chase.

“He was some kind of loner,” the man said. He glanced down the trail behind him as if he was remembering. “He’s got this heavy beard and a thick coat—too thick for the weather, I thought. He was near the campground but he didn’t seem to want to come near. Like he was just watching people. I don’t know. I thought he was a pervert or something, to be honest.”

“Okay, thank you,” Tara said. She took a card printed with her info out of her pocket. “If you see him again, would you give me a call?”

“Sure!” the woman replied, taking the card. “We’ll let you know right away.”

“Thanks,” Tara said. She nodded, then glanced over her shoulder. There were more people further up the trail. “Alright. Enjoy your hike.”

She moved on, walking fast to get away from them and avoid having an awkward long drawn-out moment after making her exit and yet still walking with them.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket before she was able to reach the next group. Tara glanced around, stepping to the side of the trail to take the call; it was the station’s number flashing up on her screen. “Deputy Sheriff Strong,” she said, her standard greeting.

“It’s Deputy Bryant,” he replied over the line. Bryant was their youngest deputy and as such, the one who often got stuck with the jobs no one else wanted to do. In this case, Tara had trusted him to be the one to look over the deceased’s social media and go through his phone. “I’ve finished looking through all the pictures.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Not really,” Bryant said. “I did find pictures of the viewing spot where Heron was found, but there was no one else in the shot. He took a selfie with the camera facing over the view.”

“He’s lucky he didn’t stumble backwards and fall down the cliff,” Tara muttered. She’d seen enough reports of people who did exactly that to be persuaded herself never to attempt it—no matter how good the view. “Does the timestamp on the shot bear out the time of death as early this morning?”

“Yes,” Bryant confirmed. “You can see the dawn light behind him—breaking golden over the park. He must have been killed right after it was taken. It’s a shame the camera wasn’t facing the other way.”

“That is a shame,” Tara agreed, humming under her breath. “There’s nothing linking him to this location on previous trips?”

“Not even anything in Edgar County,” Bryant said. “All of his shots are up in more northern spots.”

“Got it,” Tara replied. “Thanks, Bryant.”

“No problem, Deputy Sheriff,” he said, hanging up.

Tara thought for a second. There definitely was no link between Daly and Heron. That was good; that meant they could definitely rule out this being some kind of double homicide. There was still a chance it wasn’t a homicide at all, she supposed, and that Heron had actually overdosed on some kind of recreational drug—though there was no evidence for that theory at all. Even if it had been that, they would still need to arrest

someone: the injection site being where it was, there was no chance he could have injected himself.

It all hinged on the tox report.

If he'd been poisoned, that would tell them everything.

Tara didn't even have the chance to get walking and talk to more people before her phone rang in her hand again. She looked down and saw Glenn's name, putting it to her ear hurriedly. "Glenn?"

"I've got something," he said. "I've had several people now tell me about a weird loner with a beard who was hanging around last night and this morning. Someone even saw him going off toward the trails right before dawn."

"I've heard about him, too," Tara said. She covered her mouth for a moment, thinking. There were two options open to her: continue questioning people in search of a possible witness, or make a move toward finding this mysterious suspect.

As far as she was concerned, these people could be interviewed by someone else—they could get one of the other deputies down here to help out. What they really needed was to find and interrogate this suspect, because if he had snuck up behind Jamie Heron and injected him with some kind of toxin, he was probably going to want to try to get as far away as possible.

"What do you want to do?" Glenn asked.

"Do any of your witnesses recall seeing him near a vehicle or a tent?" Tara asked.

"No," he said. "No, they all said he was just hanging around. Someone said he looked kind of dirty. They thought maybe he lives on the land."

"Then we're going to shut down the entrance to the state park and get a manhunt going," Tara said, making the decision. "I'm calling Sheriff Braddock. We can't let this guy leave."

“Right,” Glenn said grimly. “I’ll go talk to the rangers and get them to stop anyone leaving by the main entrance.”

Tara turned and looked back the way she had come, then over what she could see of the trails from the height she had reached, as she waited for her call to connect to Sheriff Braddock’s phone.

He was out there somewhere.

Somewhere in the vast expanse of the state park, where it was almost impossible to control the borders or stop anyone leaving whenever and wherever they wanted—if he hadn’t already made his escape.

Everything was stacked against them.

Tara wasn’t going to give up.

CHAPTER NINE

Tara stopped and sat down on a boulder that was conveniently located to the side of the trail, resting her tired legs. She was out of breath, panting a little to regain her usual balance.

It had been a long day so far.

“Do you have enough water?” Glenn asked, taking a sip of his own. Annoyingly, he was standing up still, drinking from his canteen instead of taking the opportunity to fully rest. It was like he was bragging about how much fitter he was than her.

Of course, that probably wasn’t the case at all and his actions were perfectly innocent. But Tara had been walking around this damn state park for half a day with no results, and she was tired enough that she was starting to feel snappy.

“I’ve got enough,” she said, hefting her own canteen to check its weight and then taking a drink. It was a warm enough day that they needed to keep hydrated. She glanced up as a helicopter marked with the sheriff’s department colors and logo buzzed overhead. She didn’t have the energy to wave at it, and besides, she didn’t want them to think that she was trying to signal something.

“You think he’s still out there?” Glenn asked.

It was a fair question. They’d searched so much of the state park already—but there was also a lot more distance to cover. Enough that Tara was no longer confident they’d make it by the end of the day, given their limited personnel numbers and resources. Everyone else would be starting to get tired, too. They were going to get slower and slower as the day wore on.

“Yes,” she said. “I think he’s still out there. But maybe we need to ditch this system and try something else.”

“Like what?” Glenn asked, raising his eyebrows. He knew her. He knew that she was usually good at following protocol. It was only in cases where she truly felt that breaking it would get them further—like when she went outside the county to interview witnesses without informing the sheriff—that she considered it.

Tara looked to the side, thinking out loud. “This whole area is crisscrossed with trails, but the rangers don’t have any reports of anyone being harassed up here or seeing anyone weird, right?”

“Right,” Glenn confirmed. “They told me they were aware a man had been seen around the campground a few times, but he hadn’t spoken to or approached anyone, so they weren’t considering it to be serious yet.”

“Then I don’t think we’re going to find him by looking on the trails,” Tara said. “If I were him, I would be camping out somewhere where I wouldn’t be found and asked to leave. Somewhere more isolated. Nowhere near a trail.”

“In the trees?” Glenn suggested. The wooded area of the park ran around the base of the hill that formed most of the nature trails. A few snaked through it, but they were far apart—still easy enough to find a place to camp out of sight of any casual hikers.

Tara nodded. “Right where the helicopter won’t have any chance of spotting him.”

“You think we should go out that way? It’s still a lot of ground to cover,” Glenn pointed out.

“We’ve already got Deputy Walker and Deputy Kay down there doing a grid search,” Tara said. “We don’t have to search the whole area alone. Anyway, I don’t think we should just charge in. We have to be more logical about it. Do you have your map?”

Glenn pulled the map out of his pocket and opened it up, spreading it wide. The map covered the whole state park and only the state park. It was produced for visitors to help them navigate their way around, so the trails were clearly marked.

“Right,” Tara said, leaning over it and tapping her finger on the markings. “So, he was seen around the campground here, but no reports of him being on the trails. I don’t think he would use either of these two trails that run from the campground through the trees.”

“There’s space between them,” Glenn said, leaning forward to tap the map next to her hand. Their fingers almost brushed, and Tara tensed, quickly drawing her hand away. “He could easily move through the middle without anyone seeing him. Why do you think he keeps going to the campground if he doesn’t want to be seen, though?”

“Excellent question,” Tara said, clicking her fingers. “He’s in need of something. Maybe food? He could be trying to scavenge anything left behind or unguarded.”

“That makes sense.” Glenn nodded. “If he’s living in the woods, he can’t exactly drop by the store and pick up supplies. Especially since witnesses described him as dirty and unkempt, with clothing that looked like it hadn’t been washed. Unlikely anyone would let him in to buy anything, if he even has money.”

“Alright, we’re getting somewhere,” Tara said. “He’s living in the woods with no natural food source, or at least not enough that he can get by on it, but otherwise avoiding the public.”

“There’s a lot of wild mushrooms and berries up in this area,” Glenn said, tapping an area near a stream that wended its way through the very north of the park. “Plus fresh water. I guess he doesn’t wash often. Maybe he’s somewhere below this point, so he can’t go up there easily or often. He might not even be aware he can go

up there for food—I only know because I’ve walked that trail.”

“Then he must be somewhere in this area,” Tara said, tapping the central part of the forest on the map. “Away from the main trails, below the river, and in an isolated spot. That narrows it down considerably.”

“It’s about a half-hour walk to get there,” Glenn noted.

“Then we better not waste another minute,” Tara said grimly, knowing she wasn’t going to get there any faster by just sitting around.

“There,” Tara said, whispering it to Glenn in a rush. She didn’t want to alert their bearded loner if he was nearby—and there was a good chance that he was nearby.

Glenn paused, swinging his eyes around to where she was pointing. After a second, he saw it, too. He gave her a nod and they both began to advance silently. Tara kept her wits about her, glancing in all directions just in case their suspect might be coming up from behind them.

The glade in which she had caught a glimpse of stacked wood was quiet. There were animal noises all around them—mostly birds calling to one another high overhead in the trees—but nothing that would suggest a human. Tara and Glenn crept closer until they were standing right on the edge of the glade, looking in.

The stacked wood was, as Tara had suspected, placed neatly near an old campfire. It had burned down to blackened ashes. Several smooth, flat stones were placed in the center, an old technique for cooking which she had heard of plenty of times. There was a slight dip in the earth a few steps away—a hole someone had

clearly dug—and in it, a black garbage can liner sealed up.

“What do you think?” Glenn whispered.

“I have to go look,” Tara replied. “You keep watch.”

She stepped forward into the more open space, a break from the monotony of the tightly growing trees, and slipped a pair of gloves out of her pocket and onto her hands. Once she was both protected and not likely to compromise evidence, she reached for the plastic bag.

She took a second to breathe and gather her courage—then ripped it open.

If she had been expecting some kind of evidence of a crime, or something that might harm her, she was mistaken. The bag seemed to contain only plastic packaging from food: the kind of thing that could cause a lot of problems for the local wildlife. It seemed their mystery man was attempting to keep all his trash in one contained space, rather than leaving it lying around everywhere.

From the look of the packaging, she had to guess that their idea of him scavenging food from the campsite was correct.

Tara dropped the bag and glanced around. There was still no sign of anyone nearby. “Looks like this is where he’s been living,” she said, daring now to raise her voice to normal level. She took another look at the stack of wood from this different angle and realized it was set up to support a small tarp on the other side—just wide enough for someone to sleep under.

Glenn stepped out to join her. “I don’t think he’s still here. The fire’s dead and there’s nothing else around. No personal belongings, no backpack, no food stash. It’s like he’s moved on.”

“That’s exactly what I would do if I had killed someone and knew that people might be looking for me,” Tara muttered. “But where?”

Glenn nodded ahead. "There's a slight trail there."

Tara followed his gaze and stepped closer. There was something: kind of an indentation in the grass and fallen leaves. "That could be a rabbit trail."

"It could be nothing at all." Glenn shrugged. "I don't know what else to look for, though."

Tara nodded thoughtfully. He was right. They had no other leads. Might as well see where this one could take them.

After a moment more of thought she could come up with no reason not to. She checked her cell phone for service, but the trees were thick here and maybe the mast was too far away, and she had nothing. They were alone, at least until they got back to a spot where they could call someone.

"Let's go," she said, stepping out along the trail and leaving Glenn to follow her.

There was no particular indication that their loner had used this trail himself. Nothing to make them think that he had gone this way before them. Perhaps he had taken off in a direction he'd never gone before.

But if he had a lot of things to move, maybe more than he could take in one trip, he'd have had to go back and forth. That, too, would explain the tarp and the wood left behind—it was possible he still needed to make another trip.

All of which made it possible he was out there somewhere, ahead of them on this same faint trail, and Tara's heart raced with every step they took along it.

But the trail led straight ahead. There were so few other markers along the way they were following that it was almost easy to just walk in a straight line—almost. A couple of times, Tara had to stop and check she was still looking at the right indentation in the undergrowth, a trick of her eyes under the dappled shade of the trees.

“What’s that?” Glenn murmured, and a moment later, Tara heard it, too.

Water—running water.

The stream.

She didn’t need the power of her eyes to follow the rest of the trail. From here, it was possible that the loner might have heard the water and surged ahead, recognizing the sound of possible salvation. A water source, a food source—it was everything he would have needed.

“We’ve gone in almost exactly a straight line from the site where he was sleeping,” Tara said, low enough that only Glenn would hear her—just in case the man they were seeking was still nearby.

“It’s like he must have found a map,” Glenn observed.

Tara had had the very same thought. “He realized there was a better place to go.” That was somewhat troubling, because it didn’t quite jive with the theory that he had moved on because he had killed someone and knew they would be looking for him.

Then again, they had no idea of his mental state. In his warped perception, it was possible that heading to the other side of the woods constituted getting far enough away from where he had been to stop him becoming a suspect.

But then there was the other side to it: if he was addled and confused, living on the land because he had lost some kind of grip on reality, then would he have the presence of mind, ability, and resources to inject someone with a toxin?

They still didn’t even know what kind of toxin it was—or how hard it was to procure.

All of this, though, could be answered when they found him. That had to be the first step. Because after everything, it was altogether possible that he wasn’t what Tara was expecting or picturing in her head at all.

Tara was so lost in thought she almost stepped right out of the trees without realizing it.

The stream was so close that the noise filled her ears, the water burbling and rushing as it ran over rocks. The trees thinned out for a short distance, leaving room for a trail that ran alongside the stream for a short distance before branching off to the north.

But not before going over a tumbledown stone bridge—clearly put there a long time ago, when maybe the trails through the woods were different. Fortunately it was barely needed, because it was falling apart. The stream was small enough here for anyone to wade through it. The bridge was, if anything, just for those who didn't want to get their clothes wet—and Tara doubted many people came this way anymore.

Which didn't explain why there was smoke drifting out from underneath it.

"There," Tara whispered, then lifted a hand with two fingers raised. She pointed one to the left and one to the right. Glenn stepped out beside her and nodded. One more glance at one another to confirm their timing—and then they walked forward at the same time, both heading for opposite sides of the bridge.

Tara had her hand on the gun at her hip, not quite drawn yet but ready to do so if it turned out to be necessary. They were on either side of him. He had no place to go. He would have to surrender—and if he didn't, the threat of a firearm might convince him to change his mind.

She took one more step to round the stone side of the bridge—

And there he was.

A tall man, broad-shouldered, dressed in an overcoat that was slightly too heavy for the time of year. He looked dirty. His hair was greasy, his long beard bristling in every direction. His face was smudged with dirt, and

his eyes that darted in her direction seemed to be buried within dark pits.

He saw her—

Looked around—

Saw Glenn—

And ran in the direction that neither of them had accounted for.

Across the stream—and toward the anonymity of the woods.

Tara cursed under her breath and sprang into a run after him.

CHAPTER TEN

“Stop!” Tara yelled, racing after him. She splashed through the water of the stream, feeling it instantly soak her to the skin. “Sheriff!”

Whether the bearded man understood her and didn’t care, or didn’t understand her, he didn’t stop. He didn’t even look over his shoulder.

He raced on toward the trees, where Tara knew he would be able to disappear instantly if he just got far enough ahead of her.

She splashed through the water and hit the bank at the other side, stumbling for a second on the muddier side before she got onto dry land, then pushed herself to put on a new burst of speed. She wasn’t quite within reaching distance, but he wasn’t yet so far away that he was lost.

Her boots were full of water, squelching and sloshing with every step, and Tara knew that there would be blisters in it for her if they had to run for long. There was nothing to do though. She had to go after him for as long as she could—or until she took him down.

She could hear Glenn running behind her, adding his own shouts of warning. It didn’t make a difference. The bearded man kept running—deceptively fast under his heavy coat, springing through the trees with the experience that came from living in the area, dodging exposed roots and small shrubs that Tara had to take care not to trip over. He was getting away.

There was one more thing she could say that might make him stop.

“Stop right there or I’ll shoot!” Tara yelled, even though her gun wasn’t in her hand.

The bearded man looked over his shoulder—back at her with wide eyes—seeking out her hands.

Her empty hands.

He was going to keep running.

He was going to get—

He tripped as he turned, falling right over a root he hadn't been looking for.

Now he was in her reach again.

Tara put on a fresh burst of speed, hearing Glenn's footsteps behind her doing the same, needing to get to the suspect before he got up. He was struggling, pushing himself up to his feet. He was going to run again. He was going to be on the move...

She couldn't let him get away.

Tara launched herself into the air toward him, colliding heavily with his back and knocking him down to the ground again, making him land flat on his stomach. She grappled for his arms even as she dealt with the shock to her system from landing hard. It said something about her job that she was getting used to the sensation. She managed to get her hands on his arms and twist them back, then reach for the handcuffs at her belt. She couldn't quite grab them—

And a cold piece of metal was pushed into her hand—a pair of handcuffs—passed to her by Glenn. She snapped them onto the suspect's wrists one at a time, only then daring to breathe for a moment.

"I'm not going back," he barked, struggling to turn over onto his front and get up to run again. "I'm not going back!"

"Back where?" Tara asked, yelling to be heard over his own voice. Back to prison? Was he a felon?

"Back to Canto Rodado," he said, his voice coming out like a wail. "You can't make me! I have rights!"

Tara looked up, still trying to stop him from bucking away from her, and met Glenn's eyes.

"You're wanted in Canto Rodado County?" he asked, leaning down and grabbing the guy's arms so that they could haul him up together.

"They said I was supposed to go home," he cried, his voice sounding like the caw of some great bird. "Ain't got a home! Told me I couldn't stay there—but I ain't got a home!"

"We need Jessy," Tara remarked, somewhat reluctantly. "She'll be able to tell us what the hell's going on."

"Agreed," Glenn said. The man had quieted down—his shoulders were slumped in defeat. He must have felt Glenn's tight grip on his arms and knew that, despite appearances, Glenn was not just some skinny junior. He could take the man down easy, even given the disparity in their height. Tara knew that from experience: he was wily. "Let's get him back to the car. It's going to be a long walk."

Tara looked down at Glenn's feet. His boots were bone dry.

"How the hell did you stay dry?" she demanded, shivering in the wet fabric of her khaki trousers.

"I took the bridge," Glenn said.

Tara stared at him wordlessly.

"Let's get this man back to the precinct," she finally said. "You take him to the car. I'll call off the search effort and ask my sister to come over."

And cross every single one of her appendages, she thought, that Jessy would come and help out without making any snide references to what had happened last time they spoke.

Tara leaned back against her desk, looking over at the bearded man in the lockup. Thankfully, he was far enough away to not hear their muted conversation. “So, he’s just a vagrant?”

“That’s right.” Jessy nodded. She hadn’t said anything at all about their last meeting, which was a relief. Tara had been expecting something along the lines of “Oh, so you remembered protocol *this* time?” That would have been somewhat uncomfortable to have to explain to Glenn.

But Jessy hadn’t said a thing. The only problem was, Tara wasn’t sure that was an improvement.

Because instead of addressing the elephant in the room head-on, Jessy was just avoiding looking at her. She was treating her completely like a colleague from a distant part of her organization and not at all like a sister.

A red flag for anyone who had seen the pair of them interact with one another before, because all Tara ever did was try to get Jessy to *stop* treating her like a little sister.

“Is there even an arrest warrant out for him?” Glenn asked.

Jessy shook her head. “We asked him to move on a couple of times when he took up residence in spots that the owners objected to. He wants to live off-grid, away from other humans. The only problem is that he’s trying to do it on other people’s property—and I’m sure the state won’t be happy with him trying it in the state park, either.”

“What about the murder?” Tara asked. “Would he be capable of that?”

Jessy looked across the room at the bearded man—Henry, apparently—for a long moment. “No,” she said. “I don’t even think Wild Henry knows he’s on this planet. All he wants to do is be alone and stay away from any

kind of technology. I don't think he would use something like a syringe or a poison. He would be the kind of guy you'd go after if someone was clubbed to death or stabbed with a flint knife. A syringe is far too technical for him. Too plastic."

Tara looked at him again, thinking for a minute. She leaned over to Deputy Bryant, who was sitting at his desk waiting for the phone to ring. "Bryant," she said. "Take him this release form and get him to sign it."

"What?" Bryant asked. He looked startled at the idea of getting too close to the man. "I don't want to. Deputy Walker said he once tried to make him move on from the state park and Wild Henry bit him."

"Do it," Tara urged him. She was a little exasperated with him for ignoring a direct order in front of a sheriff from another county. As far as she was concerned, Bryant could also do with a bit more exposure to things he didn't like. He still had a lot of toughening up to go before the rest of the team really saw him as someone they could trust with the big tasks. And besides, it was fairly obvious to her that Deputy Walker had made the story up to poke fun at Bryant. He needed to learn that nuance, too.

Bryant got up with clear reluctance and moved slowly toward the caged-off part of the room and Wild Henry, who didn't even seem to be aware that anyone was watching him. When he reached the bars, Bryant held the pen and paper out in opposite hands.

"Um, excuse me. Please sign this," he said, when Wild Henry didn't react at all.

Henry reached up and took the paper—then saw the pen and seemed to hesitate. He looked at the paper helplessly, like he was going to be able to sign it by some other method.

"Take the pen," Bryant urged.

Henry reached up with what appeared to be extreme reluctance and took the pen in pinched thumb and forefinger, looking at it with deep distrust.

“Now sign your name,” Bryant told him in the same tone. He had to have figured that it worked the first time, so it was worth trying again.

Henry put the pen against the page and nothing happened. Tara had given him the type of pen that needed to be clicked on to work. He stared at it for a long time, seemed to give some kind of full-body shudder, and then dropped both it and the paper to the floor.

“See?” Jessy said with a shrug. “That’s about the theme of our experiences with him, too. He won’t deal with man-made things. He might open a plastic packet of something if he’s starving hungry, but he hates it. Anything else would be beyond him.”

None of them were psychologists, but Tara was prepared to buy it. She could see firsthand the psychological effect that interacting with man-made items—with being forced to sit inside society instead of on the outskirts—did to Wild Henry.

Maybe if the method of murder was anything else, she would have thought it likely that Wild Henry had snapped and killed someone who made him panic. But an injection...

No. It didn’t work.

“I don’t want to just release him,” Tara said. She felt some reluctance about forcing this man to stay somewhere he was uncomfortable, but at the same time, she had a duty of care to his health. Maybe they could help his mental health at the same time. “I think we should discharge him to the care of a doctor. First for a check-up, since he’s been living wild, and then for an assessment. He might need to be put in a mental hospital for his own good.”

