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MELINDA LEIGH



LIE TO HER

A D V A N C E R E A D E R ' S C O P Y — U N C O R R E C T E D P R O O F

LIE TO HER

ALSO BY MELINDALEIGH

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See Her Die

Drown Her Sorrows

Right Behind Her

“Her Second Death” (A Prequel Short Story) *Dead Against Her*

Morgan Dane Novels

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The Widow's Island Novella Series

A Bone to Pick

Whisper of Bones

A Broken Bone

Buried Bones

The Wrong Bones

LIE TO HER

MELINDA LEIGH

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For Charlie, Annie, and Tom

CHAPTER ONE

There's no line between love and hate, not even a fine one. It's a mud puddle.

Quicksand.

And you can be simultaneously mired in both.

Let me explain. You love someone. They reject you. Now you hate them. But you still can't stop loving them, even if you hate yourself for it.

A hot fucking mess, right?

I halt on the shoulder of the road. As the tires hit the gravel, the steering wheel vibrates under my hands, as if my SUV understands the significance of the moment. My heartbeat accelerates, my blood rushes, and heat blooms on my skin. I lower the window and take a deep breath, holding the cool December air in my lungs for a few seconds. I smell burning leaves and dampness. The first snow of the season is forecast for this evening. The weather won't affect my plans.

Nothing will. I exhale slowly, then repeat the exercise twice more, until my pulse steadies. After weeks of preparation, the first step of my plan is finally coming to fruition. I can't—
won't—lose my nerve.

Forest and fields flank the country lane. Winter has stripped the trees bare. There are three houses in sight. The blue saltbox in front of me is currently for sale, vacant and dark. It's been on the market for over a year, and clearly no 1

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one has shown any interest in buying it. The property is listed *as is*, and it's been a long time since anyone has shown it any love. The siding desperately needs power washing. The lawn is both overgrown and dying. Weeds strangle the shrubs, and the rusted mailbox, beaten down by corrosion and neglect, leans on its post as if too exhausted to remain upright.

My gaze shifts to the house across the street, a tiny, white, ranch-style home. A lamppost and a porch light both blaze.

The owner left for work at four thirty, as he does every weekday afternoon. He must work nights, because he never returns until early morning. I know this because I've been watching the street, making careful notes about the residents' activities.

It's the third house that interests me, the small farmhouse on the other side of the saltbox. Spencer LaForge—the first name on my list—lives there. Lights glow inside and out.

On his dating app profiles, Spencer describes himself as a forty-seven-year-old digital marketer. His photos show a fit, attractive man with a smile full of straight white teeth and enough of a tan to make him appear outdoorsy. He claims to enjoy good conversation and a nice pinot noir. His hobbies include running, hiking, and reading. He's looking for companionship and romance.

That's not what he's going to get today.

He doesn't deserve a nice life anyway. He's a liar, a cheat, a player. But the truth wouldn't make an attractive dating profile, would it?

Superficial, middle-age douchebag seeks hot younger woman to fuck and dump wouldn't get many swipes.

Killing him might seem a little harsh, but Spencer is a liar.

Not the worst one, but a liar just the same. He must pay for the way he treats people. Today, I'll cross him off my list.

I pull into the driveway of the vacant house and get out of my SUV. I pull my small backpack from the rear seat and 2

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heft it over one shoulder, then hoof it across the lawns to Spencer's driveway. I stop in front of his attached garage, pull disposable gloves from my pocket, and tug them on. Then I enter Spencer's four-digit passcode into the PIN pad mounted next to the doorframe—another important detail I gleaned from watching him through my binoculars.

The overhead door rolls up. I slip inside and hurry past the black F-150. I walk past the riding lawn mower that occupies the second half of the garage. At the door that leads into the house, I press the button mounted on the wall and lower the overhead door. It closes with a metallic rattle and thud.

I draw in a long, gasoline-scented breath.

I'm in.

Despite his life of deception, Spencer is a man of routine.

He uses the same passwords for everything. His dating app profile was ridiculously easy to hack. Today is Tuesday. He finished work an hour ago and is currently out for a run. He won't let a little thing like darkness interfere with his routine.

He'll return soon to prepare for the date he's expecting to arrive at six o'clock. He's supposed to cook her dinner. Won't she be surprised at what she finds?

My lips pull into a grin. My face is so tight, it feels as if the skin might split open. I wish I could stay and watch her reaction. The slut deserves what she gets, although none of this is her fault. I'm sure Spencer plans to treat her the same way he treats all women. She's just another one of his victims.

Most people are willing to take their lumps and move on.

Not me. I hold a grudge, nursing it like a newborn.

Focus!

I make my way through the mudroom into the kitchen.

Spencer didn't spare any expense on the renovation, with professional-grade appliances, granite counters, and a high-end slate floor. French doors open onto a covered patio. The 3

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teak outdoor table is set, complete with a vase of flowers, two plates, and two wineglasses. A neat pyramid of split logs, kindling, and tinder fill a sunken firepit. Graham crackers, chocolate, and marshmallows are lined up on a small table.

S'mores.

The only desserts Spencer will be having are his just ones.

I turn back to the great room. I've been in the house before. I needed to get familiar with the layout. A good plan minimizes potential surprises. I hurry for the stairs and jog to the second-floor landing. Down a short hall, I stick my head in the extra bedroom. Excitement ripples up my arms as goose bumps as I scan Spencer's collection. There are things you just don't expect to find in the average home.

Don't get ahead of yourself. Stay in the moment. The plan must proceed one step at a time.

Turning back, I return to the kitchen. I spot two thick steaks marinating on the counter. Filets. Romantic setting, good wine, a hearty meal. He's pulling out all the stops.

Clearly, he's banking on sex. After all, this is their third date.

In Spencer's very limited mindset, he deserves sex tonight.

The bastard.

How many women has he used and discarded?

Anger heats the back of my neck.

I check the time on my watch. Spencer will be back soon.

I need to get to my hiding location. My hand strays to my jacket pocket, where my tools weigh heavily. I have no desire for a fight. For my plan to work, Spencer must comply. Once he's restrained, the rest of the plan will play out smoothly.

Easy as pie, as my grandmother used to say.

But first I must obtain control. A sudden burst of nerves assaults me. My skin grows prickly and itchy. My stomach rolls over. Doubt tempts me

to abandon my plan. But I can't.

I promised myself I would get even. I'd better get my shit 4

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together. Tonight is only the beginning.

Users will be punished.

I head for a small closet that faces the kitchen and great room. The door is louvered, so I'll be able to see. Perfect. I push aside a ski jacket and step in, closing the door behind me. The minutes tick by. My heart skips, and I'm suddenly aware of the sound of my breathing. Is it loud, or is it echoing in my ears because of my adrenaline rush? A tune plays silently in my head, a damned earworm for sure.

Every breath you take.

I concentrate on controlling my lungs. I can't have Spencer hearing me. Can't have him ruining what I've so carefully planned.

I hear the motor of the garage door opener engage. A minute later, the door rattles closed.

Spencer is home.

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CHAPTER TWO

Breathing heavily, Spencer LaForge jogged up his driveway and let himself in through the garage door using his PIN pad.

In the kitchen, he glanced at the clock on the microwave. Less than an hour until his date was due to arrive. He could hardly wait. He grabbed a bottle of mineral water from the fridge, twisted off the cap, and drank deeply.

Opening the dating app on his phone, he stared at her picture again. Avery was hot with a capital *H*, with long legs and boobs to die for. In person, she looked like a model. He wanted to wrap that long hair around his hand and hold on tight. The photos didn't do her justice.

Water bottle in hand, he sauntered up to the granite island and turned the filets in the marinade. They'd be ready for the grill by the time he finished his shower. He glanced through the glass doors at the romantic scene he'd set.

A snow flurry drifted in the air, and Spencer smiled.

Cue the snow.

An outdoor dinner with a roaring fire and snow flurries was about as romantic as it could get.

He sipped his drink. He needed to be adequately hydrated, he thought with a grin. He'd fueled up with a lunch of raw oysters on the half shell. The night was going to be spectacular.