“It somehow feels wrong, but I agree that it’s the right thing to do,” Jessy said. She was looking at Wild Henry—not at Tara. “He needs help. Maybe if they can deal with his issues and get him living safely in society again, he might one day be able to thank you.”

Looking at him now, Tara thought it was probably a fifty-fifty chance.

“Alright,” she said with a sigh. “Thanks for coming in.”

“No problem, Deputy Sheriff,” Jessy said, and Tara winced as she walked away, already leaving the office.

So, apparently, they weren’t going to talk about it.

“What was all that about?” Glenn whispered, nudging her with his elbow and nodding in the direction of Jessy’s back.

“Nothing,” Tara said, waving a hand in the air. “Sister stuff.”

Because even if she was ever going to explain to him what was going on between them, and how she’d started looking into Cassie’s case again, she definitely wasn’t going to do it in the middle of their workplace. The very place where her boss might hear the whole story.

“It’s getting late,” Glenn said, checking his watch.

Tara looked up and out of the windows at the far side of the room. He was right; the sun was already heading down. Now that they had spent almost a whole day chasing around after a suspect who wasn’t even viable, they were also running out of light so quickly there wasn’t any hope of finding more physical evidence tonight. Not that she thought they would find anything else at the scene anyway. Both she and Glenn had stood there for long enough, waiting for Lindsie or watching her load the body up, to have spotted anything significant.

“The killer is probably in Shanghai by now,” Tara muttered. They’d given him, or her, more than enough time to get away. They had no leads, and even if they had one, it would be hard to pursue right now. No way

they would find another escapee in the woods in the dark, if it came to that. "We might as well go home. Clock off and come at it fresh tomorrow."

"We'll get them tomorrow," Glenn said. He clapped her on the shoulder in a friendly gesture which only served to remind her of the fact that he was with someone else now, and friends was all they were going to be.

"Right," Tara said. "I hope so."

Because tomorrow she was going to have to make her first report to the state police, and she had a feeling they were going to accuse her of being some incompetent back-country deputy who hadn't the first idea about solving murders.

Right now, that was what the voice in her head was telling her, too.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

He paused by the visitors' center to check his pockets. He always liked to check them here—far enough from the parking lot and around the corner of the center so that he was less likely to be seen, close enough that he could go back to his vehicle to pick up anything he had forgotten.

In his jacket, there was an inside pocket that took up most of the right-hand side, from just under the arm down to the hem. It was that kind of jacket—made for people who were outdoors a lot, who needed to carry a lot of things with them. He tapped it and felt the light but reassuring curvature of the plastic mask.

Good.

He next patted his left pocket, the one right up at the breast, a smaller but no less useful pocket. Inside, he felt the outline of the rectangular box he was carrying. The one with the syringe.

Also good.

He glanced up at the sky, just now brightening with the light of the dawn. His every morning started the same way: an early walk along the trails, watching the sun rise above nature's spectacular beauty. He began to walk, keeping the visitors' center at his back, making sure he was only admiring the beauty of the trails. The campgrounds were irrelevant to him.

Not only that, but they would be infuriating.

He couldn't stand watching the way people lived, the way they assumed that the whole earth was theirs for the taking.

He started up his favorite trail. He didn't walk the same pattern each day. First of all, that could become tedious, and the one thing he never wanted was for his

morning walks to become tedious. Doing it this way meant that everything was always new. He was always seeing things from a different angle than ever before, enjoying a new revelation about this rock or that view.

Secondly, if you kept to the same route every single day, you wouldn't be able to catch people out as easily.

He patted the pocket with the syringe one more time, then drew his hand away guiltily. He hadn't meant to draw attention to it. Thankfully, it didn't seem as though anyone else was around yet. Behind him he heard a tiny snatch of conversation and realized that someone must be arriving behind him—perhaps a couple or a family. He didn't turn to look.

His attention lay ahead.

He started to move onto the first rise—the area of ground that started to slope upward. It was his favorite trail for several reasons, but the most compelling was that it gave an incredible view exactly at dawn. There was a particular rock you could stand on where you could watch the golden light of the rising sun suddenly break past the hill, flooding over everything as if released from behind a dam.

He was very much looking forward to seeing that today.

It would feel like a welcome reward for the efforts of this week.

He climbed higher, rushing now in his haste to get to the spot in time...

And hesitated, breaking over the crest of a certain rise in the trail and seeing who was up ahead of him.

A young hiker—a single one, not a group or a couple. Someone who had come up here on her own to see the view. Perhaps to clear her head or to get a new perspective. Or perhaps she was one of those influencers. That was fine. So long as she didn't take his picture or do anything to harm the park. She could do

what she wanted, so long as she avoided those two things.

The hiker walked up to the spot—up to his spot—and climbed on top of one of the rocks without pause, as if she knew exactly where she was going. She climbed up there and sat, hiking boots kicking from splayed legs against the front of the rock, and he realized he was going to have to share his view with her.

She was taking a cell phone out of her pocket. No doubt to record the view.

He gritted his teeth as he came to a stop further down along the open viewing point—further down than was optimal, but it would have to do. This was as close as he was willing to go.

The other person had her eye trained on the view. She hadn't even noticed him.

He watched her from the corner of his eye.

He couldn't help himself.

The sun was almost at the right height to break free and douse the gray land in shades of brilliant gold.

What was that hiker doing with her hand?

Fiddling with something on top of the rock?

She seemed to have found something loose—some kind of chip in the stone...

No.

He watched her do it. He couldn't believe he was watching her do it.

She levered something—maybe a pocket knife, by the glint of silver—under the chip until a piece of the layered rock snapped off from the top of the boulder, and she held it up to the light before sticking it into her pocket.

The light of dawn burst across the land below them, and he didn't even notice it.

He was too busy staring at the hiker.

By the time he turned back, the view was gone.
Spoiled.

He knew that every single time he came back here, no matter how long he kept taking these daily morning walks, he would always remember.

He would see it in his mind.

The park visitor who had the audacity to vandalize a piece of ancient rock for a souvenir.

She got up from the rock and jumped down to the ground, seeing him there with a start. She actually raised a hand, smiled, greeted him.

He nodded coolly. He couldn't force himself to smile.

Either way, she accepted the gesture at face value and began to move on.

Obviously, her end goal was not to stop here at this viewing point. She had more intentions for the rest of the park.

She might be going anywhere.

She might damage anything.

He couldn't let that happen.

He started to follow at a distance, keeping her in his sights. Up ahead, there was a place where the trees came close to the trail, then receded again. That spot—the spot where there was cover. That was where he could catch her.

But he had to grit his teeth and keep walking straight on when the hiker suddenly turned and walked back in the other direction, patting her pockets and seemingly finding that something was missing.

“Lost something?” he called out, putting on a faux cheerful tone that took every ounce of his self-restraint.

“I left it back at the campsite,” she said with a wry chuckle. “Better go back and set off properly.”

He nodded and lifted a hand in farewell, as if he was just sending her on her way with a blessing.

But there was no blessing.

He waited until he knew he could do it without being seen, and then began to tail her through the trail and back down toward the campground.

He was going to have to be quick. He knew that. The chance of someone seeing him was high if he wasn't careful. But he had his trusty mask in his pocket, and he could follow her for the rest of the day to wait for an opportunity if he really needed to.

He was nothing if not patient. He learned that from Mother Nature. She always had her ways.

He followed silently in the shadows and behind the trees and rocks that the park provided him, knowing he was going to catch his prey.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Today, Tara had one priority—and she hoped she could keep it as one priority only. Finding out what had happened to Jamie Heron. That had to be the next step forward.

She arrived at her desk with a certain sense of relief that she had actually managed to get up in the morning at the normal time, prepare for work, travel to the sheriff's office, and sit down without being told there was another pressing call for her to deal with.

“Morning,” Glenn said breezily, shrugging off his jacket and pulling out his chair to sit down. “Anything happening yet today?”

Tara shook her head. “I’ve got to call the state police,” she said. “I don’t suppose you’ve had any blindingly insightful eureka moments overnight about the case?”

“Nope,” Glenn said, making a sympathetic face. “Sorry. You think they’re going to pull us off the case?”

Tara sighed. She hoped not. But on the other hand, she wanted the case solved—and if she wasn’t the best person for it, then maybe letting go of her ego was the better option. “We’ll see,” she settled for, reaching for her desk phone and dialing the number she’d been given the day before.

The line connected almost immediately—as if Captain Lymon had been waiting for her call.

“Hello, Captain Lymon speaking,” he answered brusquely.

“This is Deputy Sheriff Strong from Edgar County,” Tara said, forcing herself to take a deep breath and say it even though she wasn’t looking forward to the call at all. She needed to do it and there was no way out of the duty. The only thing she could do was to suck it up. “I’m

calling with an updated report on our murder case here in the state park.”

“Right,” Captain Lymon said. “Tell me what you’ve got.”

“Well,” Tara said. She hesitated. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Lymon repeated with a bark of surprise.

“We pursued a lead of a strange individual seen around the site near the time of the victim’s death, but he turned out to be someone we could rule out of the investigation,” Tara said. “We don’t have any other suspects at the present time. We’ve spoken with the victim’s family and there doesn’t seem to be any motive that we can yet discern. As for the toxin used to kill him, we’re still waiting on the results from the state lab.”

Lymon grunted. “You spent the whole day talking to one person?”

“Finding him, sir,” Tara said, taking another deep breath and gritting her teeth. He wasn’t here. He didn’t know what it was like on the ground. “He was living rough in the trees. We had to track him down and bring him in.”

“You released him?” Lymon asked.

“No, sir,” Tara said. “At least, of a fashion. He’s been taken for psychiatric care. We know where to find him if we need to ask him anything else—but I will say he didn’t seem to be capable of answering much, anyway.”

“Right.” Lymon cleared his throat. “Our investigator is still busy. He should have been coming out to you today, but it will have to wait until tomorrow. It doesn’t exactly sound like you’re getting anywhere with the case, but there’s nothing we can do about that until our reinforcements are available.”

“I’ll report in again tomorrow morning if we don’t have anything before then, sir,” Tara said, needing to end the call before she gritted her teeth so hard she started losing bits of them. She hung up the phone while he was

still giving his vague approval, unable to force herself to stay on the line for one second longer.

She sighed and hung her head, drooping her shoulders low over her desk.

“That great, huh?” Glenn asked with a twinkling grin that, despite everything, did actually make her feel a tiny bit more cheerful.

“Alright, ma’am,” Deputy Bryant said all of a sudden, so loud it cut across the rest of the noise in the room. All of the deputies, Glenn and Tara included, glanced around at him—but it was Glenn and Tara he looked back at while holding the phone to his ear. “Yes, we’ll have someone with you very shortly. Please stay at the scene and stay on the line—and don’t touch anything.”

He pressed a button on his phone’s cradle. Tara was a step ahead of him. She knew what he was going to say.

“There’s a body?” she asked, before he had a chance to say a word.

“At the state park, near the campground,” he said, his eyes wide. “It sounds exactly like the last two.”

Except for being in a different part of the state park—but Tara wasn’t about to correct him when there was a body to be investigated. They needed to get down there as soon as possible, before other members of the public could stumble across it and the scene could be compromised.

“We’re on our way,” she said, leaping out of her chair and snatching the car keys from her desk. “Send Glenn the exact location if you can. We’ll work out the route on the way.”

And then she was gone, dashing out of the sheriff’s office as fast as she could, knowing they needed to get there as soon as humanly possible—if they were going to have any chance of catching a killer at all.

“It’s the same,” Tara said, keeping her voice low. She glanced up at Glenn, who was standing close by to keep watch. She gestured toward the victim’s neck, then carefully laid it back down on the ground. “There’s a small puncture mark back here, just like with Jamie Heron.”

Glenn was pale. He was glancing around them in all directions—like a sentry standing watch, but also like a man who thought there was a chance the killer might still be nearby. “She can’t have been there long,” he said. “We would have found her during the search. Not only that, but there’s a lot of foot traffic through this area once the sun is fully up. Whoever did this must have struck at or just before dawn, like with Heron, too.”

Tara carefully patted the dead woman’s pockets. “I can’t seem to find any ID... wait—what’s this?” She pulled the item out of the right-side pocket of her jeans and stared at it in confusion.

“A rock?” Glenn asked.

Tara held it up, looking into the distance slightly. “I’m not an expert, but it looks like those rocks up on the trails. A small piece of one, anyway. Why would she have that in her pocket?”

“A keepsake?” Glenn shrugged.

Tara mulled it over for a second, slipping the rock into an evidence bag. What did it mean?

Whatever it was, one thing was clear to her from the rest of the evidence.

“We have a killer on our hands,” Tara said grimly, putting her hands onto her thighs to push herself upright. She peeled off her gloves and discarded them into a pocket. “The kind of killer who strikes more than once. You realize we’re going to have to reexamine Heron all over again to see if he has any link to this woman.”

“Oh my god!”

Tara turned at the sound of the exclamation to see a man in a park ranger uniform walking toward them. He was staring at the body between her and Glenn with a mask of shock on his face.

“Sir?” Tara asked. It was a catch-all question, an invitation for him to give the information they were lacking. If she asked something specific, he would answer only the question she asked; if she left it open like this, he would tell them much more.

“I recognize her,” the park ranger said. He came closer, then backed off a step, covering his mouth. He was pale. “She came into the park earlier this week. We had a chat because she’s here alone, she wanted to get some help with setting up camp. I told her I wasn’t allowed to leave the front gate while I was on duty, and to ask someone nearby to help. You don’t think that person killed her, do you?”

“So, not a hiker,” Tara muttered, looking over the body again. “A camper.”

“She was going to hike the trails, but she was here mostly to take a break, she said,” the ranger went on. He seemed to be reacting to his shock by talking endlessly, barely taking a breath. “She wanted a vacation in nature. Something about disconnecting from life and reconnecting with the earth. She said the first thing she was going to do as soon as she got set up was to turn her cell phone off.”

“Do you remember her name?” Glenn asked.

“No,” the ranger replied. “But I remember her plot. It’s just on the other side of the trees. She requested something close to the entrance to the campground because she wanted to be safer. I told her it was a really safe plot. Oh god. It wasn’t safe at all!”

“Sir, can you go ahead and get that name for us from your logs?” Tara asked. He was clearly in need of some

direction. Maybe if he was helping, it would calm the panic in his mind that he had somehow done something wrong. He nodded rapidly and stumbled backwards a few steps before turning to rush off, leaving Tara and Glenn with the body for a moment.

“We’re going to need to work hard to keep this area closed off,” Tara said. “We need Lindsie, but also two or three more deputies—as many as the sheriff can spare—to guard the scene until she gets here and transports the body back to her lab.”

Glenn nodded. “I can stay here until they arrive,” he said, knowing her methods well enough to sense that she had somewhere she wanted to be. “I don’t mind doing it alone while you check out the place where she was camping.”

Tara smiled at him, grateful for a partner who knew what she wanted. At moments like this there were twin thoughts that turned over and over together in a spiral: regret, because he was the perfect partner and maybe would be the perfect romantic partner as well; and relief, because maybe she had made the right choice in keeping him as a partner by refusing anything romantic.

“Thanks,” she said. “When the ranger gets back with the name, get him to help you stand guard until reinforcements get here. Make the call now, and you’ll only have ten or fifteen minutes to wait. I’d bet that Lindsie is going to find the same toxin, whatever it is. If there’s any chance a scuffle went down close to where she was camping, it might give us the identity of the killer.”

Glenn nodded along with her instructions, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket. He hit dial, and when it was clear that he was connecting to the sheriff’s office, Tara glanced around and checked for any others in the vicinity. The park was still quiet. Soon, there would be a lot more footfall, and a lot more risk of the scene being contaminated.

Glenn could handle his area for a short while—it was the campsite Tara needed to focus on now.

She moved quickly through the trees, heading in a straight line in the direction the ranger had indicated. It was only a minute before she broke through and into the main campground: a wider open space that was neatly set out with rows of camping sites, broken up by paths paved with loose, natural stone.

Around half of the designated spots that Tara could see from her vantage point were in use. Campers and trucks with their beds converted for tents jostled alongside large or small tents anchored to the ground. There were rows of camping points with hookups for generators and water points, and other rows that seemed more simple, better for tents.

The victim, it seemed, had hired a standing camper van—the first in a row of shining silver vehicles that were clearly permanently parked.

Her car was parked at a right angle to it, neatly leaving space for her to walk right up to the door of the camper. Tara paused by the car first, shading her eyes to look through the windows. There were a few signs of it belonging to someone: a dancing hula figurine glued onto the dash, a fake lei hanging around the rearview mirror—perhaps signs of someone who enjoyed traveling in general. On the backseat Tara saw a leather jacket thrown casually to the side, a number of empty drink cans from various soda brands littering the footwell, and what looked like a hamper for food.

Without the key, Tara couldn't see more—but there was no sign of any kind of struggle taking place in or around the car, or outside the camper. She glanced around one more time to confirm her findings and then stepped up to the camper, finding the door locked when she jiggled it.

She moved to the side and peered in through the windows instead. They were small, but nevertheless

afforded enough of a view of the interior for her to put a picture together. Everything looked normal. The deceased had left a sleeping bag and pillow open on one of the bench-like beds, and the other was strewn with a few sets of clothes—perhaps her closet for the week. Tara could make out brown paper bags of groceries on the counter beside the sink, and leaning over to the second window, a pair of sneakers that looked too clean for forest walking by the door.

Nothing had happened here. Everything was neat and orderly, nothing disturbed. The victim had clearly locked up behind herself, walked up out of the campground—

And then met her end, out there in the clearing.

Whatever this toxin was, it either acted incredibly quickly or gave the victim only enough time to *start* moving back toward the campsite, not to actually get there.

One thing Tara was clear on: this happened in an isolated area out of sight of the other campers, early in the morning, with very little chance of witnesses. The killer knew what they were doing. They avoided being seen, they used a method that could have escaped detection if Lindsie wasn't so good at her job, and they made it look like the victims had heart attacks—a common cause of death in state parks.

But they had made one mistake.

They'd killed two people on subsequent days—far too close together to avoid notice.

What worried Tara was that if they didn't make an arrest today, they might find another body tomorrow morning.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I swear to God, Lindsie better have something for us, Glenn—or we’ve got nothing.” Tara was already wishing for just five more minutes of a proper break by the time they schlepped back to the coroner’s office, brushing the crumbs of a hurried lunch eaten one-handed off her uniform while driving. With lives on the line, though, there was no time to rest. “No link to Jamie Heron and no possible motive for anyone to want Mara Soke dead.” Learning the name of that morning’s victim had given her no peace at all—and gotten her no closer to solving the case.

“We’ll get there,” Glenn said. His placid confidence was sometimes encouraging, and sometimes—like now—irritating. If he had a way for them to get there, an actual lead or an idea, Tara would have been all for it. Hearing his confidence when they had absolutely nothing just made her feel more like an imposter.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he grabbed it as they walked—only to scowl and put the phone away.

Beth again?

Tara didn’t want to ask. She pretended she hadn’t seen. She was afraid that if she did ask, the hope in her voice would be too obvious—and she’d come off as desperate as well as a monster.

Tara pushed through the doors of the coroner’s office and hurried down to the lab where she knew she would find Lindsie. She immediately saw and recognized the victim—Mara Soke—on the slab. Lindsie was apparently done, given that she was sitting at her computer typing out some kind of notes rather than working on the body.

At the sound of footsteps across the polished tile floor, she turned and greeted them with a grim wave before jumping up. “I’ve got the results from the state

lab,” she announced, which was the best hello Tara could have asked for.

“What do they say?” Tara asked. Was it too much to hope that the result would in some way give them the key that unlocked the entire case?

“The toxin that was injected into Jamie Heron’s body was not synthetic, but natural,” Lindsie said. “It comes from a very specific type of snake. A subspecies of rattlesnake which is only found in this state park plus the mountains going up north. It’s quite rare in the wild, let alone in captivity.”

“You can tell exactly what snake it is from the venom?” Glenn asked, clearly impressed.

“This particular rattlesnake, the Hades Rattlesnake, has a footprint unlike any of the others,” Lindsie explained. She grabbed a few printouts that had been left on top of a steel cabinet, tapping them: the top sheet showed an image of a snake coiled up with a rattler tail behind it. “Most rattlesnakes will cause death within two to three days if the patient doesn’t receive treatment. Definitely enough time for someone to seek help. But this snake has a particularly fast-acting venom that targets the heart specifically.”

“That’s how the killer does it,” Tara surmised. “He attacks them with this venom so they drop immediately, rather than being able to fight back.”

“Yes, and no—it’s more than that,” Lindsie said. “In the wild, a bite from the Hades Rattlesnake will still take a couple of days to kill you. But in the concentration this killer is using... the injection stops the heart muscle almost immediately. Very little further damage occurs to the circulatory system because it simply stops circulating. That’s what made it so hard to trace at first. If this happened in a county where they didn’t have a top-rate coroner, it could have gone unnoticed.”

“Good thing we have a top-rate coroner,” Tara quipped. Lindsie beamed.

“So, there’s no chance this could be an animal attack?” Glenn asked.

Lindsie chuckled. “I don’t know of any breed of snake that could bite down with just one tooth and leave a perfectly syringe-shaped bite mark,” she said. “No, there’s no chance it’s natural. The concentration of the venom alone is a giveaway.”

“Could it be synthetically harvested in any way?” Tara asked. “Like recreated in a lab?”

“No, the person who is doing this must have access to an actual rattlesnake for milking,” Lindsie said.

“Milking?” Glenn looked a little green.

“Extracting venom from the teeth and venom tracks,” Lindsie said, holding up another printout. This one contained a photograph as well as detailed illustrations of the kind of equipment that could be used to extract the venom from a live snake. “It’s a pretty nasty way to go.”

“Would they feel any pain?” Glenn asked.

“They would certainly feel the injection,” Lindsie replied. She looked over at their victim as she spoke, as if feeling the dead woman’s pain. “Immediately afterwards they would experience blurred vision, tightness and pain in their chest, and other symptoms of a heart attack—like shooting pains in the arm. Lightheadedness, weakness, and difficulty breathing would follow, and shortly after that they would simply collapse.”

There was a small pause as each of them digested that horror. The thought of going out that way was almost unbearable. Not even having a chance to save themselves made it even worse.

“Okay, so first question,” Tara said. “Who has a Hades Rattlesnake for a pet?”

Lindsie shrugged. “I can’t answer that one,” she said. “I can only tell you what the body tells me. The rest is on you guys.”

“Thanks,” Tara said, half with sarcasm and half with a wry grin for her friend. “Alright. We’d better go find out whether there’s a register for this kind of thing.”

“Go ahead,” Lindsie replied. “Oh—one last thing. I obviously haven’t had time to send off the sample of your new victim’s blood to the state lab, but I did run a few comparison tests with the equipment I had here. In every aspect I can measure, they’re identical. It’s the same venom.”

“Same concentration?” Tara asked.

Lindsie shrugged. “I’ll tell you when the state lab tells me.”

“Thanks, Linds,” Tara said, turning to go as Glenn echoed her words.

The good thing about visiting Lindsie for answers was that her building was directly next to the sheriff’s office, and therefore not a long walk to go ahead and process what they had discovered.

“What do you think?” Tara asked as they walked. “I don’t know if this snake warrants a license for owning a rare animal, but I’ll look it up.”

“We can check out local zoos and wildlife centers, too,” Glenn said. “I’ll look up some more statistics on just how rare this snake is in this area. I’ve never heard of it before, but if they’re easy to find on the trails, maybe someone just needs to find and grab a wild one every time they want the venom.”

Tara shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said as she pushed through the doors of their office. “If they were that common, surely we’d have been called to more cases of rattlesnake death.”

“Not if they’re easy to treat,” Glenn pointed out. “Maybe they just head to the ranger’s station and get treated and we never hear about it.”

It was possible, she had to concede. “Still,” Tara mused, making it to her desk and pulling out her chair to

sit down. “You’d think we would at least know the snake existed.”

“You’d think.” Glenn shrugged. “I’ll look it up now.”

There was a tense silence as both of them turned on their computers and began fiercely typing and clicking their way through their work. Tara searched for exotic animal databases, finding a list of restricted breeds in their state and reading her way down it.

It was a long list, and she was familiar with most of it already—given that it was part of their job to respond if anyone was ever reported to own a tiger or an endangered rhino. But snakes seemed to be in short supply on the list. There were plenty of them, but the notes stated that only snakes which were not defanged or didn’t have their venom removed needed to be declared.

And of course, there was the factor that they always had to contend with on lists like this: that people didn’t necessarily declare a rare pet just because the law required them to.

“It doesn’t look like Hades Rattlesnakes are common,” Glenn said. “In fact, scientists don’t actually have a clear number on how many of them are out there because they usually stay away from humans. Their venom is used normally for killing small animals so they can more quickly drag them back to a safe place or swallow them whole.”

“I’m not seeing a lot of ways to track them in private ownership.” Tara sighed. “As for the venom, I’m guessing it’s the same as anything else—probably available on the black market.”

“There is one thing that comes to mind,” Glenn said thoughtfully, steepling his hands in front of himself and leaning his elbows on his desk. “Aren’t there, like, snake shows or something near the park?”

“Snake shows?” Tara repeated, not at all sure what that meant.

“Yeah, where they do demonstrations and let snakes crawl on your shoulders and stuff,” Glenn said. “I think a friend of mine went to it once. I’m sure he said it was near the state park.”

Tara started typing into her search bar. “Let me see... yeah, I’ve got it. Snakes and Shakes. It’s a one-man show about a five-minute drive from the park entrance. Looks like he’s a trained snake handler who puts on shows... Oh, wait!”

“What?” Glenn asked, leaning forward so he could move his head and see Tara’s screen.

She turned it as far as she could toward him to help out. “Look. Isn’t that the snake that Lindsie just showed us?”

Glenn squinted at the photograph—a promotional shot of the snake handler holding a rattler by the head and tail, lifting it in the air with a grin. “I’m not an expert, but it looks pretty damn close to me.”

“Then I think we have our lead,” Tara said, getting up from her chair with a grin. They were getting somewhere—and the thought that they might get this wrapped up before anyone else died was cheering. “Come on. We’ve got a snake show to visit.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jessy sighed, hesitating with her hand on the button to release her seatbelt.

Was she really doing this?

Surely she had to be mad to even consider this?

Jessy moved her hand from the belt and rubbed her forehead, trying to think. She'd driven here under the momentum of a sudden whim and now she was doubting herself completely. She wasn't even sure what she was doing.

The thing was, she wanted to believe Tara.

They had spent so long missing Cassie—all of the Strong family. They'd borne it in their own different ways. Their mom and dad hated to talk about it, and Jessy had emulated them, thinking it made her stronger to put it all in the past and leave it there.

The trouble with that approach was that it was never really, truly in the past at all.

Jessy flicked down the sun visor above the steering wheel and flicked up the mirror cover, looking at her own eyes in the reflection. The Strong sisters had many differences between them: Cassie was a brunette while her older sisters were blonde, Tara was always more headstrong, Jessy always took on more responsibility. Cassie had been growing tall and willowy while Jessy remained about half an inch shorter than Tara, making her feel like she was the dumpy one in the family.

But there was one thing they had in common.

Blue eyes.

Jessy closed her telltale Strong eyes and flipped the mirror shut.

Tara thought there was a chance they might find out what happened to Cassie. Maybe even find her—what remained of her. It wasn't a particularly cheery thought, but it still would feel better to have something to bury. Something instead of these loose ends that had haunted them all for the past decade.

It wasn't that Jessy never thought about Cassie at all. She knew Tara thought that she was closed off, that she'd simply turned off that part of her brain and pretended their little sister never existed.

But it wasn't like that.

Every day, Jessy found herself thinking about her. Wondering. Wishing. In some absurd way, even though it hurt—hoping.

So maybe, given that it hurt her every day anyway, it wouldn't hurt any further to just take a look into what Tara had found out.

Jessy looked down at the file again, sitting open on the passenger seat. She'd called the lab in Edgar County and spoken to the woman at the morgue—Lizzie or Lindy or something—and asked for it. The woman must have known who Jessy was and why Tara had ordered the DNA to be tested, because she'd sent it over right away.

The results bore out what Tara had said. The clothes had been dated to almost exactly ten years old, the packaging and remnants of food a clear match to the brands that were popular back then. Jessy hadn't even needed to check. She remembered eating them herself. She remembered everything about that day—that month—that long, hazy, drawn-out panic that seemed to pervade everything in their lives from the morning that they woke up and Cassie was gone.

This lead...

Even if the woman who was up in the cave back then knew nothing about Cassie, even if she had been up

there doing something completely innocent and left spare clothes behind for a good reason... there was still a chance she knew something that would help. That she had been in the right area at the right time, maybe seen the right person.

And it wasn't going to hurt to ask—not now that Jessy was operating within the actual boundaries of the law within the correct county.

Jessy closed her eyes, unbuckled her seatbelt, and opened the car door, forcing herself to get out and walk to the house before she changed her mind. She rapped her knuckles against the front door and held her breath, gearing herself up for what could turn out to be a fight.

The woman—Alexina Colenova—opened the door and saw Jessy, and her body language immediately became defensive and angry. She folded her arms across her chest, effectively blocking Jessy from entering by forming a bar against what little space she had left between the door and the frame.

“Oh,” she said. “It’s you. Is this about the complaint I made?”

“No,” Jessy said, then reconsidered with a tilt of her head. “Well, yes. I suppose it is.”

“Good. Is she getting suspended or something?”

“Not exactly,” Jessy said, knowing from experience that the best way to answer direct but uncomfortable questions was with vagueness—and swift evasion. “May I come inside? There’s something that I want to talk to you about.”

“Okay,” Colenova agreed, giving her a suspicious and testy look but stepping aside all the same. Jessy had the feeling she needed to tread carefully. This woman had already reacted badly to being questioned once... and why was that? she had to ask herself. Perhaps because she had something to hide?

Jessy made quick note of the house as she walked through to sit in a small and unpretentious living room. The place was well-kept but sparse. The furniture was clean but worn, as if it might have been hand-me-downs or thrifted. There were no framed photographs on the walls or on the shelving. All in all, the home spoke of a place that was hard-won and hard-kept, perhaps to an owner only just making ends meet.

A place like this, Jessy would have pinned it on someone who had started from scratch with no support: an adult who had grown up in the system, or a former addict who'd lost everything, or a divorced woman fleeing an abusive marriage under a new identity.

Someone who'd had nothing and now had just a little.

That was a good place to start with for an understanding of Colenova, and it also meant that Jessy was left feeling that she needed to tread even more carefully.

“So,” she said, sitting down in an armchair—making herself a more difficult object to remove from the home. “The thing is, although my colleague from Edgar County had no business coming here and talking to you without our cooperation, it transpires that she did actually have some valid questions to ask of you.”

Colenova had taken the sofa opposite her, but now she made a noise of disgust and rolled her eyes. “Really? I told her everything I was prepared to tell her. Whatever she was asking about, it's nothing to do with me.”

“Is that so?” Jessy asked, tilting her head up to meet her eyes. “Well, if you weren't involved with what was left in that cave, then it should be easy enough to prove. Did you live here in Canto Rodado County ten years ago?”

“No,” she retorted, but what she said next was considerably more reluctant. “I lived in Wyatt, in Edgar County.”

Bingo, Jessy thought, though it wasn't exactly incriminating in itself. Plenty of people would move around this small area, following jobs or lovers or family. "Alright. And have you ever climbed St. Bridget Peak?"

Colenova shook her head. Her arms were firmly crossed over her body again, her eyes sliding off to the side as if she couldn't keep up the eye contact. "Why would I?"

"Perhaps because you were a younger woman then, and we all do crazy, stupid things when we're young," Jessy said. "Things we later regret or feel shame about."

Colenova tossed her head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ms. Colenova, clothing was found in a cave very near to the top of St. Bridget with your DNA on them," Jessy told her firmly. "Can you explain that?"

Colenova shrugged. Her movements were becoming sharper, more aggressive. "I donate clothes all the time. Someone obviously bought them or was given them and never cleaned them up properly. That's not my fault if other people are skeevy."

Jessy bit her lip. It was a poor excuse. It was also very difficult to prove wrong.

"Can you explain why only your DNA was found on the clothes and not anyone else's?" she asked.

"Maybe they took them up there and left them when they realized they picked up the wrong size or something stupid like that," Colenova retorted. "Or maybe it was ten years ago and the rest of the DNA just, like, disappeared or something. I don't know how DNA works."

Jessy looked at her for a long moment and Colenova stared right back, practically bristling.

It was a flimsy explanation, but then the evidence was flimsy, too. Circumstantial at best. And the way Colenova spoke, it was definitely enough to introduce reasonable doubt.

But if there was one thing Jessy had learned from years of doing this job, it was that innocent people didn't come up with excuses to hide their tracks.

They just said they didn't know—because they didn't.

But still, it wasn't evidence.

She couldn't carry on down this track. Colenova was furious already. If she pushed, she was going to end up with a complaint against her own name, not just Tara's—and the press would have a field day with the fact that they were sisters, even if she didn't get kicked out of office.

“Thank you, Ms. Colenova,” she said with a bright and utterly fake smile, rising to her feet. “It's good of you to help us clear all of this up. I'll see to it that you're not bothered again unless something else comes up.”

“What does that mean, something else?” Colenova asked, following Jessy close to the door—as if she was afraid the other woman wouldn't actually leave.

“Oh, you know,” Jessy said with a small shrug. “Never say never. I don't like to make guarantees I can't back up. But this is the last time you'll be interviewed on this particular piece of evidence.”

Because what she really wanted to do was leave a little tiny bit of space:

For Colenova to be interviewed again if something else came up that implicated her all over again.

Jessy's gut told her that you didn't lie or get so angry about being questioned over something unless you had something to hide.

Of course, that didn't mean that the thing she was hiding had anything at all to do with Cassie.

Jessy got back into her car and slumped into the driver's seat, thinking. She glanced over at the file and flipped it shut, shaking her head at herself.

This was a waste of time. Colenova wasn't talking, and there was a high probability that she didn't have anything useful to say anyway. The idea that only one crime was committed in that summer ten years ago was preposterous. There were plenty of reasons why someone might not want to talk.

She shook her head again as she started the engine. No, she wasn't going to push this any further. There was nowhere to push if Colenova wasn't talking, and anyway, there was no guarantee all of this would even get anywhere at all.

She'd spent years getting over Cassie's loss. A decade. She wasn't even fully over it now, all these years later. If she gave herself hope now and it turned out to be false...

Jessy didn't know if she would ever get over it.

She had to move on.

She drove back to the station telling herself one thing over and over again.

It's over. It's been over for a long time. We're not reopening the case now. We can't.

By the time she pulled up outside her workplace and started to get back into work mode, she almost believed it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Visitor logs,” Tara muttered to Glenn under her breath.

He glanced at her, clearly not understanding the non sequitur for a moment.

“Over there,” she added, pointing, then stepped off to the side without waiting to see if he would follow. She knew he would.

“What kind of snake show has a guest book?” Glenn asked, wrinkling his nose slightly. Tara tried very hard not to find it attractive.

“I guess one that’s trying hard to have an online presence,” Tara said, tapping on the greasy, fingerprint-marked tablet that was bolted to the table in the entranceway. Waking up the screen, she found it did exactly what it promised according to the large sign that had been printed above it. It was a place for visitors to leave their happy thoughts and fond memories of the show, in exchange for being entered into a monthly prize drawing for a free show ticket.

Just one, Tara noted. A pretty good way to make people who had liked the show the first time around buy again.

“Let’s go through the previous entries before someone notices we’re here,” Tara said quietly, swiping off the entry form and finding herself on a web page designed for travelers and tourists to find fun things to do in their local area. The page for Snakes and Shakes was packed with responses, almost all of them five-star ratings. People always seemed to take the unspoken cue that if you were entering a drawing to win something, you had to give it the highest possible score.

Tara glanced over her shoulder at the reception desk. There was still no one there. There was only another sign displaying this week's show times as well as the instruction to ring the bell if you wanted to buy tickets.

"There," Glenn said, drawing her attention back to the tablet. He'd already scrolled down through some of the responses. "Mara Soke. She was here a couple of days ago."

"What?" Tara exclaimed, looking over the list to make sure Glenn was right. He was. "Two days ago—that would be the day that Jamie Heron was killed."

"What if she saw something that put her in danger?" Glenn asked in a hushed whisper. "Something that made the killer go after her and finish her off?"

"Like she witnessed the first murder?" Tara thought about it. "It would make her a target—but she never came forward, and that would mean the killer waited for two days to take her out. I can understand if they were waiting for an opportunity, but that doesn't explain why Mara wouldn't say a word."

"Maybe she didn't understand what she had seen," Glenn suggested. "Or she could have tried to blackmail the killer."

It was possible, yes. But... "Let's try to stick to what the evidence is telling us unless we can overcome reasonable doubt," Tara said. "At any rate, this is a clear link between one of our victims and the snake handler. We need to talk to him—right now."

"Excuse me," a woman said from behind them. "Can I help you?"

"Ah, yes," Tara said, rolling with it as she turned around, as if they hadn't been trying to evade notice. The woman was on the other side of the welcome desk, and she was dressed in a snakeskin-patterned outfit which very clearly set her out as an employee of the show. "We

were wanting to have a word with the snake handler who runs the show. Tolliver...?”

“Tolly Verve,” she corrected Tara with a brusque nod. “What’s it regarding?”

“That’s a private matter,” Tara said. “Where is he? Is he back there somewhere?”

“I’ll bring him to you,” the employee said, starting to turn away.

“No, no,” Tara insisted quickly, stepping close after her and rounding the side of the desk. “We’ll follow you.”

The woman gritted her teeth and clenched her jaw, but she must have seen that Tara was serious. “Fine,” she said, making no secret of the fact that she wasn’t happy with the arrangement.

But for Tara, it was essential. If this was their killer and he heard that officials from the sheriff’s department wanted to speak with him, then there was a high chance he would make a run for it and they would never catch him.

She and Glenn followed the woman through what seemed like a maze of corridors—everything backstage was very small, with cramped single-passage halls leading between a number of marked doors. Everything looked grubby and grimy, and Tara immediately felt concern for the snakes living behind those doors—especially those in the one marked hatchery. This didn’t look like the kind of place where responsible care was taken of the animals. She made a mental note to ask someone from animal control to come and check the place over, see if it was up to scratch.

“He’s in here,” the woman said, finally stopping outside a door marked “venomous.” Tara found herself swallowing for a moment, thinking about the possible implications of that sign. There were dangerous snakes on the other side. Potentially, there was a dangerous man. The combination could end up being deadly.

Still, this was her job. How would she catch a killer if she was too afraid to walk into a situation that only had the potential of danger?

Tara reached for the door handle and turned it, stepping inside.

A peculiar smell assaulted her nostrils as she walked in. She'd never smelled anything like it before, but if she had to put her finger on it, she would guess it was the smell of snakes—many, many snakes, all caged up together.

Because caged was the right word for it.

These were not high-tech temperature-controlled glass aquariums or environments that simulated the snakes' natural habitats. They weren't even being kept in spaces that gave them room to roam. In a sweeping glance, Tara took in plastic storage boxes that bore the silhouettes of writhing shapes inside of them, crates that appeared to be sealed and stuffed with straw and marked with names of breeds on the outside, and a small number of glass boxes that were so full the snakes barely had room to move.

This was a lot more than just a snake show, surely.

There could be no possible reason for them to have this many snakes for such a small local show.

Tara walked forward hurriedly, around a stack of plastic boxes—

And stopped, freezing in place, because for a moment she couldn't even believe what she was seeing.

"Tolly Verve," she said out loud, barking the words as a warning.

Because he was standing there, on the other side of the stack of boxes, immersed in a task to the point that he hadn't even looked up at her.

The task of using a cup to milk the venom from the teeth of a snake that he was holding with his other hand,

coaxing it to bite down so its venom would flow into the container.

He looked up at her, and for a moment they made eye contact—his going comically large. He knew he was busted.

And Tara saw the exact moment he decided to run.

Still, she was powerless to stop him as he lunged for the stack of boxes right next to them, knocking them all to the floor.

Tara heard herself let out an extremely unprofessional curse—a fact that was not completely shameful because she heard Glenn make a loud shriek at the same moment. The snakes flew out of the top bin as it toppled over, spraying across their side of the room. One of them landed on Tara's shoulder and she flicked it off with a yell, immediately recoiling as she realized that the floor was now covered in the creatures. She saw from the corner of her eye that Glenn, who had been standing more squarely in front of the stack, was brushing them off his body and out of his hair, but she barely even had time to be concerned for him.

The snakes were everywhere.

And if they were all venomous...

"We have to get out of here!" she said, hearing her own voice come out as a whimper, backing up away from the writhing and hissing mass that had been unleashed. Her back bumped against another stack of crates that rattled when she touched it, making her jump back and away.

Glenn had leaped in the other direction, clearing the snakes and getting himself closer to the door. "Come around!" he shouted at her, holding his hand out to indicate that she could run by the snakes on the opposite side—the place where Verve had been standing—to escape.

“Go after him!” Tara told him with a cry. She needed to find the right moment to spring past the writhing mass on the floor. Going around the snakes, there was still a chance one of them would lunge for her... and Glenn was far closer to the door, far better placed to catch their suspect.

“Not until you’re safe,” Glenn insisted, and his tone was so determined and time was running so fast that Tara made the decision not to waste any more of it arguing with him. If the best way to get him rushing after their suspect was to do what he said—

She dashed around the side of the still-stacked boxes, making it past the snakes and grabbing Glenn’s hand so that he could pull her with him as he stumbled out of the room. He reached out and slammed the door shut behind him, effectively trapping all of the snakes in there until they could find someone to come out and deal with them.

Tara didn’t wait to watch him do it. They were both safe now. There was only one thing left that mattered.

She ran down the twisting and turning hall after their suspect, unable to see him but basing her chase solely on instinct. If someone wanted to get away... they would have to focus on getting to their vehicle.

Tara nearly bowled the female employee over as she passed her again at the welcome desk, shoving by as quickly as she could and then sprinting for the door. The parking lot was just outside. If she could just get to him in time...

There!

Tolly Verve was in his car, fumbling with what looked like his seatbelt. He met her eyes through the window as she ran toward him, and he started the engine in a panic, letting the belt clatter back against the door beside him as he abandoned it. The car reversed at high speed, pointing directly at the exit onto the road—

The exit that she just happened to already be standing in the way of.

She wasn't going to back down.

Tolly looked at her, his hands white on the wheel, the car in drive. The engine was running. His expression behind the windshield was pale and stunned, pure fear. He knew he was caught and he knew it was over. The only chance he had was to drive out of there as quickly as possible and get far away before they could stop him.

He looked at her and met her eyes, and she didn't back down or jump out of the way.

She leaned forward.

He gunned the accelerator, driving right at her. She didn't move. She steeled herself. If he didn't brake hard, this was going to hurt—

He wasn't going to stop. She saw the look on his face and she just knew. What more could she expect from a man who had already killed others?

In a split second, she knew she was going to have to do something different.

There wasn't any time to think. Tara dove to the side, throwing herself to the ground—but as she did so, she took one thing and dropped it into the road.

The keys she wore attached to her belt by carabiner, including the novelty star-shaped keyring her sister had given her years ago—the spikes of which were strong enough, she hoped, to pierce a tire.

The last thing she saw was Tolly swinging the steering wheel in her new direction before she hit the ground.

It was the squeal of the brakes that alerted her that she wasn't going to be hit. Tara's eyes were shut tight in anticipation of the impact, her body braced to try to minimize the damage. It wasn't until she heard the

crunch of metal and brick that she opened her eyes again.

When she looked up, Tolly's car was smashed against the wall of his own building—the front of the car crumpled and steaming, the bricks crumbling in a few places. He'd not only crashed his car, but wrecked his own place of business, too.

Just deserts for aiming squarely at a deputy sheriff.

Glenn wrenched the driver's side door open and hauled him out bodily, snapping handcuffs onto Verve's wrists even as Tara joined them, her heart racing with the adrenaline of the near-miss.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Alright, Mr. Verve,” Tara said, leaning back in her chair. “Why don’t we start with you explaining what you were milking a snake for?”

Verve had the good grace to at least look as though he knew he’d done something wrong. He was strange to look at—tall and thin with a slight sway to him that made her think of a snake in human form. “I was extracting its venom,” he said.

“Why were you doing that?” Tara asked. Beside her in the interview room, Glenn folded his arms over his chest. Verve swallowed nervously.

“I’ve been selling venom and rare snakes on the black market,” he admitted. “I sell to collectors and natural medicine practitioners.”

“Natural medicine?” Glenn said, his tone suggesting he was skeptical.

“Oh, yes,” Verve said, nodding solemnly. “Some of them kill the snakes and grind them up, or use their skin as an ingredient. But some people swear by small amounts of venom as a curative.”

“Have you tried this medicine yourself, Mr. Verve?” Tara asked.

“God, no,” he said, shaking his head with a horrified look. “It’s all made-up nonsense. I’m not going to swallow a dried snakeskin.”