He'd primed Avery with two romantic evenings and a fuckton of flattery. On their second date, she'd practically melted. She 6

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was a sure thing.

Now for his shower. He turned toward the stairwell. A *click* stopped him. He looked down the hall. Empty. He stood still, listening hard. The noise had sounded like it had come from inside.

Nah. Couldn't be. He lived alone. No one had the code to his door or a key to his house except his biweekly cleaning woman, and she wasn't due until the following day. Had an animal followed him into the garage and gotten trapped? He headed for the hallway to investigate.

At the entrance to the hall, the closet door sprang open, and a figure leaped out.

Startled, Spencer had no time to assess the intruder. He pulled back an arm to deliver a punch. Something crackled.

A burning pain seared Spencer's hip and shot through his body. His muscles stiffened, and then his nerves seemed to short out. He pitched forward, his limbs limp and useless, and fell over like a bird electrocuted on a live wire. He wanted to throw out an arm to catch himself, but he had no control over his body. He crumpled to the floor. Pain knocked through his elbow and shoulder. He lay on his back, his muscles still not responding.

"Hello, Spencer," the intruder said.

Spencer wanted to speak, but his jaws were clamped tight, and his lips wouldn't work.

"Are you all right? You don't look well at all."

Spencer blinked hard, but the figure remained featureless.

He tried to roll over to his hands and knees, but his muscles were still on strike. He managed to get two words through his gritted teeth. "Help me." A plea.

The intruder rolled Spencer onto his side, tied his hands behind his back, and bound his ankles. Spencer wanted to struggle, but he couldn't control his arms. By the time his 7

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muscles started to obey his commands, it was too late. He was fully restrained.

Two hands grabbed him by the ankles. The intruder dragged him out the french doors. Spencer thumped over the door tracks. The patio pavers burned against the side of his face. Nausea stirred and swirled in his belly. But the fresh air helped clear his head, at least for a few seconds. A flake of snow drifted across his vision.

“It’s snowing.” The voice sounded impressed but also condescending. “You’ve outdone yourself tonight. This would have been the perfect date.”

Spencer gained control of his tongue and managed to spit out a weak, “Fuck you.”

“Fuck me? No, I think you’re the one who’s fucked.” The intruder jammed a small device at him. It crackled as it made contact with his hip, and the flash of electricity was like liquid fire roaring through his nervous system.

As he convulsed on the ground, his body useless, his brain screamed, *Stun gun!*

The figure leaned over him. Spencer’s eyes were not cooperating. Outside sounds echoed as if he were in a tunnel.

But his own heartbeat raced in his ears. That he heard loud and clear.

The intruder struck at him again. Another wave of current rushed through him. Aftershock or fresh shock? He looked up at the dark sky. A snowflake landed on his face. “Please,” he rasped.

A shadow loomed over him. “Shut up.” The voice faded.

Blackness swirled at the edges of Spencer’s vision. He squeezed his eyelids tightly closed. When he reopened them, nothing had changed. It wasn’t a dream. It was a nightmare—except Spencer was wide awake.

A hand slapped his cheek. “Stay with me. I want you ♂

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to know what’s happening. I want you to experience every single second of terror and pain. I want you to suffer. You’re a user, Spencer. You need to pay. You’ve never suffered any consequences for your actions before, have you? Guess what?

Today is full of firsts—mostly for me. For you, it will be full of lasts.”

Even if he wanted to, Spencer couldn’t respond. He was helpless, and deep inside him, he knew this was the day he was going to die.

CHAPTER THREE

Sheriff Bree Taggert adjusted the latch on the stall door with a screwdriver. The barn was cold, and her breath fogged in the early December evening air.

Her sixteen-year-old nephew, Luke, raked the dirt floor, leveling the surface. The stall hadn't been used in years, and horses had the uncanny ability to hurt themselves. When he finished with the rake, Luke used his pocketknife to cut the twine wrapped around a bale of straw.

"There's no guarantee that I'll find the right horse at the sale tomorrow." Bree tested the door. The latch worked smoothly. She shoved the screwdriver into the pocket of her jacket and helped her nephew spread the straw.