“But you’re quite happy to supply something that you know full well is poisonous and potentially deadly to consumers?” Tara said. She was building toward the main point. If you could be happy to passively cause a death, maybe you would be the type of person to graduate to actively causing it.

“I’m not responsible for what happens afterwards,” he muttered. He averted his eyes, looking down, unable to handle the truth of what he had done. “I’m not responsible if someone dies.”

“Actually, under the law, you are,” Tara said, scoffing at his complete lack of responsibility. “Especially when you’re the one who administered the toxin directly.”

Verve’s eyes snapped up to hers. “What? Isn’t this about a supplier? Why would you think I gave someone poison?”

“You tell us, Mr. Verve,” Tara said. “Why did you inject Jamie Heron and Mara Soke with venom?”

His eyes widened so far it looked for a moment as though his eyeballs might fall out. “Inject them? I didn’t inject anybody! I would never do that—it would be far too dangerous!”

“Where were you in the early hours of this morning?” Tara asked, changing tack.

His eyes shot to the side, a look that instantly put her on edge.

“Answer the question, Mr. Verve,” Glenn urged him. “You’re already on the hook for murder. Give us a reason not to put you behind bars for life.”

Verve swallowed. “I’d like immunity,” he said.

“Well, you’re not going to get it,” Tara told him. There was no point in beating around the bush. She didn’t personally have the power to make a deal with him; they’d need to bring in lawyers and get a prosecutor to find a judge who could sign off on it, and by the time they went through all of the hoops, Verve might decide not to tell them the truth anyway. Tara wanted him to feel so boxed into a corner on the murder charge that—if he really didn’t do it—he would tell them what he knew. Besides, she still wanted him charged with aiming his car at her. She was going to have to get all of her keys recut.

“Your only hope of leniency is if we put in a good word for you on the basis that you cooperated early.”

He swallowed hard and licked his lips. The movement made Tara think of a snake’s tongue tasting the air and she held back a shudder.

“I was meeting some contacts for a deal,” he said. “I sold them an order of a hundred common snakes for use in their medicine manufacturing business. I can give you their names and info.”

“What time was that?” Tara asked.

“Just before dawn,” he said, hanging his head. “We met up by the lake. There’s a cove—I had to use a boat to get there.”

Tara looked at him, thinking. A boat journey across the lake on the other side of Edgar County. There was no way he would have had time to get there and back in time to stab Mara Soke with a needle, if the timing he was giving them was correct.

It got him out of the murder charge. But it didn’t give him his freedom. He was still going away after admitting it.

Tara could sense that this was a much bigger case. The state would want to take it over. They probably had surveillance on some of the players he was trading with. Maybe he could turn state’s evidence after all and get out of the punishment that awaited him, or at least lessen his sentence.

But did it mean he was telling the truth? Or did he understand that psychology would suggest no one would ever admit to a crime, and was thus admitting to a lesser charge to avoid murder?

“Where were you in the early hours of yesterday morning?” Tara asked, going on a different tack. That was all she had. With more data, perhaps she could make a more informed decision.

“I was at work, preparing the snakes.” He shrugged. “I have to do all of the black market work outside of show times. It takes a really long time to milk snake venom. They only produce a little at a time and then it takes a month or two for them to build their supplies back up again in the gland.”

“Is there anyone who could verify your whereabouts?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I was alone.”

One last test. “And the day before?”

He seemed to think back. “I was doing the same. Actually—no, I woke up a little late and I was still rushing to work around dawn.”

He hadn’t been fazed by the question. The real killer would know that he hadn’t done anything three days ago and would wonder why they were asking. They would most likely hesitate or frown or at least think for a moment. Verve seemed to have answered in good faith.

Tara made the decision. He wasn’t their killer. She was sufficiently convinced—and she was getting a feel for him, besides. He seemed like the kind of man who wouldn’t have the guts to actually go through with a murder. He’d stopped short of running her down, after all.

“We’re looking for a very rare type of rattlesnake,” Tara said, taking the photograph Lindsay had given them out of her file and placing it in front of him. “A Hades Rattlesnake.”

“Oh, yeah, I have one of those,” Verve said, nodding. He became far more animated while talking about the snake. It was as though they were his true passion—except that he seemed to treat the animals awfully. “They’re endemic to this specific area. Very rare outside of the state.”

“Do you know of anyone else who has one?” Tara asked. “Private collector, maybe? You may even have

sold one?”

“Oh no,” Verve said. He shook his head with an expression that suggested she was a fool for even having the idea. “It was hard enough finding and capturing the one I’ve got.”

“Do you sell the venom?”

He shook his head. “No, we defanged that one and kept it for the show. It was before we started really doing the other stuff. This was supposed to be a legitimate business, you know? But we couldn’t get enough visitors in. We were going to have to close down—and this man approached me one day, asking if I’d ever considered farming snakes...”

Tara held up her hand to pause him. “Alright,” she said. “You can save the black market stuff for the state investigators who are going to come and talk to you about it.”

She turned to Glenn and nodded, starting to get up from her seat.

“Wait here,” he said to Verve, following her lead. “Someone else will come to talk with you shortly.”

Of course, that was a lie. There was a good chance Verve was going to be waiting in a cell for a couple of days before they could either transfer him somewhere else or get someone out to interrogate him.

Tara found she didn’t have any sympathy for him at all.

“What now?” Glenn asked as he closed the door to the interview room behind him.

“Now we go back to the state park,” she replied. “Because if this killer has struck twice in the same place, that’s where he must be. And without any other leads in sight, I want to go to where he hunts—and see if we can get inside his head.”

And maybe, she thought to herself...

They might even manage to stumble right on him.

At least she hoped they would, because as things stood, pure chance was the only way they were going to solve this case without another death.

Tara rubbed her hands over her face as they parked in the visitors' section at the state park. Without any special reason to go to a specific place—given that the crime scenes had both been combed over and then, necessarily, reopened to the public—they had to park where everyone else did.

“You tired?” Glenn asked. His tone was sympathetic rather than accusatory, but Tara couldn't help feeling the other way.

“I'm fine,” she told him. “Just frustrated.” Truth be told, she was tired—after a long manhunt yesterday and another long day today—but she wasn't going to let it stop her. The state police would be breathing down her neck again in the morning, probably asking why they had wasted their time on yet another unviable suspect, and she wasn't going to have anything to tell them. Not only that, but it was already getting later in the afternoon—and if she didn't bring in the right person before dawn, she had a horrible sinking feeling that they were going to have that third body on their hands.

“We'll get there,” Glenn told her, as he always did. “We just have to take our time and look at all the facts carefully. Sooner or later, we'll find that the killer made a mistake.”

“How do you do that?” Tara asked him. She hadn't meant to say it, but it had just come out. “How do you always stay positive and optimistic even when it looks like we're never going to solve the case?”

“Because I know you can do it,” Glenn told her, completely earnestly. “You’re the best investigator I’ve ever met. You’re smart, and you’re quick, and there’s not a criminal out there that I’ve come across that could outwit you forever.”

Tara blinked at him. A lump rose up in her throat and she swallowed it down. “Let’s get out of the car,” she said hurriedly, needing a moment so he wouldn’t see the emotion in her face.

Oh, Glenn, she thought, looking up at the distant shape of the hill that formed the main part of the state park and trying to slow down her rapidly beating heart.

“Where to, then?” he asked, joining her in the fresh air.

Tara took a deep lungful, exhaling it slowly. The air was clearer up here. It made you think better. She turned and swept her eyes around in a circle. “Up that way,” she said, nodding toward the hill and the trails that led to it. “The two victims were found in the area of the state park, inside the boundaries, which means the killer can’t be far away. This is his domain.”

Glenn shuddered. “I don’t like the sound of that,” he said. “Makes me feel like I’m walking into his reach.”

“Well, we are,” Tara said. They began to walk toward the welcome center, a large gap in the fencing that separated state land from the rest of the area. “Especially if he’s going to strike again. He could be anywhere around here, looking for a victim.”

“Great. I might just wait for you at the welcome center,” Glenn joked—but Tara put her arm out and grabbed his sleeve, stopping him.

“Wait,” she said. Her mind was racing, following through on the thought he had triggered. “The welcome center. Is this the only entrance to the park?”

“Yeah, for visitors,” Glenn said. “I guess animals can go in and out in other ways.”

“Then this is it,” Tara said, snapping her fingers. She turned to him with a lot more hope than she’d felt so far in the case. “This is how we’ll get him. The killer had to have come through the welcome center. Whether they’re in there all the time, maybe at the campsite, or they’re coming in day after day—this is the point where they have to enter.”

“So if they have any records...”

“We might be able to narrow it down and name the killer,” Tara said, grinning for what felt like the first time in a long time.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tara sighed and rubbed her forehead. “So you have no records whatsoever?” she asked.

The ranger who had helped them out earlier that morning shook his head. He had a guilty look on his face, though Tara suspected that was because he was regretting he couldn't help rather than that he'd actually done anything wrong. “Only for the campgrounds,” he said. “Visitors have to book a place in advance and show their ID before they camp. It helps with tracking down people who vandalize the park or leave their site in a mess when they leave so we can issue fines.”

“Do people ever sneak in and set up camp without checking in?”

The ranger coughed slightly. “Yes. We try to catch them all, but... there's only a few of us.”

Tara buried her head in her hands for a moment, leaning against a 3D map of the site. “So, we actually have no way of knowing who has been in and out of the park for the past few days at all.”

“Um, sorry. No.” The ranger actually backed off a step when Tara looked up at him, no doubt feeling the rage that was emanating from her.

That had been such a good thought. A fantastic lead. And now it was nothing.

“The logs for the visitors that camped for the past few days—we'll need to see those,” Tara said. “Anyone who was here both yesterday and today, at least.”

“Do you want me to start going through the names?” Glenn asked.

Tara hesitated. “Not yet. We can give those logs to a couple of the others to start looking through, maybe. Of course, there is one other category of person who does

come here through the welcome center and who will be logged.”

The ranger frowned. “No, there’s no one else.”

“You,” Tara said, raising her eyebrow pointedly. “The employees of the state park.”

“Oh,” he said, raising his eyebrows back. “I hadn’t thought of that. I can get you the employee roster.”

“I would appreciate that,” Tara said, watching him rush back off toward what was probably a staff room at the rear of the facility.

“What are you thinking?” Glenn asked, leaning next to Tara on the raised map. His elbow slotted nicely on top of the miniature welcome center. “It could be a staff member?”

“They’re here every day.” Tara shrugged, keeping her voice down even though the welcome center was mostly empty. There were a couple of tourists examining a wall of information about local wildlife, and one other bored-looking ranger standing at a desk near the entrance where people could ask for information. “They would be more likely to have the opportunity and means to come into contact with one of the Hades Rattlesnakes in the first place.”

“But the employees would be here all the time, week in and week out,” Glenn said. “Why would someone strike now?”

Tara paused. She could see what he was thinking. Maybe it was more likely to be a visitor—someone who had only come to the park in the last couple of days. But she saw it differently. There were lots of things that could trigger murderous intent, even if it had lain dormant for a person’s whole life until that moment. “We should check anyone who has been fired or started working here within the past couple of months,” she said. “That kind of change could easily be a red flag.”

“Good thinking.” Glenn nodded. They both looked up as the ranger returned with a small item in his hands. As he got closer, Tara saw it was a flash drive.

“Here,” he said. “All of our records from the last few months for visitors, and the last couple of years for employees.”

That was far more than they had asked for—maybe so much data it might muddy the waters—but Tara wasn’t going to complain. “Thank you,” she said, taking it. “We need to get this back to the office and start checking the names.”

“Just out of curiosity,” Glenn said, “if someone used to work here, but they were fired, they would still be able to come onto the park property, right?”

“Well, sure.” The ranger nodded. “They could just walk right on past. It’s not like we would be checking for them. It might feel a little awkward for everyone, but there’s nothing to stop them at all.”

“Right,” Tara said. “And was there anyone fired recently?”

The ranger thought back. “Well, just Archie King.”

“What was he fired for?” Tara asked.

“He was kind of creeping out the tourists,” the ranger said—and then his face went pale. “Oh.”

“Oh, what?” Tara asked in frustration.

“Um. Well, he was fired because whenever he saw tourists who weren’t treating the park respectfully, he would, uh, I guess—harass them and stuff?”

“What do you mean by harass?” Glenn asked.

“He would follow them and yell at them like some ornery old man,” the ranger said. “I thought it was funny at the time, but someone made a complaint.”

“Right,” Tara said, snapping into action. She wasn’t going to make the same mistake again of putting all of

their resources on one lead and losing time. “Glenn, you get this flash drive back to the station and start going through it. You check the employees, and get whoever else is back there to look through the visitors. We need to look for anything that would make someone a more obvious candidate for a violent attack. A history of mental illness, criminal history, recorded threats, anything like that.”

“What are you doing?” Glenn asked, though his suspicious tone suggested he already knew.

“I’m going to pay Archie King a visit,” she said firmly. “And before you say anything, I will be perfectly fine alone. That’s an order from your superior officer, Deputy Grayson.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Glenn said reluctantly.

Tara didn’t care. They needed to cover as many angles on this as they could.

She wasn’t going to let the killer slip away because she’d been overly cautious.

“I’ll call you if I need backup,” she said, already turning for the door. Privately, though, she knew she was very unlikely to call him.

Catching a killer all by herself would not only be an excellent end to the case and a way to save lives—it would also remind Sheriff Braddock that she was in line to be his successor. And if it shut the state police up as well, it would be the perfect way to conclude everything.

Now she just had to pull it off and stop a killer in his tracks—preferably before he managed to get anywhere near her neck with a needle.

Frustration stabbed a headache into Tara’s forehead as she jabbed at the screen of her cell phone, starting

the call.

“Tara? Do you need help?”

“No,” Tara said, sighing at Glenn’s panic. “No, I’m fine. The suspect isn’t even home.”

“He’s not?” Glenn said. She was even more annoyed that he seemed relieved. “Well, where is he? Did he get another job?”

“I don’t know, and there’s no one here at the property to ask,” Tara said. “Look, we need to take action. He could be at the state park right now, waiting somewhere to find his next victim.”

“What do we do?” Glenn asked. She could hear from his voice that he was ready to carry out whatever task she needed, and that made her feel considerably better.

“You haven’t found anything yet in your checks?” she asked, just in case.

“No, not yet—but there’s a lot of names to check,” he said. “Sometimes people only take the job for a short while and then find out they’re not cut out for it. There’s a surprisingly large number of people who fit our time requirements for the campground, too.”

“Alright, I don’t want to pull you away from that,” Tara said. “I’m going to talk to the rangers. They’ll know what Archie King looks like much better than we would from checking a photograph. If they search the park systematically, they’re much more likely to spot him.”

“The whole state park?” Glenn asked. “I mean—you know we had a lot of trouble yesterday. It’s big. And we had the helicopter.”

“No, just the trails and the campground,” Tara said, thinking as she went. “That’s where the killer has struck so far, and it’s also where we’re most likely to find him. My concern is that if we wait at all, King could take a new victim. We’ve got to hit the ground running.”

“Got it,” Glenn agreed. “Does he have any listed known relatives?”

“A brother,” Tara said. “As soon as I’ve mobilized the rangers, I’m going to try and track this guy down and see if he knows where his brother is—or if he can get him to voluntarily surrender.”

“Sounds good. I’ll call you immediately if a name flags up something.”

“Thanks. Hey, Glenn? You were right,” Tara said, turning to get back into her car.

“About what?”

“We’re going to get him,” Tara said fiercely, slamming the door behind her for emphasis. “He’s out there somewhere, maybe even stalking his next victim. I won’t let that happen. I’m not going to stop until we get him.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

He reached down and touched the outline of the mask inside his clothes, inside his pocket. The true face that he had to hide away from the world—but at least he could wear it closer to his skin than the clothing that defined him to everyone else out there.

He needed that touchstone today.

He needed to connect with his own nature and remind himself that everything was alright. That he was still the same person inside...

And that no one could still see him, because they only saw the outside.

He shoved his hands inside his pockets and began to walk casually along the outside of the campgrounds. Just strolling without much purpose, doing all he could to both spend time and avoid looking suspicious. All he could do right now was to burn time. There was nothing else he could attempt.

Not with the sheriff's department and the rangers crawling all over the whole place, stopping him from doing what he wanted.

He had seen the person he needed to remove from the state park half an hour ago and it still itched and burned under his skin. His fingers kept twitching as though they wanted to just leap up to his pocket and grab the syringe, put it into action. He couldn't let them. Not while he was being watched. Not while the whole place was being watched.

He was going to have to wait.

"Excuse me," the man said, coming up close to him. For a second there was a flash of fear through his veins, sending sweat to his armpits and the back of his neck, making the palms of his hands tingle. Had he been

made? Had the man noticed that he was being stalked? “You work in the welcome center, right? I thought I saw you there earlier.”

He nodded, inclining his head slowly. “Yes, I was there,” he said. “I saw you come through. I’m one of the park guides.”

“Oh, great!” the man exclaimed. A few steps behind him, his gaggle of two small children and a put-upon wife were waiting. They were fidgeting, hot and bored, already tired of walking. He had seen the father pluck the flower from the ground and tuck it behind his wife’s ear, as if he had no regard at all for the murder of a precious plant. It was already withered. A waste. “I was wondering if you could help us figure out where to go. We heard about some rare flowers that grow in the park and we wanted to go and see them.”

A spike of hot, white fear and anger exploded in his gut. The father was going to take his family and they were going to trample all over the beautiful flowers. He would probably pick half of them to adorn his wife’s limp, greasy hair.

He couldn’t let that happen.

“Oh, yes, of course,” he said politely, smiling and turning to face the vague direction of the trails. You could see them branching off from here, leading into the distance. “What you’ll want to do is to head up the furthest trail to your left, here.”

“Oh, great,” the father started.

He held up a hand to let him know he wasn’t done. “Once you’ve walked for about five minutes...” He turned and looked at the children and corrected himself. “Let’s say ten minutes, you’ll come to a twisted tree with dead branches. It was struck by lightning about fifteen years ago—it’s a pretty interesting sight in itself.”

“That sounds good, doesn’t it?” the father called back to his tribe, who were clearly uninterested.

“After the tree, turn onto the trail that appears to your right,” he said. He knew he was lying. The trail for the flowers went to the left, not the right. “After that, so long as you always take the right-hand fork, you’ll stay on the right track and reach the flowers.”

“And it’s an easy walk, right?” the father asked. The mother was looking at him in such a way that suggested she was perhaps the one with this concern, not wanting her children to have to walk far.

“Oh, yes,” he said.

The walk was not an easy one.

In fact, he had just deliberately sent them on one of the most challenging hikes in the whole of the state park.

He hoped that would be enough. That they would get a short distance along it and then give up and come back to the campground. They would probably argue and come home in a rage, the mother assuming that the father had taken them in the wrong direction. Since no one was recording this conversation, it felt safe to lead them astray. If they returned and sought him out, he would just tell them the mistake they had made: he said *left* at the tree, not right.

He watched the family go, turning to offer him a friendly wave, which he returned.

They would be back.

He didn’t need to follow them up the trail and beyond; he knew where they would be later.

And maybe the father might leave his group in search of supplies or facilities later today or tomorrow. If he did...

Then maybe the rangers wouldn’t be on patrol by then, and he could do what he needed to do to protect the park.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tara looked up at the office building in front of them, taking in the banners for multiple firms at the entrance and the neatly-set-up reception area. “He better not be lying to me,” she muttered.

“If he’s lying, we’ll go back and arrest him for obstructing justice,” Glenn replied from the passenger seat. “He definitely said here, right?”

Tara nodded, glancing down at her notebook to double-check her notes. “This is where Archie King’s job interview is, according to his brother.”

“Then let’s go find out,” Glenn suggested, opening the car door on his side.

Tara appreciated the idea of just getting on with it and making sure the lead was a viable one, but she was concerned about making too much of a scene—maybe causing more problems. If he was around other people, there was even a chance that their suspect would try to use them as hostages or harm them on the way out.

“We wait here for him to leave,” she said. She tilted her head, peering through the windows that looked into the lobby. Aside from the front desk which was manned by a young woman in a blue suit, there looked to be a number of low, comfortable sofas slung around a central coffee table for visitors to wait at. Tara zoned in on this area, immediately spotting a young man sitting there in a gray, slightly ill-fitting suit with one knee jiggling up and down. “That has to be him.”

As she watched, to her horror, the one thing that could possibly ruin their strategy happened.

The man looked around and straight at her, spotting the marked sheriff’s department car they were sitting in. He looked at them with so much interest and concern,

sitting up straighter and leaning forward as if he was about to run, that she had no doubt he was the man they were looking for.

The only kind of person who would have so much nervousness and alertness in one package had to be someone ready for a job interview...

Or a killer wanting to avoid a conversation with police.

“We have to go now,” Tara said, cursing as she reached for her door handle. “Now, Glenn, before he runs!”

They rushed together the short distance into the building, and Tara found herself drawing her neck up and pushing her shoulders back, wanting to give an air of authority.

Her eyes swept the lobby interior as she stepped inside and adjusted to the light.

“Archie King?” Tara said out loud, cutting directly to the chase, making a beeline for their waiting suspect. He was just sitting there. He hadn’t taken the opportunity to get out.

He blinked and nodded, maybe in spite of himself. Because he was surprised that they were there for him? Or because he was surprised that he had been caught so soon? “Yes.”

“We need to ask you some questions,” she said.

“Oh,” he said. He looked at the woman behind the desk and then back. Since she was staring at them with equal levels of confusion, it couldn’t have helped. “Um. Is this... about the job...?”

“No, this is an official investigation,” Tara said. She looked him straight in the eye as she said it. She watched his expression change.

He took a moment. There was fear, his face paling and then heating up. Tara braced herself. Was he going

to run?

But instead, he did something completely unexpected.

He laughed.

“Oh—good one,” he said, shaking his head. “Is this a test to see how well I perform under pressure? Wow. That’s a really great way to start an interview.”

Tara blinked. “I’m not part of this company,” she said.

“No, sure, I guess you’re a paid actor,” he said. He straightened up in his seat, facing them with more serious body language. “I’m messing up your lines. Sorry, go ahead—shoot. We’ll pretend I haven’t figured it out. So—you have questions for me?”

Tara moved her stance slightly, letting her hand rest on her gun. “Mr. King, I am not a paid actor. This is serious. I am the deputy sheriff for Edgar County. Either you answer some questions right now and here, or if you need convincing, I can take you down to the precinct and sit you inside a cell for a couple of hours first.”

King glanced at the front desk again as if he was looking for confirmation. He must have seen something in the woman’s face that caused him to doubt what he had already convinced himself of. He swallowed.

A bald-headed older man burst out of the double doors leading out of the lobby in a rush that made all of them swivel their heads around and look. “Alright, Mr. King—ah...?”

“Th-these people are here to talk to Mr. King about a crime,” the woman at the front desk stammered.

The interviewer looked at King with alarm, and then back up at them. “Nothing serious, I hope?”

“I’m afraid it may be,” Tara said. She didn’t want to make more of a scene than they needed to, but he was refusing to play along. If she had to, she was going to say it—*murder*.

“This is serious?” King asked, looking back at Tara again. “I didn’t—I mean—this is—I haven’t done anything!”

“That is a fact which we would like to establish for ourselves,” Tara said calmly. This situation felt like it was spiraling out of control, but she wasn’t going to let it. She stepped forward slightly. “If it would be possible for us to get a little privacy for this conversation, that would be much appreciated.”

“O-of course,” the bald-headed man responded. He turned to the front desk, beckoned the woman urgently, and quickly headed toward the exit. “We’ll wait out here until you’re done.”

King, meanwhile, was seemingly frozen to the sofa, unable to move or perhaps to process what was happening.

As with all suspect reactions, Tara was analyzing him with two minds: was he frozen in shock because he had no idea why they would ever want to speak with him? Or because he now realized that he was about to get caught?

It was always hard to tell—until the moment when it wasn’t.

“Right,” Tara said, relaxing her shoulders on purpose and putting her chin up, maintaining a powerful posture so that King would respond to her. In a situation like this when everything seemed to induce panic, humans were wired to look for a person who would lead them and take charge. If that was her, he would be much more likely to answer her questions cooperatively—and maybe slip up. “Mr. King. Let’s start with discussing your previous employment at the state park and why you don’t have it anymore.”

King’s shoulders slumped. “Do we have to talk about that here?” he asked miserably. “They’re probably listening.”

“I would think that being driven away in a patrol car would not do wonders for the impression you give at this interview either, Mr. King,” Tara said pointedly. Beside her, Glenn moved forward and took a seat to King’s left, opposite him but in the direct line he would have to take to try and make for the door. A quick lunge and Glenn would be in prime position to cut him off if he did try to run.

King sighed, his shoulders slumping even further. He was the picture of dejection. If his head hung any lower she would have thought he was trying to reduce a feeling of nausea. “I got fired,” he said.

Tara moved closer and sat directly opposite him. “Why?”

King sighed again and scratched the back of his head. “I take things too literally, I guess,” he said. “I was too harsh on following the rules. If I saw someone do something that was against the park rules I would tell them off. They would get kind of ornery back and then we’d end up shouting at each other because I didn’t actually have any power to do anything about it. Turns out you’re supposed to just gently enforce them or something. I don’t know how to do that. I just tried to stop everyone who I saw doing something wrong.”

Tara tilted her head a bit. She didn’t want to admit it at this point of the interview, but she had a little sympathy. It was a difficult line to tread. She suspected that what really happened was that the older or longer-term employees had learned it was more trouble than it was worth to try to enforce unenforceable rules. The general public, as she had intimate reason to know, were usually of the general opinion that the rules applied to everyone except themselves.

“How did it feel to lose your job for that?” she asked. Sympathetic or not, he was still a murder suspect.

“Terrible,” he said. “Like I was a complete failure. I’ve spent all day, every day, applying and sending out

resumes since then. This is my first actual interview.”

Tara had to wince internally. His first—and if he was innocent, they had ruined it for him. But what were they supposed to do? There was a murderer at large. If they tried to be careful and never disturb anyone who had the potential to be innocent, there would be a lot more lives at risk.

“Where were you this morning before dawn?” Glenn asked. Tara let him take the lead for a moment, watching King carefully.

“I was at home.” He shrugged.

“Was there anyone with you?” Glenn followed up. It was honestly frustrating, the number of people who didn’t give them all the necessary details for an alibi at first ask, when it was very clear that was what they were trying to establish.

“My mom was in the house,” he said, his voice quavering a bit. He must have felt pathetic. “I had to move back in with her because I was already behind on rent.”

“But did she see you? Was she with you at all times?”

He shook his head no. “I was just in bed.”

“What about yesterday?” Glenn asked. His tone seemed to imply he was trying to get King to work with him, trying to throw him a bone.

“No,” he said. “I was at home as well. I’ve been getting up to head to the Workforce and Business Center when it opens at eight.”

Tara frowned. “The Workforce and Business Center where?” she asked. They’d had one in Wyatt some years before, but in the economic downturn it had ended up closing. The nearest one now was clear on the other side of Canto Rodado County.

“The Doylesville Center,” he clarified.

A lightbulb went off in her head. “Do they log your arrival each morning?”

He thought for a moment. “I have to get a parking ticket. And then I work with one of the representatives every day on updating my resume and looking for training opportunities. So they would at least be able to tell you I was there.”

Tara looked at Glenn. “It’s a two-hour drive from the state park to Doylestown,” she said. “Even if you’re going fast.”

Glenn nodded. “I’d say you’re right about that,” he said. “Maybe even slower right now, with the construction blocking off the roads near Charlesboro.”

Tara snapped her fingers in agreement. They had it. There was no way someone could murder a person at dawn, or even just before it, and successfully make it to Doylestown on time to get there at eight. Not even if they stabbed someone in the neck and then immediately walked right out of the state park to their car, without pausing or getting changed.

King had to be in the clear.

“Alright,” Tara said, standing up with a sigh. “We’re going to check out what you’ve told us and confirm it to be correct. In the meantime, you might as well get back to your interview.”

“Thanks,” Kind said morosely. “As if I’m going to get the job now.”

Well, that’s up to you, Tara thought to herself. A man who could deal with that kind of pressure and sufficiently explain it with the gift of gab would be a shoo-in for a hire. But that wasn’t something you could teach—and certainly not in a single passing comment.

“Good luck,” was all she said, sincerely hoping it might actually make some small amount of difference. If the manager had been listening at the door, he’d know they had cleared King of what they’d suspected.

But really, she was the one who needed the luck now.

She and Glenn walked out of the building, nodding to the bald-headed man and his companion, who both scurried back inside immediately with more than a few curious looks. They walked back to the car and sat inside, closing their doors and cutting themselves off from the outside world.

Only then did Tara give vent to her frustration.

“God!” she cried out, hitting the side of the steering wheel to underline the word. “When are we going to find a viable lead?”

“Whoa!” Glenn said, leaning back away from her. “Where’d that come from?”

Tara groaned and leaned her forehead against the wheel, careful not to set off the horn. “Sorry. I’m just... I feel like we’re running in circles, chasing our tails, and not actually getting anywhere.”

“I know, and I feel it too,” Glenn admitted. “But some of this has got to lead somewhere, right? There’s a killer behind all of this. He’ll have made a mistake at some point.”

“There are plenty of killers out there who got away with it,” Tara said glumly. “Do you know how many unsolved crimes there are out there in the world? Or even just in the state? And most of them end up never getting resolved because there’s some hick sheriff’s department on the case who don’t have enough experience and make so many mistakes the evidence just gets lost.”

“Hey, we’re not hicks,” Glenn said, pouting slightly. “We’re doing our best. And we’ve had experience with murders before.”

“A very small number of cases.” Tara sighed, rubbing a hand over her forehead. “Thankfully. I mean, this county was a safe place for a long time. Now it just feels like every other week, we have a major case.”

“Maybe we just got better at spotting them,” Glenn said. “Lindsie’s very good at her job.”

Tara stared at him. “That’s not a cheerful thought,” she said.

Even so, her brain couldn’t help going back to thoughts of her sister.

Maybe Glenn was right. After all, Cassie had never been declared a murder—they’d never even found out what happened to her. What if there were cases like that littered through the county’s history? Murderers who got away scot-free because the coroner didn’t have enough experience to spot an injection mark or the sheriff’s department didn’t have the resources to go out and find the body?

And if the reason her sister’s disappearance had never been solved was because it had never been correctly investigated, did she have any chance at all of ever finding any answers now that so much time had passed?

Maybe Jessy was right about all of this. Maybe Tara just had to stop looking. Stop torturing herself. What had happened wasn’t her fault—she had enough distance and maturity now to understand that, even if her subconscious didn’t really fully believe it. Maybe instead of trying to go over the case again and spending potentially years of her life on a wild goose chase that would lead nowhere, she would be better off investing her time in a good therapist.

Maybe she needed to just move on. Focus on the cases that she could solve today. Make sure no one else ever had to go through the pain that she had gone through.

“I think it’s a good thing that we’re getting better at our jobs,” Glenn said, shrugging. “What do you want to do now?”

Tara sighed. Right. Back to the present. “Well, so far as I can see, we don’t have any—”

She cut herself off, looking down at her pocket. Her cell phone was ringing. She grabbed it out of her pocket, pleased she hadn’t started to drive yet. The caller ID told her it was the phone from the lab. “Hello, Lindsie?”

“Tara,” Lindsie replied. She sounded like she was talking faster than usual—a sure sign that she had found something interesting. “I got the results back from the state lab for our second body, Mara Soke.”

“Go on,” Tara said, giving Glenn a significant look.

“It’s the same venom, and still a fatal dose,” Lindsie said. “But get this: it’s a lower concentration than the last one. She had time to take a few steps before she died.”

Tara raised her eyebrows. “What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure,” Lindsie said. “You know what I always say.”

“Right. You work with the bodies, it’s my job to do everything else,” Tara said, with a small sigh. It would be so much easier if Lindsie could interpret the evidence, too. “Thanks, Lindsie. A clue is a clue.”

“You’re welcome,” Lindsie signed off happily, ending the call. Her work was done. She had a reason to feel good about herself.

“What is it?” Glenn asked.

“The second body had a smaller dose of the venom in her system,” Tara relayed thoughtfully. “What does that mean? Is he experimenting with the quantities?”

“Maybe he made a mistake,” Glenn suggested. “Or maybe he tried a lower dose because the victim was a woman and had a smaller body mass.”

“Hmm.” Tara thought about it for a moment. “Well, I don’t know what it means yet. But if we’re going to get any answers, I think we have to return to where the killer strikes. Let’s go back to the state park.”

“Good idea.” Glenn nodded, reaching for his seatbelt. “Maybe we’ll have another revelation. We can only have so many before it’s statistically likely one of them will pay off.”

“I hope you’re right,” Tara muttered, putting the car into drive and heading out.

It was already late afternoon. If they didn’t catch some kind of break in this case soon...

She was scared that it would be night, and the investigation would become so much harder—and in the morning, their killer would leave them another victim on the trails.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tara walked through the entrance to the park, turning her face to the heavens to catch some of the warm and gentle rays of the sun. It was over the apex of its path through the blue sky but still a ways off from coming down. They were still in some of the peak weeks for long days, which gave her a little hope.

A tiny, infinitesimal bit of hope, but it was something.

“What are we looking for?” Glenn asked, glancing around. There were a few people heading into the park and a few heading out around them. Given the size of the space, it wasn’t enough to be considered busy, but there were visitors around.

“I don’t know yet,” Tara said. “I just want to get a feel for the killer. Maybe we’ll see something useful, like figuring out the employee records.” She made a casual gesture toward the welcome center as she said the last words, turning her eyes to follow the path of her hand.

There were signs posted along the outside of the welcome center: don’t take anything from the state park, don’t leave litter behind, don’t feed the wildlife. *Don’t get murdered* would be a good addition, she thought. Maybe not as popular with the tourists as the others were.

The information on the signs was good—mostly warnings, but some of them were safety-related. Another sign warned people not to go beyond the safety barriers to take pictures and to obey any and all signs they saw along the trails. The next—

Tara stopped walking.

“What?” Glenn asked.

“Dangerous animals in the park,” Tara read aloud. “Do not approach these animals: bears, mountain lions—rattlesnakes.”

“Oh!” Glenn said. “Like our snake venom victims. It’s kind of ironic. They didn’t go anywhere near the snakes.”

“Yes, but look at the rest of the sign,” Tara said. There was a small box with extra information—she pointed to it now. “If you are bitten by a snake, you must proceed to the ranger’s station as soon as possible for the antivenom as there is a chance the snake may be venomous.”

“Right?” Glenn asked.

“Anyone who knows about the antivenom would also, necessarily, be aware of the deadly qualities of the snake,” Tara said. “We should head to the ranger’s station and talk to them. See if anyone has any particular qualifications which might make them seem suspicious.”

“We’ve already checked all of the other park employees,” Glenn pointed out. “None of them were flagged for previous convictions or mental health issues.”

“So, it stands to reason that the person we’re looking for has fallen through our checks so far,” Tara responded. “We have to look outside of those parameters if we’re going to find them.”

“Alright,” Glenn conceded with a nod. “The ranger’s station is about a fifteen-minute walk into the park.”

“Then let’s get there now,” Tara said decisively, turning to walk.

“What would be the motive for someone in the ranger’s station to kill people if they usually save them?” Glenn asked.

There was something about the phrasing of the question that gave Tara pause. While they walked, she let her mind run through the track it was following, humming out loud to let Glenn know she was thinking.

Killing people, saving them. There was something about that juxtaposition that spoke to her.

Savior complexes were real and documented things—and the motive behind numerous serial killers she'd heard of. There were EMTs or doctors who wanted people to get hurt so that they could be there to save their lives, making themselves into heroes. There were also angels of death or angels of mercy, as they were variously known—doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals who gave patients lethal injections or smothered them.

Saving, killing—there was a possibility there.

“What if someone is injecting people with the venom in order to try to save them?” she mused out loud. “Like, seeing if they'll be able to get to the ranger's station in time for the antivenom? That would allow them to save the day and be congratulated and praised.”

“Aren't they using a little too much?” Glenn asked skeptically. “Like, by an order of magnitude?”

“Yes, but they brought the concentration down in the last dose,” Tara pointed out. “If they don't have access to the right calculations... well, in fact, I don't know if *anyone* out there would know the exact calculations for the level of venom needed for instant death, given how rare this particular species is. Maybe they're experimenting with the level of venom to use. They reduced the amount for Mara Soke to see if she would survive.”

“That's pretty risky,” Glenn scoffed. “Anyone who wanted to save lives would surely not want to risk them that badly.”

“No, but it's not about saving lives,” Tara argued. At least this discussion was helping to eat up the path under their feet, bringing them closer to their destination. “It's about being a hero or a savior. They don't really care about the person that lives or dies. They care about the way people will react to them. It's something to dream about, really—people thanking you for saving their lives.

Naming their children after you. It would be like being in a movie.”

“Wouldn’t someone like that go into the medical profession?”

“Many do—I’ve read about cases,” Tara told him. “But if you’re not smart enough to get into medical school, or you dropped out, or you want to get to be a hero without having to do all the hard parts—this is a good outlet. I mean, for them. Not for the victims, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Glenn said, flashing her a wry grin. “But isn’t it a stupid approach in the first place? They’re counting on the victim knowing they have to get to the ranger’s hut to get the antivenom, when they won’t even know what happened to them.”

“I have to figure that someone who would do this has giant-sized delusions in the first place.” Tara shrugged. “I guess it would be even more impressive if someone runs up to you with weird symptoms, and you save them based only on that. You’d look like a superhero.”

“Well, that makes a kind of twisted sense. But how are we going to be able to tell?”

“We could do a bit of pretend,” Tara suggested. “We could rush in and say you’ve been bitten and see who administers the antivenom, and then ask them to come back for questioning.”

“That could spook the real person if we get it wrong—what if there are multiple people trained in administering the antivenom?” Glenn said. “There must be a gentler way to do it. Besides, I don’t want to actually get injected with anything. It might be bad for me.”

Tara chuckled lightly. “Alright, alright. How about we tell them we need to talk to the people who are nominated for antivenom duty because we need to make sure they know what to do if another attack happens?”

“That could work.” Glenn nodded. “I think I see the ranger’s station up ahead.”

Tara followed his gaze. The building was still just a speck against the landscape—a brown spot of natural wood—but she was sure he was right. “Then we’ll do that,” she said. “And we’ll take their names because we need to create a register of anyone who can help if things do come to that point tomorrow morning. Maybe we can request the staff roster so we can see who was around on each of the mornings that our victims died.”

“I like your way of thinking,” Glenn said with a grin, even though they’d really come up with it together.

“Just stick to the script and we’ll be able to fool them,” Tara said. “Let’s not talk about it again in case someone in there might overhear us.”

“From here?” Glenn asked, casting a doubtful look over at the still-distant station.

“They’re rangers,” Tara said pointedly. “They range.”

Glenn chuckled but waved a hand of concession, and said nothing further.

It was strange approaching the building in silence from so far away. Tara felt nerves begin to build in her stomach. What if she wasn’t convincing enough and the killer worked out why they were there? What if he just decided to attack them in order to escape?

The nerves bubbling up in her stomach weren’t enough to stop her. They needed to do this. If they could find the killer tonight, before the sun went down, then Tara knew they would save at least one life. And that was what this was all about—what her whole job was all about.

She exchanged one final and meaningful look with Glenn outside the station, then stepped inside with a deliberately much more casual demeanor.

“Hi,” she called out, glancing around the room. There were three rangers in the station—it looked like one of them was there at all times, if not two, while a third appeared to be cleaning some kind of equipment.

“Hi, Deputy Sheriff,” responded the first one she had noted, who was sitting behind what seemed to be a welcome desk. He obviously recognized her rank from her uniform. “Can we help you with something related to the deaths?”

“You can.” Tara nodded. “We’re doing the rounds to try to prepare for tomorrow as much as we can.”

The second ranger, who had been reading a battered old paperback book, put it down on the table to give them his full attention. “Do you think someone else is going to die tomorrow?”

Tara nodded solemnly. “Unfortunately, given that we haven’t made much progress yet on the case, it looks like we have to prepare for that eventuality.”

“Wow,” he said, looking off into the distance to process the idea. “That’s terrible.”

“Well, we need to do what we can to reduce the risks,” Tara said. She glanced around decisively. “Who here is in charge of administering antivenom to anyone who comes in search of help?”

“All of us,” the ranger from the front desk said. “We’re all trained in it. That way, if someone comes, we can help them no matter who’s here.”

“Great,” Tara said. “And you have enough antivenom in stock in case someone comes in tomorrow?”

“Yeah.” The other ranger shrugged. “I guess so. I mean, we always have the same amount in stock. If it gets used, we order in some more.”

“Has anyone had to come in recently?” Tara asked. She looked at all three of the rangers to see them shaking their heads.

The third ranger, the one who had not spoken—he was getting her attention the most. He had stopped cleaning the machinery he was working on and was watching her, hands on the table, though he had tried to

continue for a while until the conversation got serious. Was he trying to avoid attention?

“I should take down your names,” Glenn said, lifting his notebook. “Just so we can record who we’ve spoken to. Are you all going to be here tomorrow morning?”

“I’m on leave tomorrow,” the one with the book said. “It will be Tommy in my place. Do you want his full name as well?”

“That would be great,” Glenn replied, going around and jotting down their info. “Were you three on duty the past few days, or does it cycle?”

“It cycles, but this week is our shift to be in the hut,” the front desk man said. “All three of us have been here all day since Monday.”

Already, Tara was homing in on the quiet one: Taeho Kim, he gave his name as. He shook black hair out of his eyes slightly as he spoke, his tone quiet and hushed. Tara interpreted his body language as nervousness, a desire to fade into the background. The other two were far more talkative and open. There had to be something there.

“Thanks for your help!” she called out cheerfully as they moved back toward the door, lifting a hand in farewell. “Hopefully, you won’t be called on tomorrow, but just stay ready.”

“We always do,” the man at the front desk said, puffing his chest up a little.

Tara stepped outside with Glenn following her.

It was almost torturous, having to wait until they were far enough away that they couldn’t be overheard to make the call.

Tara put her phone to her ear as soon as she was sure they had walked far enough—almost halfway back to the parking lot. It rang just once before connecting. “Deputy Bryant speaking.”

“Bryant, it’s Deputy Sheriff Strong,” Tara said. “I need you to look up a name for me.”

Glenn made a gesture toward her phone, a frantic kind of circling motion, and Tara pulled it down from her ear to put it on speakerphone. They both listened as they walked.

“Go ahead, Deputy Sheriff,” Bryant said.

“Taeho Kim,” Tara told him. “That’s T—A—E—”

“I got it,” Bryant said. “He’s in our system.”

“He has a record?”

“From about fifteen years ago,” Bryant replied.

“Juvenile stuff. It’s sealed, so I can’t see what it was, but it looks like he spent time in a juvenile detention center in Maine.”

“Maine?” Tara asked in surprise. “Why’s he here?”

“I don’t know, but the system says he was an EMT in the local area about five years ago,” Bryant replied. “He was called as a witness in a trial to testify about the injuries of an assault victim.”

“Anything else in the system?” Tara asked.

“No, that’s it.”

“Thanks, Bryant—good work,” she told him, knowing it was important to boost his self-esteem now and then, and ended the call.

“An EMT,” Glenn said thoughtfully.

Tara stopped walking. “He could be the person we’re looking for. A savior complex that maybe got him booted out of that line of work, so he came to the state park. He would have the know-how to inject someone quickly and efficiently every time. He might even know enough about medicine and dosages to know how to kill someone. He was here on duty the past couple of days, so he had both the means and the opportunity.”

“It works, especially if he wasn’t good enough at the job to keep it,” Glenn said. “Maybe he’s made mistakes before. Maybe he lost his job because of that—and he’s making the same mistake now by not giving them enough of a chance to get help.”

Tara looked up at the sky thoughtfully. The evening was approaching rapidly; another half hour and she estimated it would be completely dark. “We have to bring him in for questioning,” she said. “If we leave him out here, he might take his next victim.”

“Then let’s get him,” Glenn said, turning and heading back in the direction they had come from.

The ranger’s hut seemed to loom even larger and more imposingly on the horizon as they approached it this time. Maybe it was the fact that Tara felt a desperate hope now that it housed their killer—that this thin thread they were grasping would stop him from killing again. Either way, this time, it wasn’t dread that flowed through her veins.

It was anger—and determination to stop him before he killed anyone else.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

“Back again so soon?” the ranger at the front desk joked, looking up from whatever he was doing on the computer to fix them with a twinkling eye.

Tara wasted no time. She was no longer here to play nice or put on an act. “Taeho Kim,” she said, addressing the quiet ranger directly. “We need to ask you some questions. I’d like it if you would come with us to the sheriff’s station.”

“To the station?” he asked, blinking. “Why?”

“As I said, we have some questions for you,” Tara repeated. She didn’t want to be drawn in right now. She wanted to get him back to the station, where they could question him at length in the right environment.

“You can ask me here,” Kim said dismissively, turning his attention back to the tiny cogs that he was cleaning of grease.

“Where were you this morning around dawn?” Tara asked. At least she had permission to interview him right here in front of his colleagues.

“No comment,” Kim said. He had a light hint of a smirk around his mouth, as if he thought he was getting one over on her.