"You *have* to find Uncle Adam a horse." Eight-year-old Kayla stood in the aisle, holding a lead rope attached to her sturdy little horse, Pumpkin. "His birthday is Sunday! He needs to be surprised."

Since Adam had specifically asked for a rescue horse, Bree doubted surprise was on the table. But she hoped he'd be pleased.

"I'll do my best." Bree had inherited a farm and three horses when her younger sister was murdered. She had also been granted guardianship of her niece and nephew. It hadn't even been a year since she'd moved from Philadelphia to upstate New York, but Bree felt like she'd become a whole
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new person. She'd shed her old life and left it behind like a snakeskin. She didn't miss it at all.

"How old will Uncle Adam be?" Kayla asked.

"Twenty-nine," Bree answered. She couldn't believe this would be her baby brother's last year in his twenties.

Sometimes, it seemed barely any time had passed since he was an infant. Since she'd held him on a bitter winter night as they and their sister hid under the porch of their farmhouse while their father murdered their mother.

"Wow. That's old," Kayla said.

Bree laughed. "It is."

"Can we name the new horse?" Kayla dropped the rope, picked up a soft brush, and began brushing dried mud from Pumpkin's legs. Pumpkin,

who never exerted energy unless it was absolutely necessary, cocked one hind leg and shifted instantly into nap mode. His head and eyelids sagged.

“Don’t you think Uncle Adam should name his own horse?” Bree emerged from the stall, brushing straw dust from her jeans. From her napping spot next to the tack room door, Ladybug, the rescue dog, opened one eye. Satisfied her people were still there, she resumed sleeping.

“I guess,” Kayla grumbled.

But Bree knew the little girl would have dozens of suggestions for her uncle.

Luke’s horse, Riot, kicked his stall door.

“OK, Riot.” Luke laughed. “I know what time it is.” He headed for the feed room.

Kayla picked dirt out of Pumpkin’s hooves, then put the pony-size Haflinger in his stall and planted a kiss on his nose.

The scene was adorable, and Bree’s heart swelled with warm fuzzies, a feeling she hadn’t known existed until she started parenting. Her eyes misted—another new reaction—and she didn’t understand why her eyes were tearing up when she was *11*

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happy.

Except that Christmas was coming—the first one without their mother—her sister—Erin. If it weren’t for the kids, Bree wouldn’t even bother to celebrate. The festivities would only make her grief come roaring back. But that felt cowardly, and the kids deserved better. Bree had to show them by example that they could keep Erin in their hearts and simultaneously move forward.

If only she had some idea of how to do that.

Bree stopped in front of Cowboy’s stall and rubbed the paint gelding’s head. The sweet-natured horse had belonged to her sister. His company made Bree feel closer to Erin, and that soothed her. Impatient, Riot nickered over his half door. Bree stepped sideways so she could scratch both horses’

foreheads at the same time. As always, spending time with the kids and horses brought her a peace she hadn’t known existed. Sometimes she was so content with her new life, she felt guilty. Erin should be the one enjoying an evening with her kids. But that was not to be.

Bittersweet. Everything in life was bittersweet.

“Well, we’ll be ready if you get lucky.” Luke emerged from the feed room, carrying three containers. He dumped grain while Kayla tossed hay over doors and Bree topped off water buckets.

A few minutes later, Bree checked the stall door latches before leading the way out of the barn. Never wanting to be left behind, Ladybug got up from her napping spot and hurried to keep up. Bree turned off the lights, closed the barn door, and headed toward the back porch. A damp wind cut through her jacket, and she shivered.

“It’s snowing!” Kayla turned her face to the sky and opened her mouth, trying to catch a flurry on her tongue. Only a handful of flakes drifted through the night sky, but Kayla was 12

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an optimist. “Can we have hot cocoa?”

“Of course.” Bree opened the back door. The dog ran through the opening.

Bree and the kids shed their jackets and dirty boots at the back door and washed their hands. She checked the time and turned to Kayla. “If you get your shower and put on your pajamas, we can watch a movie.”