Why would he be trying to toy with her like this if he had nothing to hide? Everyone else who worked at the state park had been nothing but helpful. They’d wanted to save lives.

“If you want, I can arrest you,” Tara told him. “Is that what you would prefer? I, for one, would like it if you would cooperate instead.”

Kim snorted, looking up at her with complete indignation. His nostrils flared. “What the hell have you got to arrest me for?”

He was doing it like this?

Fine.

Tara could play.

She wasn't going to just back down—not by any stretch.

“Murder,” she told him flatly, reaching for her belt where both her gun and her handcuffs were attached.

“What?” he asked flatly. He dropped the cog and the cloth he was cleaning it with, putting his palms on the table. “You're wasting your time.”

Tara wasn't going to be drawn into an argument. There was no point in trying to counteract his statements. The outcome needed to be the same either way—it wasn't like he was going to talk her out of doing this. “You need to come with us, sir,” she said firmly. She had her eye on the other rangers in her peripheral vision. Both of them had stopped what they were doing and were watching them closely.

But neither of them had spoken up or moved. It didn't feel like they were going to intervene to try to stop Tara and Glenn. That was good. The last thing Tara wanted—would ever want—was for this to turn into some kind of shootout.

“You can't arrest me,” Kim scoffed. “I work for the state. You'd better send the state police if you want to talk to me.”

“We've been invested with the authority to handle this case by the state police,” Glenn said. It was mostly true, even if it missed the part that the authority would expire as soon as the actual state police arrived.

“This is crap,” he said dismissively. He reached for the cog again as if he was just expecting them to go away. “I'm not talking to you, and I'm not going anywhere. I haven't done anything. I've just been sitting here, doing my job.”

Tara turned to the ranger at the front desk. “Where was Mr. Kim at dawn this morning?” she asked.

The ranger swallowed. His eyes flicked nervously toward Kim. He clearly was torn between honesty and supporting his co-worker. Getting arrested for perjury or losing a friend.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “He was out on patrol.”

“Gary!” Kim exclaimed, leaping to his feet with an angry movement. The chair behind him scraped back across the floor.

“Sorry, man,” he said. “It’s true, though. It doesn’t mean I think you killed anybody, but you have to be honest with the police.”

Tara took the handcuffs off her belt and raised an eyebrow.

“Screw this,” Kim said, turning away abruptly. For a split second Tara had no idea what he was trying to do. Did he think that just turning his back on them would be enough for him to get away? That they would just shrug and say there was nothing they could do and leave?

And then she saw it.

Another door at the back of the hut. She’d assumed it led to a bathroom or another kind of facility, but from the way he was making a beeline toward it, there was only one possibility.

It led outside.

“Hey!” Tara shouted. She exchanged a rapid glance with Glenn—enough to communicate that he should start moving after Kim, which he did—and then spun on her heel.

She was not going to try and blunder across the room after him like every clumsy cop in a heist movie and just let him get away. She let Glenn chase him down from behind.

She dashed out the front door, then ran headlong around the side of the building toward where he would be coming out.

He must have known something about the terrain that she didn't—perhaps that there were better hiding opportunities to the left of where he exited. And somehow, call it kismet or karma, she had decided also in that split second to run to the left of the building.

Both of them were going full pelt when they saw each other, and he didn't have enough time to properly correct his course. He jerked to the side, changing direction like a rabbit running from a fox, but the change slowed him down.

Just enough for Glenn to tackle him from behind, sending them both flying to the ground and landing in an undignified heap.

For once, Tara was glad it wasn't her taking the body blow.

She came to a stop beside Kim and grabbed one of his arms, wrenching it up and snapping a cuff on it before he could get enough of his wind back to get away.

“Right,” she said. “Do you feel like talking now? Let's get him back to the car, Glenn.”

Tara sighed heavily and put the file she had been pretending to read down on the table.

“Excuse me?” she said, even though she knew what she had heard. She was just hoping that Taeho Kim would have second thoughts about saying it out loud again in this interview room.

“I'm not talking to you,” he repeated. “I want to talk to the state police.”

The man had balls, she had to give him that.

There weren't a lot of things they could do from here. It was his constitutional right not to say anything that might incriminate himself, so she couldn't force him in any way to talk. Asking for a state investigator would often be laughed down, but it was his right to ask for it—and in this case, things were complicated even further by the fact that the state police really were supposed to be taking over.

“Alright,” Tara said. She shrugged and got up from her chair, trying to pretend that she didn't care anyway. “You sit there and wait for a state investigator to come along. Just know we might have to hold you for longer than normal in order to accommodate your request. We've been waiting two days for them already, so get comfortable. And if you start to get a little bored, you can always change your mind and shout out for us.” She paused near the door with those last words, using her inflection to imply that there was a chance they wouldn't come when he got desperate.

He didn't say a single thing, just smirked.

Goddammit, Tara thought. He wasn't fazed by her threat of a long wait at all.

She turned and left the interview room. Glenn was standing just outside with his hands folded over his chest; he'd been watching from the room next door. She groaned and handed him the file, for a moment wanting to lean on him. If they had been just simple friends and colleagues she might have done it. Instead, she pulled herself back at the last minute, horrified at the thought that he might read too much into the gesture.

“We'll get him,” Glenn said grimly. “One way or another.”

“In the meantime, we need to start building up the case against him,” she said. “Did you send Kay and Walker to his home?”

Glenn nodded. “They’ve already arrived. They got inside with his key.”

“Great.” Tara put her hands on her hips to think for a moment. “Let’s go over everything again.”

“Everything?” Glenn asked quizzically.

“Everything,” Tara repeated. “Right from the beginning, like we were investigating for the first time. There must be some other piece of evidence we can use that might help us figure out the case and get him put away for good.”

Glenn nodded. “Got it. I guess we should look into his background a bit more as well.”

“That’s right,” Tara said. They fell into step beside one another, walking back to their desks. “I’m going to call the hospital administrator to see if I can find out why he stopped being an EMT—whether he was fired. I want you to go through every single detail from the crime scenes—anything at all that might indicate something we’ve missed or forgotten to take into account.”

“Got it,” Glenn replied. He pulled out his chair and sat at his desk, pulling out his notebook as he fired up his computer.

Tara knew she could trust him to get on with the task without supervision. It was one of the things she enjoyed most about being partnered with him—they could achieve true division of labor, which meant everything was done much quicker. She used her cell phone to quickly search for the contact info for the hospital, dialing the number on her desk phone and waiting.

There was a long pause as the phone rang. There was no immediate answer. Tara glanced out the windows at the back of their office. By the time they had taken Kim back to the car, driven him here, gotten him set up in the interview room, and finally spoken to him, it had gone full dark outside. The administrator was almost certainly not at her desk.

They weren't going to have to wait until morning, were they?

There was a change in the dial tone that made Tara sit up straighter—a quickening and rising in pitch, like something had just happened on the line. Only a moment later, she heard the unmistakable sound of a connection.

“Hello?”

“Hi, this is Deputy Sheriff Strong. I'm trying to reach the hospital administrator,” Tara said, wondering if she'd managed to get the right person.

“Um, yes, that's me,” the woman replied. “We have a system that sends recognized emergency numbers through to my cell, so I'm not at work right now. Is there something I can help you with?”

“Possibly,” Tara said. “I'm looking into the background of a former EMT who worked for the hospital.”

“Oh, I see,” the administrator replied. “Well, I'll do my best, but I don't have access to my personnel files until the morning.”

“Do you remember an EMT named Taeho Kim?”

“Yes!” the administrator exclaimed. She sighed a little, a relieved sound. “Are you doing a background check because he's looking for a job with you?”

A job? Why would she assume that? “No, I'm afraid this is in connection with an open investigation.”

“Oh,” the administrator said—then her voice changed to one of more clear alarm. “He's alright, isn't he? He hasn't been attacked, or...”

“No, he's fine,” Tara said. She was beyond puzzled by the reaction so far. “Ma'am, do you remember Taeho Kim well?”

“Yes, of course,” she said. “He was one of the best EMTs we've ever had. When he left, his colleagues actually threw him a big party—I went to it. He has quite

a reputation. Honestly, it's a crying shame that he couldn't continue his work."

"Why couldn't he?" Tara asked, frowning. This was getting curiouser and curiouser.

"Well, because of his condition," the administrator said. "The shaking in his hands. It's only going to get worse as he gets older, unfortunately. It doesn't get in the way too badly for most types of work, but being an EMT, he needed to be able to do things with precision."

"What kind of things?" Tara asked, feeling a dawning sense of horror regarding their suspect.

"Like being able to inject patients or set up a drip or transfusion," the administrator said. "It was so sad when he realized he wouldn't be able to do it anymore. It's a congenital condition, you know. Hereditary. He apparently watched his father go through life with the same thing. The progress can be slowed down, but you can never go back to the steadiness you had before."

Tara rubbed her forehead with a sigh. "Alright. Thank you."

"That's alright. So, is he...?"

"Kim is absolutely fine," Tara told her. "I'm sure he'd be grateful for your concern. If you'll excuse me, I have more calls to make."

"Oh, of course!" the administrator replied, but Tara didn't hear anything else. She was already ending the call.

"What was that?" Glenn asked warily. He must have seen her attitude change—her shoulders slump.

"Taeho Kim has a congenital disorder that makes his hands shake," she said glumly. "He had to leave his job as an EMT when he became unable to handle needles."

Glenn audibly gasped. "So that means..."

"He can't be the killer," Tara said. She groaned and threw her head into her hands. "Why did he have to kick

up so much of a fuss and waste so much of our time?”

“I guess he felt like his reputation was being challenged,” Glenn said, able to be empathetic as always. Tara wasn’t feeling quite so charitable. “But... why did the other ranger say everyone there could administer antivenom?”

Tara paused, then groaned, holding her head. “He didn’t,” she said. “He told us everyone there was *trained* in administering antivenom. If Kim was always on duty with at least two other rangers, there would always be one person in the hut at minimum who could administer it. With his experience, he’s probably the one who *gives* the training.”

It was dark outside, and maybe they had missed their chance to stop the killer before the morning. All because they’d heard what they wanted to hear instead of actually questioning their assumptions. It was a stupid, rookie mistake to make, and Tara’s head ached at the thought she had made it.

“We need to go back to the beginning,” Tara said, feeling like she wanted to sweep the entire contents of her desk to the floor and start again. “Every hunch, every thought, every lead. What have we missed?”

“I’ve been going through the files,” Glenn said, patting a pile of paper to his side. He’d gone through it quickly, Tara thought—but then again, they hadn’t had time to make that big of a paper trail. “There’s a few things that stood out, although I have no idea if they’re useful.”

“It’s all useful. We just have to figure out how,” Tara said. “Go on—shoot.”

“Okay. First thing,” Glenn said, lifting up a crime scene photograph. “The trampled flowers at the first scene. We assumed that Jamie Heron had stepped past the sign warning about the flowers in order to take a selfie.”

“His cell phone camera roll bore that out,” Tara said. “There’s no evidence of anyone else in the shots, though.”

“Right.” Glenn nodded. “Like I said, I don’t know if any of this means anything. There’s something we hadn’t considered at all in the second victim. Lindsie put it in her report, but I guess it didn’t stand out. Mara Soke had a piece of rock in her pocket—remember?”

“A piece of rock?” Tara repeated, wrinkling her brow. She’d completely forgotten, but what did it even mean—if anything?

Glenn lifted up the photograph to show her. It was a flat, small piece of rock, clearly something that had chipped off a larger piece. There was actually a sharp-looking edge on it, though it obviously had never gotten the chance to be used as a weapon. “From the composition, it looks like it was probably part of a boulder from one of the trails.”

Tara widened her eyes. “That does tell us something. We assumed that Mara was either just leaving or just turning back after leaving the campground. If she had something in her pocket from the trails, maybe she’d already been up there.”

“That’s what I thought,” Glenn said. “And it kind of ties them together somehow, I think?”

Tara thought it over. “Jamie Heron disobeyed a sign and trampled on the flowers. Mara Soke took a piece of rock. You’re never supposed to take anything out of parks or protected areas, right?”

“Yeah,” Glenn said. “I mean, again. I don’t know what that means. But it seems like a link.”

Tara thought about that for another long moment. “Okay. What else?”

“The decrease in dosage between Jamie and Mara,” Glenn said. “We never explained that. If it’s not someone

with a savior complex trying to get them to survive, then we still haven't got a reason for it."

Tara hummed as she thought.

There was one thread that kept tugging at her mind.

They'd turned to the rangers because of the sign at the welcome center indicating that anyone over there would have knowledge of the snake venom. But if the sign was at the welcome center, then anyone who worked there would know about it, too.

That was where she'd been headed before all this distraction—looking into fired employees and ex-EMTs.

"If someone cared deeply about the park," Tara said slowly, thinking it through, "if they worked there and dedicated their lives to it, then they might be very upset to see tourists ruining or removing things from the park."

"Upset enough to kill?" Glenn asked. "Really?"

"I don't think we're dealing with a rational individual here," Tara pointed out. "This is someone who caught a wild snake—a deadly snake—and milked its venom. Someone who then walked out into that state park with the venom in a syringe and attacked not one, but two people with it. He killed Jamie Heron and then he went on and killed Mara Soke right after, knowing what the consequences of that injection would be. He probably watched both of them die."

"So, you think it's someone who works there, but not a ranger?"

Tara knew the other names had already been checked out by Bryant while they were on the way back to the office. There was no flag on any of them—on any employee of the state park that they hadn't already spoken to. This person, whoever they were... if she was right, then they didn't have a record.

"We're going back to the welcome center," she said. "Come on—and quickly. They're just about to close for the night. We need to get there before they do, or we

might miss the last chance to stop this from happening again.”

Glenn said nothing—just rushed after her as she broke into a run, heading down the hall and outside to the car, with every intention to step on the gas all the way to the state park.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Tara pulled up as close to the welcome center as she could—easier at this time of the evening, when most people had left for the day and driven off—and leaped out practically before the engine had stopped running.

Her heart was pounding in her ears as she ran toward the welcome center. She could feel desperation clawing at her, making her breath short and sending panic signals to her brain. If she didn't get there in time...

She didn't want another body in the morning. It would feel like it was on her hands.

She grabbed the door handle and pushed—finding, to her relief, that it opened.

“Oh, we're just closing for the day,” someone called out—but when he stepped backward and saw Tara emerge from the other side of the leaflet stand he had been behind, he smiled and lifted a hand in greeting. “Sorry, Officer—I didn't realize it was you.”

“That's alright,” Tara said, slightly out of breath, as Glenn joined her. She stepped fully inside, letting him close the door behind them. “Are you the last one here?”

“Yeah, I get locking up duty tonight,” he answered, and Tara's shoulders slumped. He was a young man, brown-haired and cheerful-looking, dressed in the khaki uniform of the park. “Can I help you with anything? Were you looking for someone?”

“Yes, but you may still be able to help,” Tara said. There was always a chance that he was the one she was looking for, but she had to take that chance. He would either freak and run once he realized they were onto him, or he would lie to hide the truth and they would find him out after checking the information. The important thing right now was to stay calm but wary, just

in case. “I need to look at your staff records—and ask you about them, too.”

“Oh, sure,” he said, nodding. He cast around for a minute as if he was trying to figure out how to square his duties with what they were asking of him, then fished a key out of his pocket and held it out toward Glenn. “Dude—would you mind locking up while I grab everything from the back?”

Tara and Glenn exchanged a glance. There was a chance—an outside chance—that he wanted them locked in with him so he could attack. But as Tara saw it: if they were trapped in here with him, he was also trapped in here with them.

And they had guns.

“Sure,” Glenn said easily, taking the key from his hand and heading back toward the front door. The employee, meanwhile, headed to the back room, and Tara followed him. She didn’t want to leave him alone at any point so he could spring a trap.

“This is the computer,” he said out loud, leading her right to a machine—seemingly not fazed at all that she was following. Tara relaxed a tiny bit. “It has all the info on here—staff schedules and everything.”

“Great,” Tara said as he sat down in a chair in front of it. “That’s a good start.”

“What do you need to know?” he asked, clicking the keyboard rapidly and then settling back with his hands on his thighs.

“Take me through each of these people,” she said. “Start at the top and work your way down.”

“Well, the top one, that’s me,” he said, and grinned. “Adam. It’s alphabetical by first name.”

“Okay, great—next one?”

“Oh yeah, Ben. He’s a cool guy. He’s old, like, in his thirties. He has a couple of kids and sometimes he

brings them to work.”

“Has he ever had any problems at work?”

“Nah. Everyone likes Ben. He brings us brownies sometimes.”

“What about snakes? Does he have any interest in snakes?”

“Not really?” Adam wrinkled his nose. “I think the dude likes mountain lions or something. He says it’s cool when someone gets a picture of one near the trails even when everyone else is freaking out.”

“Okay,” Tara said. “Moving on.”

“Clementine is major hot,” Adam said, nodding with satisfaction as if to underscore the point. “She’s from Europe. I like it when I have shifts with her because all the dudes that come in here always ask her for help and I get to just, like, sit back and chill.”

“Snakes? Problems?” Tara asked.

“Yeah, sometimes she has problems with dudes coming on too strong,” he said. “I don’t know about snakes though. Clem is like, scared of everything. I don’t know why she works in a state park but she said it was easier than dealing with pervs at the water park.”

“What about Ethan Green?” Tara asked, skipping ahead over a few more female names. She had the feeling that their killer was a man—statistics bore the theory out—and she could always circle back around if this time-saving exercise didn’t actually help.

“Oh, dude’s real sad,” Adam said. “Yeah, totally sad. I can’t even look at him sometimes. He’s real quiet though. Never gets in any trouble or anything like that.”

“Why is he sad?” Glenn asked. Tara only just managed not to jump in the air. She’d almost forgotten he was there, he’d come back from locking the door so quietly.

“Well, like, his mom and stuff,” Adam said. When he realized Tara was staring at him blankly, he lifted his hands in the air as if to say he couldn’t believe they didn’t know and carried on. “She was a ranger or something. Right here in the state park. She did it before he was even born and then she was still doing it when she had him. It was super sad.”

Tara frowned. She wasn’t seeing the connection. “That’s sad?”

“Yeah, well, ’cause when he was like five or whatever, there was a freak attack,” he said. “Bear. You don’t get bears in this park. They don’t come this far down from the national park. But one of them got lost or something after hibernation—I guess they were trying to do population control that year or something—and came after the campers for something to eat. She tried to stop it from attacking a family while everyone was panicking and it got her.”

“She was mauled to death?” Tara asked, her eyes popping wider. She hadn’t heard this story. It would have been a long while ago, but presumably while she was living in the area. Maybe she had been so young that her parents had kept it from her ears to protect her from the gory details.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding with his eyes wide as saucers. “Can you imagine that?”

“Have you ever asked him why he works at the place where his mom died?” Glenn asked. Tara mentally and silently congratulated him on an excellent question.

“He said it’s all to do with the sanctity of nature,” Adam said in a grand tone, throwing his arms out in a dramatic gesture. “He says if people hadn’t messed around that year or something, higher up the chain, the bear wouldn’t have come down. And the bear was only doing what bears do. If the campers didn’t antagonize it and his mom didn’t try to get rid of it, it wouldn’t have attacked her. So he’s here to stop anyone from crossing

Mother Nature again and getting hurt. That's how he said it."

Everything clicked in Tara's head, like dominoes falling into place, one after another. His mother died in the park. It would be an incredibly special and important, almost sacred, place for him. The lesson he took from it was that those who messed with the park would be punished by nature. So, when he saw people messing with the park—trampling on flowers and stealing bits of rock—and nature didn't intervene, he maybe decided it was his duty to help.

With natural venom taken from a creature that was endemic to the park.

It was all starting to make a twisted, terrible kind of sense.

"Was Ethan working today?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "He went home last before me. Like, ten minutes before you came in."

Tara's eyes snapped up to Glenn's. "Print the address," she told Adam. "Your help is appreciated, but don't call him or anyone to warn him we're coming. I know you'll want to tell people about it, but that'd be obstruction of justice. Got that?"

"Yeah," Adam said, swallowing and then hurrying to press print.

"Call Deputy Bryant and get everyone to stay back and be on call," Tara told Glenn. "We've got to go by his place and pick him up—and if he resists in any way, we're going to need to call for urgent backup."

Tara looked up at the apartment building, which was only a few stories high. They didn't have huge apartment blocks in Wyatt. Ethan Green's home was on the ground

floor, and that meant they could go right in and get him out before he caused any further problems or disturbed the other residents.

Or, more to the point, threatened them.

“You ready?” Tara asked grimly. She took her gun out of its holster, checked that it was loaded, and then holstered it again, making sure she could get it out easily.

“Ready,” Glenn confirmed. “Let’s hope he comes quietly.”

“Let’s hope,” Tara replied, reaching for the door handle to get out of the car.

She moved quickly to the front door of the building now that she was in the open. There was always a chance that he could look out the window, see two deputies approaching, and freak out. She wanted to make sure she mitigated the chances of that happening as much as possible—and getting in fast was the best way to do that.

“Behind me,” she murmured to Glenn as she entered the building. It was supposed to be locked, clearly, but someone had stuck a folded-up leaflet at the bottom of the doorframe to prevent the electronic lock from connecting. It was pretty bad as far as safety measures were concerned—but right now, walking into the building in the dark, Tara was glad they didn’t have to either call him and warn him they were coming or wait for someone else to open the door.

The entrance to the apartment itself was not far from the lobby door, to the left. Tara once again checked that her gun was accessible, her heart pounding in her chest, but she didn’t draw it yet. She didn’t want Green to see a weapon and try to either run or tackle them. Doing this quietly and easily—making him think he was just coming in for a chat because he worked at the state park and they needed witnesses—would be the best approach.

Tara raised her hand and, willing herself not to hesitate, knocked loudly three times. The sound seemed to hang in the air for a moment afterwards. There was nothing else to accompany it—only the sound of Glenn’s breathing and her own.

No noise from inside the apartment.

Tara lifted her hand and knocked again with the same result. For a third try, she added a shout: “Mr. Green? We need to talk to you urgently.”

Nothing.

Tara bit her lip, then sighed. “It seems like he hasn’t made it home yet,” she said.

“He might be taking a bus or getting a ride with someone else, I guess,” Glenn said. “We might have made it back before him with the car.”

“Maybe.” Tara looked outside, back at the door, and then made a decision. “Let’s head back out. I want to look through the windows and make sure he isn’t just ignoring the knock.”

Glenn followed her quietly back outside. His head swung from side to side in her peripheral vision and Tara knew that he felt the same way that she did: constantly wary that their suspect may be watching them from somewhere, waiting for them. After all, he had managed to stab two people in the neck without them noticing in enough time to get away. They didn’t want the same to happen to them.

Tara walked around a manicured flower bed, obviously maintained by the building company, and made her way closer to the windows of the ground floor apartment. Shading her eyes, she looked through the window. It was dark both inside and outside, and it took her a moment to adjust and be able to see anything at all.

When she did, it wasn’t promising. An empty living room. TV dormant, black screen waiting. There weren’t

even any plates or mugs on the coffee table that might indicate someone had just recently eaten there.

Tara glanced up. There was another window further along. Maybe they would have more success there, though hope was rapidly fading. She picked her way across a patch of grass, feeling like she was probably leaving huge boot prints and killing off bits of it, and found a spot to shade her eyes and look through.

There was nothing...

Wait.

“What’s that?” Tara breathed out loud, not really meaning it to be a direct question for Glenn—more of an expression of her shock.

“I can’t see,” Glenn replied, moving next to her and shading his eyes as well. “Where are we looking?”

“That cage,” she says. “What’s in it?”

“I don’t know,” Glenn said, a note of surprise in his own voice now. “It looks like a pet cage or something, but with the blanket over this side, I can’t see a thing. Is it... glowing?”

“Lights,” Tara said. “The kind of cases you keep reptiles in often need lights to keep them warm enough for the habitat.”

“Then...”

Tara turned and exchanged a look with him. “We need to get inside that apartment.”

“We don’t have a warrant, and he’s not home.”

“We have reason to believe there’s a rare snake in there,” Tara said. “What do you think? Is it strong enough?”

Glenn paused, turning to look through the window again. “What’s that on the table?”

“It looks like a needle,” Tara said after a moment. “Or—wait. A syringe. It must be the kind of kit that Lindsie

showed us—the syringe for extracting venom from a snake.”

“Does it look like it could be used to inject drugs?” Glenn asked cautiously.

Tara began to see where he was going. “We can see a rare and protected snake that isn’t supposed to come to harm, as well as what could be evidence of current and ongoing drug use,” she said. “If someone were to overdose on an injection from a needle that was already sitting on the table, filled with drugs and ready to go, that would be an emergency situation.”

“We need to prevent an emergency,” Glenn said.

“Right.” Tara nodded decisively. She didn’t even have to tell Glenn that he would need to stick to that story if they were ever questioned on their approach. She knew he would back her up. Now that they’d made the choice, they were both going to stick to it.

She rushed back around the front of the building and toward the door, aiming a strong kick at the frame right under the lock.

It didn’t even move.

“Let me try,” Glenn said, nudging her aside.

“I can do it,” Tara complained.

“I know you can, but let’s at least take turns,” he said. “We don’t need to wear ourselves out right before a confrontation. Here.” He got himself into place and then kicked the door again. Once more, it stayed solid. Tara could barely believe a flimsy door inside an apartment complex like this could withstand the hits it had already taken, but it was on the ground floor—maybe it had been reinforced.

“My turn again,” she insisted, pushing Glenn back so she could get in.

She aimed squarely at that same spot on the frame—

And the door exploded inwards in a shower of splinters, bowing under her force.

“Sheriff’s department!” Tara shouted, taking her gun out just in case as she rushed forward across the splintered door and into the hall. “Come out with your hands up! No sudden movements!”

She was talking to herself, but there was no harm in shouting out just in case—for all they knew, he was hiding in the bedroom or already asleep after a long day at work.

“Come out with your hands up!” Glenn echoed as they moved into the living room.

“I’ll check out the case,” Tara said. Glenn nodded urgently and moved past her, keeping his gun outstretched as he headed for the bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom.

Tara reached out in the dark room for the corner of the blanket that was holding back the glow of light, and flipped it aside.

Her eyes stung for a moment as the bright light hit her full force—but she didn’t look away. She knew what she had found.

Inside the glass case, big enough for it to coil around a dead tree branch that had been artfully arranged to look like a real habitat, was a snake. A snake she recognized as being the exact species that Lindsie had shown them on the printout. The Hades Rattlesnake.

They had him.

“It’s the right one,” Glenn said from the doorway. Tara looked at him sharply, and knew from his shake of the head that the rest of the apartment was clear.

Tara holstered her gun and grabbed her phone. “I’m calling fish and wildlife services to come and take care of it,” she said. “We can’t just leave a dangerous snake in here. We need to bag up that syringe for evidence and see if there’s anything else here as well.”

“We should call in backup, right?” Glenn asked. “We need to secure the scene.”

Tara nodded in agreement. “And then we need to put out a BOLO for Ethan Green. He’s our killer.”

“Right. But where is he?”

Tara turned and looked through the windows and into the darkness of the night beyond.

That was the million-dollar question, wasn’t it?

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “But we’re going to find him before dawn.”

They had no choice.

Because if he evaded them until then...

She knew in her gut that he would seize the opportunity to take another life.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Ethan crouched in the brush, not wanting to fully sit or kneel down. If he did that, he would no longer be on the alert or ready for action. He would be on the back foot if he needed to set off.

It had been a quiet night so far, of course. That was to be expected. It was only a chance—perhaps fifty-fifty—that the man he had his eye on would leave his camper tonight in search of a bathroom or something else. That was the nature of the game, though. When you were hunting, you had to observe and then respect the habits and instincts of your prey. You had to work with them, not against them.

If he stormed into the camper with a needle and tried to find the right person, for example, there would be terrible complications. Others might wake up, and if they shouted or screamed, neighbors in the park could be awoken as well. He might have two adults and two children trying to fight him off, when he preferred a more stealthy approach. After all, he wasn't a strong man or a particularly violent one, and he had never been accused of bravery.

He didn't want to be brave. Not when he knew what getting brave could get you.

His mother had been brave when she'd stood between tourists and a rampaging bear—and she'd ended up not seeing her son grow up. Both of them had lost out on that one. Not to mention his father, who was never the same after his wife's death.

He'd done his best—but both he and Ethan knew that it was never really enough.

That was the problem with good people. They ended up sacrificing so much that they had nothing left to give. And for what? For selfish people who didn't respect the

earth? A government, or even park management, who didn't understand the needs of the park and the animals within it? Tourists who just wanted to ruin everything instead of enjoying and respecting the bounty that nature gave?

To hell with all of them.

He wasn't going to go down in history as a good person. He was too quiet for that. Too timid. He wasn't about open acts of bravery. No—he was content to work in the shadows and do the quiet kind of work that no one was ever going to notice or acknowledge.

At least, that was what the plan had been.

He shifted his weight slightly, trying to avoid cramping in his leg muscles as he silently watched. The police coming over here had been a wrench in the works. He had never imagined that someone would be able to tell so easily what he had been doing.

They still didn't know it was him.

And if he could help this park, help nature, in some small way before they figured that out, he was going to take that opportunity with both hands.

He reached up to adjust the mask on his face—the plastic was cold against his skin in the chill of the night, but for the area around his mouth where his own breathing was casting condensation back on him. It was uncomfortable, but not enough to make him want to take the mask off. After all, if anyone saw him here—including the victim—they would only see a crouching deer. A female deer at that—this mask had no antlers. He had a variety of masks to choose from, but logic seemed to dictate that the smaller masks would be the ones to attract the least attention.

Besides which, the antlers wouldn't fit in his pocket.

He shifted his weight again, a rhythmic habit which allowed him to stay in a single place for a long time without getting too uncomfortable. It was a practice that

he had perfected over the years. This was part of his routine—watching, waiting.

Before now, it had always applied to watching for wildlife, but the principles were the same either way.

He'd been watching people and wildlife interact at the park for as long as he could remember. When he was very small, his mother had brought him along to her workplace from time to time. He could only vaguely recall a couple of instances from back then, but they were precious to him. When he'd grown old enough to get around on his own, he'd come back here as a visitor at every opportunity he got.

People had assumed back then that he was an avid hiker or a birdwatcher. It hadn't started out that way. He'd only wanted to connect with his mother somehow—to discover the place where she had paid with her life. She'd paid to protect it and the people in it, and he wanted to understand the appeal.

He'd seen it. For a long time, he had.

He'd seen the joy on the faces of those who saw the amazing views at different spots in the park. He'd seen the awe on the faces of children brought by their parents to experience raw nature.

But over time, he'd also seen the single-use plastics and cigarette butts they dropped on the trails.

They way they defaced trees and rocks by carving their initials into them.

The mess they left behind in the campgrounds and the way the rangers were powerless to stop them from doing any of it.

Ethan saw movement inside the camper and stiffened. Was this his chance? He reached for the box sitting at his side, the one that contained the vial. But no—it must have been one of the children going into the bathroom provided inside the camper and then returning

to their bed. The camper didn't move as much as it would have if an adult had been getting up.

No luck for him yet.

But he was a patient man. You had to be, to do the kind of admin work that the park required. It was all wrapped up in the machine of bureaucracy, and every single change or filing required months of waiting. Unless he was the one being inspected to make sure his work was up to snuff, in which case, it seemed to take minutes.

Ethan liked his job. He didn't have to talk to many people. It wasn't quite the same as following in the footsteps of his mother and becoming a ranger, but he wasn't really cut out for that. He'd started along that path until he had realized the differences between them: his mother was brave and bold and athletic, while he was timid and quiet and really just enjoyed a nice calm walk. It was okay to not be a ranger so long as he was still here, in her presence. Still making her proud.

And he knew she would be proud of the way he was protecting the park. She'd died for stupid, selfish tourists. She couldn't possibly be angry with him now for eliminating those people to make sure that the park itself—and the wildlife within it—could be enjoyed by visitors who were more responsible for generations to come.

He shifted again and took a deep breath, letting it out evenly. It had been a long evening, crouching here and waiting after pretending to go home. That was fine. He didn't mind. He had a lot of patience. It could be a long night waiting for dawn and for the family to wake up, but that was okay, too.

He wasn't in any particular hurry.

There was no reason to run or hide. He knew the sheriff's department had arrested Taeho Kim. Kim was a rebel, an arrogant man who bucked authority because he thought he was better than everyone else at the park thanks to his training. He held a lot of bitterness due to

the illness that made him shake—something the other rangers and welcome center employees gossiped about endlessly when he wasn't around. He would probably get into an argument with the deputies and the state police and anyone else who tried to talk to him.

That meant Ethan had time.

While they were looking at Taeho, they weren't looking at him.

He wasn't going to waste this opportunity. As soon as he made his move here, they would know that Taeho wasn't to blame, so it was important to make this one count. And he believed it would: removing one bad person from the world only removed that person. But if that person was raising children to be bad people, well, removing him might also prevent those children from turning out bad as well.

It was, he thought, the best possible way to go out—if he had to go out now.

And who knew?

Maybe they still would not suspect him tomorrow. People often failed to notice Ethan. For the first time in his life, now, he was able to use that in his favor.

And he wasn't going to miss this opportunity to level the scales of justice once more.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Tara put her hands on her hips while she rested for a moment, then raised her hand to her eyes. She looked out as far as she could from their position on the trail, straining to see. There was so little light now that she could barely even tell they were in the state park, but it was going to get brighter.

Dawn was nearly on them.

“He must be here somewhere,” Tara said. She felt like the worry lines she wore were becoming engraved in her forehead, they had been sitting there for so long. All night, since leaving Ethan Green’s empty apartment just after midnight, they had searched the state park.

And nothing.

“I agree,” Glenn said. “We just have to find him.”

“He can’t be changing his MO, right?” Tara asked. Worry was gnawing away at her like a hunger. She envisioned all sorts of nightmare scenarios in her mind: Green going out to attack people on the streets because he knew the park was out of bounds, or attacking all of the rangers and deputies who were out searching for him, or escaping to another state so he would be able to start again across jurisdictional lines.

“It seems unlikely,” Glenn said. She could hear that there was doubt in his mind, too—but he wanted to reassure her. He was a good man. That fact only pooled like molten ice in her belly. A good man that she had missed her chance to be with. “Almost all killers stick to the same MO once they get started. They might improve or tweak the details, but they don’t change into different people entirely. And besides, the park as a location is so important to him.”

“Yeah.” Tara stared off across the distance, still unsure.

The state park was so vast, with most of it crisscrossed by trails that headed in opposite directions from one another. There were huge distances between them—some could not be seen from any other trail in the park. In the dark, it was impossible to see far, anyway. They had so few rangers and deputies to work with... if the state police had been able to get here already, they might have had the resources to draft in backup.

As it stood, however, it seemed to Tara that the chances of finding one single man in a state park were very small. Like finding a fir needle in a forest of fir trees. Once the sun rose it would be easier—but that was also the time when he was most likely to strike.

They couldn’t let him strike again.

But what could they do, when it seemed utterly hopeless to be able to find him before then?

“We have to be smarter about this,” she said.

“Huh?” Glenn said. He’d been looking in the other direction—she realized he had been trying to move off for a while, but she hadn’t been following him.

“It’s like before, when we were trying to find Wild Henry in the woods,” Tara said. “We didn’t find him by searching the region in an organized grid pattern. That would have taken far too long. We found him by using our heads and analyzing the evidence.”

“Then let’s do the same here,” Glenn said, as if it was an easy thing to do. “What does the evidence tell us?”

Tara bit back the negative response that wanted to fall from her tongue and tried to be positive instead. “We have two victims,” she said. “One on the trail, one near the campground.”

“Coming to or from the trail,” Glenn added.

“That’s why we’re searching the trails,” Tara said. “That’s what the pattern suggests. He goes after people on or just before the trails.”

“Isn’t it more like, he goes after people in the places where people will most often be?” Glenn asked. “It’s a distinction, but I don’t know if it makes a difference.”

Tara thought about it for a long moment. “I’m sure it does,” she said at last. “I just don’t see it yet.”

“He’s very park-centric,” Glenn offered. “He cares about this place a lot.”

“He knows it very well,” Tara replied, bouncing off Glenn’s thought. “He knows all the little places you can hide and wait without being seen. He knows that, even though his job is admin-based. He must have spent a lot of time walking the trails. We’re not going to find him just by walking up and down them ourselves and looking.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t do that,” Glenn said suddenly. “If he’s lying in wait…”

Tara nodded. “It’s crossed my mind that he could attack one of us. But we still have a duty to keep the public safe. If we pull everyone back, we can’t do that.”

“We can’t let him get onto the trails,” Glenn mused, then sighed. “Then again, he could already be up here somewhere, since he didn’t go home last night.”

“Then we have to stop his victims from going on the trails,” Tara said suddenly. It was a flash of inspiration—a realization that things could be seen from the opposite angle. “If we can’t stop him, we have to restrict the number of possible victims he has to choose from. Doing it that way, we might even be able to set a trap.”

“What kind of trap?” Glenn asked. His eyes widened a little. Tara could tell what he was thinking: she was going to put him—or herself—forward as bait. She wasn’t going to do that. She didn’t even know what the right idea would be.

“We can think about that later,” she said. “The first thing we need to do is call everyone back. Hikers are going to start arriving soon.”

“Not going to,” Glenn said, nodding into the distance. “They already are.”

Tara looked where he was looking. A pair of headlights were swinging into the parking lot area down there, one of the first visitors of the morning arriving to enjoy the view of the sunrise.

They were already running out of time.

Tara grabbed the radio on her chest. “All units—pull back to your designated trail entrance. Your new order is to prevent any member of the public or otherwise from going onto the trails. All units, please pull back. Please respond.”

The units they had scattered throughout the park—consisting of mixed rangers and deputies—sounded off in order one by one, the way they had been trained. Each of them confirmed their understanding of the message and that they would be carrying out their new orders. There was a tightness in Tara’s chest as she turned, leading Glenn to hurry down to the foot of their own trail.

What if they had realized they needed to do things this way too late?

What if even right now, someone was walking right in front of Ethan Green, not knowing they were exposing their neck?

Tara broke into a jog, almost stumbling a few times. The light of dawn was a faint glow on the horizon. Before long it would turn the sky shades of blue and gold and rise properly, bursting forth rays of light that would illuminate the whole park with much more strength than their inadequate flashlights. Up here in the park, it should have been a beautiful event to look forward to.

Tara could only view it with trepidation as she watched the thin beam of illumination in front of her, trying not to trip and fall on rocks or exposed tree roots as she ran.

She reached the foot of the trail in such a rush that she struggled to come to a stop. She swung her gaze around as she skidded her feet against the earth, managing to anchor herself in the same moment that she saw another pair of flashlight beams coming down the trail. The faint light of the sun was becoming strong enough that she could make out their forms. One of them was wearing a hat she recognized from the ranger's hut. He'd been sitting there reading a book. It was another of their own teams, coming down from a trail that started from the same point as the one she and Glenn had chosen.

"Glenn," she said urgently. "You stay here. When those two get down here, I want you to tell them that they're in charge of both trailheads. They're close enough together that they shouldn't have any problem preventing people from going up either of them. Tell them to send everyone back to the welcome center or out of the park—not toward the campgrounds."

"Where are you going?" Glenn asked. He wasn't a deputy for nothing. He'd obviously spotted the fact that his orders were to be carried out alone.

"Toward the campgrounds," Tara said with a wry smile. "That's where he struck last—between the trails and the campgrounds. There's a good few patches of thick trees between here and there. Anyone coming out of their camp and up here to see the sunrise will be in danger."

Glenn nodded. It was light enough now that she could see the edges of the contours of his face without the need for her flashlight. "I'll follow after you as soon as I've spoken to them."

“Do,” Tara told him. This was no time to be a hero. Urgent as it was to warn people they weren’t safe, Tara knew that going alone would also mean she wasn’t safe. It was a thing she had to do, but not with more risk than was necessary. “And watch your six.”

“You, too,” Glenn replied with roughness in his tone, and then Tara turned and was gone, racing down the last part of the incline to hit flatter ground and the approach to the campground.

It was quiet here, but not silent. There were small noises coming from all directions. Some were animal or bird, but others were unmistakably human. The crunch of tires down below. The sharp scratch of the zipper on a tent. Even the low murmur of a voice up through the trees.

Tara doubled her pace—and almost collided with a man just emerging from the campground and onto the walkway.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, then half-laughed. “Sorry. I didn’t see you there.”

“Sir, I need you to head back to where you’re camping,” she said, quickly scanning the trees around them. This man was alone. A perfect victim for their killer to stalk. “Walk with me now.”

“Uh,” he said, hesitant. “Sorry. Is it a crime to bump into a deputy these days? I really didn’t mean to.”

“It’s not that,” Tara said. She was looking up the trail, looking for others, trying to see any other sign of movement, but she turned back to meet his eyes for a moment to reassure him. He was older, maybe in his late thirties or early forties. He looked normal. A little ruffled from a night in the campground. Like a dad, maybe. “We’re temporarily shutting down the trails. It’s dangerous out there right now. I need you to walk back with me right now.”

“Oh, right,” he said. He looked up at the trail with a somewhat wistful look. “That’s a shame. I woke up needing the toilet, and I thought I’d just hurry up there and catch the sunrise before the kids woke up.”

“Sir,” Tara said, pointedly. He was slowing her down. Every moment they spent having this conversation was another moment that someone could be walking out of the campground and right into the killer’s reach. She turned around in a circle again as she stepped toward him, looking for anything out of place.

“Right, right,” he said, and turned to go back. Tara took one last sweep of the area, her eyes scanning the trees and brush—

And she doubled back, knowing she had seen some kind of movement.

There—in the space between a thick, warped old tree trunk and a rock. A sizeable bush filled the gap, but when the wind stirred the densely packed branches for a second...

A deer mask. The kind of plastic mask you might find in a costume store.

The mask turned, revealing a head of dark hair, revealing a human body standing up and starting to run —

And she knew without a shadow of a doubt it was him.

“Hey!” she yelled into the trees, setting off at a run immediately. “Stop! Sheriff’s department! Stop right where you are!”

And of course, he didn’t stop at all.

Tara charged headlong toward the trees, crashing through the space where he had just been. Behind her, she heard Glenn shout her name and knew he would be following her.

Ethan Green was in her sights. She saw him clearly now. Bobbing and weaving amongst the trees as though he really were a prey animal, trying to evade a hunter.

Except he was the hunter—and he was holding a deadly syringe in his hand.

She just needed to catch up with a man who knew these woods so much better than she ever would, get cuffs on him, and avoid being stabbed with a venom that would stop her heart...

But the danger didn't stop her.

It couldn't.

Because if she didn't take this risk, someone else was going to die.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Tara felt like her lungs were going to burst. If they didn't, then surely her legs would drop off first.

But there was hope.

Ethan Green had a much less athletic build than she had expected before she'd seen him in person. He wasn't a fit hiker who could jog up a mountain and back without breaking a sweat. He was just a normal guy—probably pretty good at walking the trails, but not especially strong and certainly not used to running.

She knew he wasn't used to running because he was slower than she was, and even though she'd lost him in the trees twice, she was gaining on him now.

She could hear Glenn crashing through the trees somewhere to her left. They had naturally spread out rather than following one another closely, and now they were on Green's tail to both his left and his right. If he jolted one way or the other, they would still be right behind him. He wasn't going to get away.

Tara knew that if her lungs and legs felt this bad, Green's had to be worse. He had to be running on pure adrenaline and nothing else. There was no way a man who looked like that could carry on much longer without simply falling down.

This was a game of endurance, and she felt like she had been training for it her whole life.

Green jerked suddenly to the right, clearly trying to throw them off his trail—but he threw himself right into Tara's line, and the burst of adrenaline the realization gave her threw her forward enough to make a difference.

All the difference.

She was on him—so close there was no way he was getting away now. She managed to reach out and grab

his arm and tug him around—

And he turned, ready to fight instead of run. She could see it in his eyes and she jumped back in alarm just in time as he swung his arm toward her—his hand clutching a needle.

If she'd reacted a half-second slower, he would have been able to stick it into her arm.

Tara's heart pounded in her chest. There was no oxygen left to talk or to order him to drop the needle, and besides, he had to have known what was going on. It wasn't every day someone was chased by people wearing the uniform of the sheriff's department, and when that day was right after you had killed two people, you had to see the writing on the wall.

He knew, too, that she wanted him to drop the needle. That was too obvious.

There was only one form of language left to her now, and Tara intended to speak it. She reached for the gun at her side—

Then had to jump back again, stumbling until her spine hit a tree, just managing to avoid his second swing.

She looked up and met Green's eyes. They were wide and wild, only just illuminated by the sun. It had risen enough to illuminate the trails, but here amongst the trees, the light was fleeting and inconsistent between the shifting branches and leaves.

"Stop," she managed to pant out, the only word she could manage. He would have to stop if she fired. She reached for her gun, trying to move to the side so that he wouldn't be able to lash out at her...

It all happened so fast.