“Yay! I’ll hurry.” The little girl raced for the stairs. She was a slip of a thing, but her feet thundered up the wooden steps, loud as hoofbeats.

Luke started the popcorn while Bree went upstairs and changed into flannel pajama bottoms and thick socks. Her black tomcat, Vader, uncurled himself from his sleeping ball and sauntered across the bed for an ear rub. When she left the bedroom, the cat followed her to the kitchen. Vader bumped Bree’s leg and gave her a demanding meow.

“OK.” She spooned cat food onto a plate, carried it to an empty patch of counter, and set it next to his water bowl.

Vader followed, and purred while he ate. Yes. Feeding the cat on the counter was gross. But Bree had no options because the dog would eat anything she could reach. Also, the cat refused to share a water bowl with the dog. There were some aspects of Bree’s new life that were simply ridiculous.

The microwave dinged, and Luke poured the popcorn into a bowl.

Kayla ran into the room in pink fleece pajamas. “Can I carry the popcorn?”

Bree eyed the dog, who was eyeing the bowl. Ladybug looked innocent, but she’d never met a morsel of food she didn’t love. Also, the pudgy

pointer mix was much faster than she looked.

Bree redirected Kayla. "Can you get the napkins?"

"OK." Kayla rushed to the pantry.

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Bree loaded the mugs and popcorn onto a tray. "Movie choices?"

Kayla shouted, "*Frozen!*"

"Again?" Luke rolled his eyes. "You've watched that movie a hundred times. How about *Iron Man?*"

"Too scary." Kayla followed her brother into the family room.

Bree set the tray on the coffee table. "How about a movie neither of you have seen?" She picked up the remote and began to surf through the options. Her phone vibrated in her pocket. She pulled it out and read the screen. Dispatch.

Regret washed over her like cold rain. She didn't want to answer the call but knew dispatch would not reach out to her when she was off duty unless it was serious. "I have to grab this call." She got up and went to the kitchen before pressing

"Answer." "Sheriff Taggart."

"Sheriff, we have a reported 12-77," the dispatcher said.

Bree peered through the doorway at the two kids.

Shit.

The dispatcher gave an address on the opposite side of Randolph County.

Bree placed the address on a mental map. "ETA twenty minutes."

After sliding the phone back into her pocket, she returned to the family room.

Luke scanned her face, his own expression neutral. "You have to go."

"Yes," Bree said. "I'm sorry."

Disappointment crashed over Kayla's face. "But we were going to watch a movie."

"I know, honey. I'm sorry." Guilt filled Bree.

"It's OK." Kayla sniffed. "You're important. People need you," she said in a small, heartbreaking voice.

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This kid . . .

Luke gave his sister a playful poke in the shoulder. “We can watch *Frozen*.”

“Yay!” Kayla snatched the remote from the table.

“Thank you,” Bree mouthed at Luke. Her eyes went misty again at the scene. When she’d moved in last January, he’d been a teenage boy, but he was fast becoming a man—one who made her proud every day.

She ran upstairs and changed into her uniform. She jogged back down a few minutes later, shoving her gun into its holster on her hip. As she passed through the room, she kissed both kids. “I love you. Dana will be home from her date in a couple of hours.”

Bree’s best friend and former detective partner had retired and now lived with them as a sort-of nanny. Bree didn’t like to leave the kids alone. Her cop brain only generated worst-case scenarios, but Luke was mature enough to babysit.

Before she could issue any further instructions, Luke held up one hand in a *stop* gesture. “I know. Set the alarm. Get Kayla to bed by eight thirty. Do my homework.”

“You got it.” She smiled and headed for the door. She donned boots and a jacket and went outside. After the warmth of the house—and her flannel pj’s—the yard felt cold and sad.

She slid behind the wheel of her official SUV, turned on her lights and siren, and roared down the street. She checked in with dispatch for details and updates, then reached for her phone to call Matt Flynn, her criminal investigator—and boyfriend, for lack of a better term. She was going to need him. 12-77 was radio code for homicide.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Bree came to an abrupt stop and stared.