She saw him moving as if in slow motion. The hate in his eyes intensified to such a level that she felt true and real fear, the kind of fear that could only come from the realization that someone wanted you dead at all costs

and had the means to bring it about. Somehow, he'd managed to find the strength and speed for one last thrust that she could already see she could not evade. She was moving too slow—her hand on the grip of her gun as she tried to pull it from the holster, tangled and far too slow—the tree at her back stopping her from moving backwards and no way out of the path of his swinging, slashing arm—

She blinked, just once—

And Ethan Green was no longer in front of her.

He was on the ground, the wind knocked out of him and a stunned look on his face, as if he, too, couldn't quite comprehend how he'd come to be there.

And on top of him, pinning him with his own body weight after the tackle that stopped him from hurting Tara, was Glenn.

And in his arm...

The syringe stuck out at an odd angle, the plunger all the way down, and from the way he looked at it in dull surprise Tara knew it wasn't just caught in the material of his jacket.

"No," she breathed.

"Arrest him," Glenn choked out, almost as if instinct was taking over and his brain had no say in the words, and Tara rushed forward to do what he'd said because she couldn't think of anything else at that moment. She grabbed the cuffs from her belt and slammed them onto Ethan Green's wrists, not caring whether she hurt him. This wasn't the time to be careful.

"Help!" she shouted at the top of her lungs, standing up only to put her foot on Green's chest, ready to push down if he tried to get away. "Rangers! Help! Venom!"

It wasn't the most elegant message, but she had to hope it would get her meaning across in the fewest words possible. She grabbed the radio on her chest and repeated her message, pressing the call button down

and yelling at the top of her voice instead of bothering to hold the radio to her mouth, looking from side to side in desperate hope that someone would come.

“Tara,” Glenn said, and she didn’t care at all about Ethan Green. She stumbled over to Glenn where he sat on the ground, having rolled off Green. There was a look of shock on his face. Pure shock and confusion and fear. He looked like a kid again, vulnerable and helpless.

“It’s going to be alright, Glenn,” Tara told him, grabbing both of his hands in hers. “Just stay still. Keep your heart rate down as much as possible. That will slow the venom down.”

“I’m not dead yet,” he said, as if this was such a strange thing that he could hardly believe it. “But I can feel...”

He looked down at his arm, at the place where the needle had gone in. Tara grabbed it and pulled it out of him, tossing it on the ground far enough away that Green wouldn’t be able to reach it. He hadn’t tried to run yet. Maybe he hadn’t realized that Tara had no interest in going after him.

Not if she would have to leave Glenn on his own to...

No. She couldn’t even let herself think it. No. He was going to live.

“It’s alright,” she said. A voice crackled over the radio telling her that they had her location and the antivenom was on the way. She didn’t reply. She was focused on Glenn. “Just stay calm. Help’s coming. If the concentration was lower between the first and second doses, then this dose must be lower, too. You’re going to get the antivenom and you’re going to be fine.”

“I might not...” Glenn started, but he seemed unable to finish the sentence. Each time he stopped, Tara experienced a heart-skipping fear that he was about to fall, his eyes blank and empty. She held his hands tighter, moved herself closer to his side as if she could

hold him in place through sheer willpower and closeness.

“You’ll be okay,” she said, but even as the words left her mouth, the reality of the situation was hitting her. This could be it. The first two victims were already dead after this much time had elapsed following the injections. Glenn could have minutes. Seconds. Moments.

And he would never know what she really wanted him to know.

“Tara,” he said, and there was a note in his voice that somehow said everything, absolutely everything, and it struck into her heart like a blade.

“Glenn,” she said, almost choking on his name and the emotion that was welling up inside of her. She had to say it. He had to know. If this was the last chance for him to know how she felt, she couldn’t let him die thinking that she only saw him as a colleague. “I’m sorry. I made a mistake. I—I want to be with you, too. I want to give it a try. I have feelings for you. I’m sorry I told you no.”

There was a crashing sound in the nearest trees. Up ahead, in her peripheral vision, Tara saw someone coming—a ranger—coming to save Glenn’s life.

But in the moment before chaos hit, she thought she saw the corner of Glenn’s mouth twitch up.

A smile.

Then the ranger was on them, shouting instructions and shoving a needle into Glenn’s neck and making Tara hold him still, and all she could do was hold on tight and hope with everything she had that they had made it in time.

Tara leaned her elbows on her desk and rubbed her hands across her face, trying to somehow wipe the

tiredness away. It wasn't working, obviously. Three mostly sleepless nights would do that to you.

"Strong, go home," Sheriff Braddock said.

She looked up to see him leaning on the doorframe of his office, looking at her with a mug of coffee in his hand and shaking his head.

"Sir," Tara said, "I'm fine. I just need some caffeine, that's all."

"More caffeine?" Braddock asked. He nodded at the empty mug on her desk. "Won't it be your third?"

Her third at the desk. She'd had another at home before leaving for her shift. Tara sighed. None of them even seemed to be touching her exhaustion. "One of them will make a difference eventually," she said.

Sheriff Braddock grunted. "You should have taken the couple of days off that I suggested," he said. "A case like that gets to you. You can't just come back to dealing with drunks and lost cats like it's nothing."

Tara almost snapped back at him: *How would you know?* It wasn't as though there were a lot of big cases like that in the history of Edgar County, certainly not in the time Braddock had been sheriff—not until very recently. The uncharitable nature of her almost-response was what made her realize she really was too tired, even though she'd managed to hold it in. It was only a matter of time before someone said something to her and she snapped back something she would regret. She sighed.

"Maybe you're right." Even so, it still felt like weakness to admit she needed time off.

And truth be told, it wasn't even because of the case.

It was because of Glenn. The last thing she'd seen of him was the EMTs loading him into an ambulance at the park entrance. She'd walked with him alongside the stretcher the whole way, but with everyone shouting instructions at each other and sirens and radio calls going on, there had been no chance to talk further.

Then, coward that she was, she hadn't been able to bring herself to visit him in the hospital since.

She'd told herself it was justified. He needed to recover. His body was exhausted from fighting the venom, and though he'd survived, he'd needed urgent care. She'd overheard Tracy at the front desk telling Deputy Walker that Glenn was hooked up to a drip all day long and that there was a constant stream of doctors going in and out and making notes on his chart. Making sure that no lasting damage had been done.

It had been a minor miracle, an act of God, that Ethan's venom supply had run so low he was unable to give Glenn a dose that was immediately fatal. If he'd spread the venom out more with his first victims, or if the snake had yielded a little more when he milked it, Glenn would be dead. That thought made Tara's heart stop in her chest.

The excuse was starting to wear a little thin with every day that passed, though. Especially if he'd had a visit from Tracy, who had no idea how to be quiet and calm even when the situation called for it. If he was up to seeing Tracy, then he was more than up for seeing Tara.

Or was he, when the emotional turmoil she could cause him would set all of his monitors beeping and alarms sounding?

She'd pretended she was too busy trying to get justice. Trying to figure out a way to connect George Daly's death to Ethan Green when he hadn't used the syringe. He'd as much as admitted it in questioning—talking about a man who was so scared when he was caught picking a flower and Ethan had approached him with the syringe, he had collapsed and clutched his chest before the injection could even happen—but proving it in court was a piece of the puzzle they had to figure out. Of course, it was more Lindsie's job than hers. Tara probably wasn't going to be the one to solve that.

And the other thing that held her back, that made her more of a coward than anything: she had no doubt that Beth, Glenn's actual girlfriend who he'd said he was serious about, had been sitting by his bedside this whole time. Tara had no desire whatsoever for some kind of confrontation—or a contest for Glenn's affections.

So here she was, sitting at her desk, pretending she was urgently needed—because if she wasn't urgently needed, she had no socially viable excuse for not visiting Glenn.

“Get some rest,” Braddock said. “Take the rest of the day off. That's an order.”

“Yes, sir,” Tara said dully. She wiped her hands over her face again and then started gathering her things, attempting to get up.

But when she looked up at Braddock again, something in his expression had changed. “Or maybe you'll want to hang around, at least for a short while,” he said, and then disappeared back into his office. The closing of his door was like a final period on the cryptic message, leaving Tara completely at a loss as to what he was talking about.

“Hey.”

Tara nearly fell out of her chair.

She spun around quickly to see him, unable to believe the truth of her own ears. The rest of the office was empty—all of the other deputies already out on calls or taking their lunch break—or she was sure there would have been a lot more fuss and fanfare.

“Glenn,” she said, and her voice immediately stuck in her throat.

Oh god.

She'd been such an idiot.

Why had she poured her heart out like that when she had known he wasn't available? Sure, there had been a

possibility he would die—but she clearly hadn't been thinking about the possibility that he would *live*. Now they had to work together. They had to work together while he knew that she was an idiot and everything was going to be awkward between them forever—maybe he would even want to change partners or transfer to a different county.

“Did I hear the sheriff say that you're taking the rest of the day off?” he asked, tilting his head. He was wearing civilian clothes—jeans and a gray sweatshirt that looked somehow both comfortable and stylish. Like it was just something he had effortlessly grabbed from his bedroom floor.

“Yes—yeah,” Tara said quickly, hanging her head and looking to the floor. She was fairly sure her cheeks were burning red. “I'm tired. I didn't take any time off yet, so...”

“That's a shame,” Glenn said, his gently teasing tone making her look up again in spite of her embarrassment. “I only came to see you.”

Tara swallowed hard.

“You've been cleared to come back to work?” she asked, busying herself with putting her keys and cell phone into her pockets, as if she needed to concentrate on that kind of task.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “They discharged me this morning.”

“Oh,” Tara said and nodded. She was trying not to show the disappointment on her face. Of course, he had no reason to call and tell her that he was getting out of the hospital. She hadn't even been to see him, not to mention the elephant in the room. “Did Beth give you a ride?”

“Nope,” Glenn said. He raised a hand and scratched the back of his neck, a little awkwardness in his gesture. He looked so well, Tara thought. She couldn't even have guessed he was on death's door just a few days ago.

The time in the hospital must have treated him well.
“Actually, Beth and I... we broke up.”

Tara’s heart stopped for a moment—then resumed a rapid staccato beat inside her chest.

“What?” she managed to blurt out.

Now? At a time like this? Would Beth really be the kind of woman who would abandon her boyfriend in his hour of need...?

“I broke it off with her,” Glenn said, and the lump in Tara’s throat might as well have been made of solid stone. “I told her there was someone else, and it wasn’t fair to her to continue the relationship. Not when I knew there was someone I wanted to be with more.”

“Oh,” Tara said, nodding mechanically. She no longer felt in control of her own body or mouth. Or brain. In fact, she wasn’t even sure what was going on at all—only that the odd, alien feeling of hope was so overwhelming that she could feel every single part of her brain and body shutting down.

“So?” Glenn asked.

“Um?” Tara replied, completely unable to formulate a single thought.

Glenn grinned, a grin that made her weak at the knees, and took a few more steps toward her. He closed the distance until she could reach out and touch him—if she wanted to—if she had arms that functioned.

“It’s you, Tara,” he said. His voice was low, pitched only for her. “I want to be with you. I want to give us a shot. If you’ll have me.”

Tara swallowed, and miraculously, the lump in her throat was completely gone. She raised her arms and they obeyed her commands. She opened her mouth as she stepped toward him—and her voice came out. “Yes,” she said, stepping into his waiting arms. “Yes, I’d like that very much.”

It was funny. Four cups of coffee had done nothing at all.

But one touch from Glenn—and Tara felt like she could stay awake for the rest of the week.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

“Um, hi.”

Tara looked up at the woman who had spoken, getting to her feet and sticking out her hand. “May?” she asked.

The woman nodded and shook her hand. Her palm was cool, her fingers slim. She had a delicate look about her, like she would crack right down the middle if a strong word was thrown her way. Tara shook off the cognitive dissonance of having somehow expected a teen—associating with what she had read in Colenova’s file. Of course, May was a grown woman now. Ten years had passed.

“Thank you for coming to meet me,” Tara said, sitting back down at the table and gesturing for May to take the other chair. “Would you like me to order you a coffee?”

May shook her head no. “Caffeine makes me jittery,” she said. She glanced around. “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to do this as quickly as possible.”

She was jittery, Tara noticed. Maybe still afraid of something.

“Alright.” Tara nodded easily, flipping to the appropriate page in her notebook. She’d come prepared. She had all the ammunition she needed, and questions that she hoped would lead somewhere. “Let me cut to the chase, then. You knew Alexina Colenova ten years ago.”

May nodded, but not without hesitation. “Like I said on the phone, we were friends back then.”

Tara tilted her head to the side. She’d known that much already. There was a note she’d found from back then about two girls being thrown out of a bar for underage drinking, let off with a warning. Alex and May.

They had apparently been as thick as thieves. “Can you tell me what she might have been doing almost at the top of St. Bridget Peak, in a cave up there?”

May frowned. “No,” she said. “I don’t know why she would be up there. That’s a little strange.”

“Alright,” Tara said. She moved her notebook aside and revealed what she’d had waiting underneath it: a photograph of her sister, Cassie, as she had looked right before she disappeared. “Do you know this girl?”

May looked at the photograph for a long moment and then shook her head. “No, sorry. Oh—wait, actually, isn’t she that girl that went missing?”

“Yes,” Tara said. She willed herself not to give anything else away.

“Is that what this is about? You said it was a serious case on the phone,” May said. Her eyes were wide. She looked like the type of person who had an uncontrollable nail-biting habit. Like she wanted to bite them now.

“Yes, it is,” Tara said. She hesitated and sighed. “Look, I’m not saying that Alexina did anything. I’m sure she wasn’t even involved. But this is a thread we have to tug at. It may have been that someone she knew also knew something. Did you hear any rumors at that time about what might have happened to the missing girl?”

May shook her head. “Not really. We didn’t pay attention to that kind of stuff. We were older than her, so I think all that ever really came up was our parents telling us to be careful out there. We used to laugh at that. We thought because we were a few years older, there was no way we could be in any danger. It sounds stupid now, but that’s the age we were at.”

Tara nodded. “I understand that,” she said. “So, do you remember anything from that time? Anyone who was dating Alexina, maybe?”

May paused to think, pursing her lips. Her eyes were lined in dark pencil that was slightly smudged; it looked

unintentional, like she'd been rubbing her eyes and forgotten about it. "Yeah, she was seeing someone back then," she said. "Dogtooth."

"Dogtooth?" Tara repeated. What was that supposed to be?

May wrinkled her nose. "Stupid, right? We thought he was so cool because he went by a word instead of a name. He used to wear this dumb hat with a dogtooth pattern. I was so jealous of Alex back then."

"What was his real name?" Tara asked.

May shrugged. "I didn't ever know. He just appeared in town one day and he said that was what we should call him, and none of us questioned it. I don't even know where he was living, if he came here with family or what."

"Where is he now?"

"I haven't heard from him since back then." May shook her head and frowned slightly. "He just disappeared one day. I think at the time I assumed he'd had a fight with Alex and just took off. There were rumors that he'd had to go on the run, though. People were saying he was bad news, that he'd come here because he was on the run in the first place and needed somewhere to lay low, and then he got himself in trouble here again."

"What did they say he'd done?" Tara asked urgently. It couldn't be, could it? That people said he'd killed a teenage girl?

"Everything and anything," May said with a wry smirk. "I didn't pay attention to most of it. Just idle talk. You know what people are like. He never came back, so they stopped talking and moved on to something else."

Tara sat back, thinking. "Hey, do you remember when Alexina used to take her old clothes to the thrift store?"

May gave her an odd look. "She never did that."

“Not even once?” Tara asked. She had to be sure.

“We didn’t have any money back then,” May said. “We would swap any clothes we didn’t want anymore. If something got a hole in it or got too small, we’d customize it. We were always ripping things up and sewing them back together into something new, you know? Like cutting old T-shirts in half and wearing them as crop tops or making a denim miniskirt out of a pair of jeans. We never just gave stuff away. That would have been stupid.”

“Right,” Tara said. She nodded slowly, taking it all in. Alexina had lied. If what May said was right, there was no possibility that the clothes up there belonged to anyone else. Even if they all exchanged clothes regularly—it was only Alexina’s DNA on the bundle they had found in the cave. Not a single other trace was present. “Well, thanks for talking with me. If you do think of anything that might be connected with the missing girl, I’d appreciate you giving me a call.”

“Sure,” May said, getting up to her feet with a look of palpable relief. “Anyway, I’d better get back to work.”

“Right,” Tara said again. There was no point in saying anything else—May was already gone.

Everything ticked over in her head. The clothes were Alexina’s. She had knowingly lied. Her bad-news boyfriend had appeared and then disappeared sometime around then. Clothes were important to Alexina and there was no way she would have just left them in a cave—not if she didn’t have an extremely good reason.

Everything was adding up to one big suspicious red flag, and it was pointing right at Alexina Colenova having the kind of information that might allow Tara to actually move the case along.

She wasn’t giving up now. She’d tried. She’d listened to Jessy and she’d really tried to move on.

But this was Cassie.

And Tara owed it to her to find out what had happened.

She wasn't going to stop until she knew, one way or another.

If her sister was dead, she was going to find the bones and get her buried properly.

And if she was alive...

Tara clenched the café's napkins into a ball in her fist.

This case needed to be officially reopened, and she wasn't going to hold back any longer.

She needed to get back to the office. If Dogtooth was an alias recorded in the police database or their own local system, she would find it.

Even if there were a thousand results... she would eliminate them one by one until she found him.

And he would tell her what he knew—or what he had done.

NOW AVAILABLE!

-

GIRL WITHOUT A PRAYER

(A Tara Strong Mystery—Book 5)

When wealthy home owners are found dead in their mountain vacation retreats, Deputy Sheriff Tara Strong senses this is more than just the work of an envious local. Something more sinister is at play—but not even Tara can anticipate the shocking twist awaiting her.

“A brilliant book. I couldn’t put it down and I never guessed who the murderer was!”

—Reader review for Only Murder

GIRL WITHOUT A PRAYER is book #5 in a new series by #1 bestselling and critically acclaimed mystery and suspense author Rylie Dark, whose books have received over 2,000 five-star reviews and ratings.

Tara Strong has risen to become her county’s Deputy Sheriff through her bravery and her brilliant capacity to enter a killer’s minds. Small-town life in the mountains, centered around their picturesque lake, should be idyllic. But Tara has already seen enough to know that there is a dark side to everything, that small towns hide secrets, that everyone has something in their past—and that a killer may just be lurking right next door.

Tara remains haunted by her own past, by her missing sister, by her guilt over the unsolved case. She must battle the demons of her own past, while trying to get ahead in a male-dominated police force.

Can Tara keep it together long enough to catch a killer?

A cat-and-mouse thriller with harrowing twists and turns and filled with heart-pounding suspense, the TARA STRONG mystery series offers a fresh twist on the genre as it introduces two brilliant protagonists who will make you fall in love and keep you turning pages late into the night.

Future books in the series will be available soon.

“I loved this thriller, read it in one sitting. Lots of twists and turns and I didn’t guess the culprit at all... Already pre-ordered the second!”

—Reader review for Only Murder

“This book takes off with a bang... An excellent read, and I’m looking forward to the next book!”

—Reader review for SEE HER RUN

“Fantastic book! It was hard to put down. I can’t wait to see what happens next!”

—Reader review for SEE HER RUN

“The twists and turns kept coming. Can’t wait to read the next book!”

—Reader review for SEE HER RUN

“A must-read if you enjoy action-packed stories with good plots!”

—Reader review for SEE HER RUN

“I really like this author and this series starts with a bang. It will keep you turning the pages till the end of the book and wanting more.”

—Reader review for SEE HER RUN

“I can’t say enough about this author! How about ‘out of this world’! This author is going to go far!”

—Reader review for ONLY MURDER

“I really enjoyed this book... The characters were alive, and the twists and turns were great. It will keep you reading till the end and leave you wanting more.”

—Reader review for NO WAY OUT

“This is an author that I highly recommend. Her books will have you begging for more.”

—Reader review for NO WAY OUT

-

GIRL WITHOUT A PRAYER

(A Tara Strong Mystery—Book 5)

Rylie Dark

Bestselling author Rylie Dark is author of the SADIE PRICE FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising six books; of the CARLY SEE FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising six books; of the MIA NORTH FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising six books (and counting); of the MORGAN STARK FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising five books; of the HAILEY ROCK FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising five books (and counting); of the TARA STRONG MYSTERY series, comprising five books (and counting); of the ALEX QUINN FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising five books (and counting); of the MAEVE SHARP FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER, comprising five books (and counting); and of the KELLY CRUZ MYSTERY series, comprising five books (and counting).

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Rylie loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.ryliedark.com to learn more and stay in touch.

BOOKS BY RYLIE DARK

KELLY CRUZ MYSTERY

WHERE YOU GO (Book #1)

WHERE YOU HIDE (Book #2)

WHERE YOU SLEEP (Book #3)

WHERE YOU RUN (Book #4)

WHERE YOU FEAR (Book #5)

MAEVE SHARP FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

WITH MALICE (Book #1)

WITH ENVY (Book #2)

WITH VENGEANCE (Book #3)

WITH RAGE (Book #4)

WITH YOU (Book #5)

ALEX QUINN SUSPENSE THRILLER

FIRST, MURDER (Book #1)

SECOND, DEATH (Book #2)

THIRD, ENVY (Book #3)

FOURTH, LUST (Book #4)

FIFTH, WRATH (Book #5)

TARA STRONG MYSTERY

GIRL WITHOUT A CHANCE (Book #1)

GIRL WITHOUT A HOME (Book #2)

GIRL WITHOUT A TRACE (Book #3)

GIRL WITHOUT A NAME (Book #4)

GIRL WITHOUT A PRAYER (Book #5)

HAILEY ROCK FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

BEHIND YOU (Book #1)

BESIDE YOU (Book #2)

AFTER YOU (Book #3)

WATCHING YOU (Book #4)

JUDGING YOU (Book #5)

SADIE PRICE FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

ONLY MURDER (Book #1)

ONLY RAGE (Book #2)

ONLY HIS (Book #3)

ONLY ONCE (Book #4)

ONLY SPITE (Book #5)

ONLY MADNESS (Book #6)

MIA NORTH FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

SEE HER RUN (Book #1)

SEE HER HIDE (Book #2)

SEE HER SCREAM (Book #3)

SEE HER VANISH (Book #4)

SEE HER GONE (Book #5)

SEE HER DEAD (Book #6)

CARLY SEE FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

NO WAY OUT (Book #1)

NO WAY BACK (Book #2)

NO WAY HOME (Book #3)

NO WAY LEFT (Book #4)

NO WAY UP (Book #5)

NO WAY TO DIE (Book #6)

MORGAN STARK FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

TOO LATE (Book #1)

TOO CLOSE (Book #2)

TOO FAR GONE (Book #3)

TOO LOST (Book #4)

TOO BROKEN (Book #5)