She wasn’t easy to shock. Before she became the sheriff of Randolph County, she worked for the Philadelphia PD, first as a patrol officer, then as a detective. Her last assignment had been in homicide.

Next to her, Matt muttered, “Fuck,” under his breath.

Bree glanced at him. He propped both hands on his hips. As a civilian consultant, he wore a tan jacket bearing the sheriff’s department logo, tactical cargo pants, and work boots.

Snowflakes dotted his closely cropped reddish-brown hair and short beard.

“Yeah.” Chief Deputy Todd Harvey stood at her other side. “Fuck.” Bree had no better response.

Their three flashlight beams brightened a patio made of gray stone pavers. A sunken firepit had been built into one of the outside corners. The body of a man was sprawled between the french doors and the firepit. Something shiny and opaque covered his face. No, it was wrapped around his whole head.

Bree leaned closer. “Is that plastic food wrap?”

“I believe it is,” Todd answered.

A resounding *fuck* echoed in Bree’s brain.

Todd continued. “Avery Ledger called 911 at 6:07 p.m. to report finding the dead body of Spencer LaForge. Mr. LaForge 16

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is the homeowner.”

Using the few details she’d provided, dispatch had labeled the call as a 12-77, a possible homicide. Legally, *homicide* was a broad term defined as the killing of one person by another.

That killing could be legal, as in self-defense, or illegal, as in murder and manslaughter.

Bree eyed the victim’s hands, bound behind his back.

No question. This was definitely murder.

Matt gestured to the zip ties around the victim’s wrists and ankles. “Zip ties will dig into the skin if you try to get out of them. I don’t see any deep cuts. The victim was either surprised and/or quickly overpowered and restrained.”

Bree stepped back to view the scene in its entirety. She eyed the tipped-over scattered flowers and broken glass vase on the pavers. A bottle of wine stood upright on the table. The chairs were still neatly tucked under the table. “An extensive struggle would have left a bigger mess. They didn’t even knock over the bottle of wine.” She pictured an efficient, fast, well-planned attack. “He isn’t a small man, and he looks to be in good physical condition. He should have put up a fight.”

“There could have been more than one intruder,” Todd suggested.

“That’s possible.” Bree scanned the grass but saw no path of crushed blades that would indicate a body had been dragged. A bloodless kill meant no obvious trail of blood to follow. The victim wore running clothes: black track pants and a zip-up jacket with neon stripes on the sleeves. One

sneaker was missing. Bree spotted it on the patio near the door. “The sneaker by the door suggests he was dragged from the house or kicked it off at some point during the murder.”

Her gaze returned to the plastic-shrouded head. Had he been conscious? Had his lungs burned from lack of oxygen? Had he known what was happening?

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A urine stain darkened the front of his pants. His bladder could have voided after death as normal—or in his last moments as he panicked. He would have blacked out in a couple of minutes, but those could have felt like very long minutes.

Unease swirled sickly through her gut. No matter how many murder scenes she’d worked, the sense of wrongness never failed to flatten her. How could one human do such terrible things to another?

“Could this victim be someone other than the homeowner?”

Bree asked. “We can’t see his face.” And they’d have to wait for the medical examiner to remove the plastic wrap, which could contain trace evidence, fingerprints, and/or touch DNA.

“The woman who found him recognized his tattoo. She says it’s a full sleeve.” Todd pointed to the edge of Spencer’s jacket sleeve, which was pushed up, revealing three inches of intricate ink above the zip tie. Todd scrolled on his phone, then tilted it so Bree could see the screen. “Here’s his driver’s license photo and info.”

At six feet tall, Spencer LaForge had been a fit one hundred seventy pounds. He was clean-shaven, and his dark hair was short and cut in a precise style.

“OK. So, it’s probably him.” She blinked, shifting her gaze to her chief deputy. “Did you clear the property?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Todd turned his shoulders and pointed behind him, at a set of french doors. “We gained entry through the patio doors, which were unlocked. There was no one inside.”

Large windows spanned the back of the restored farmhouse. Lights blazed inside, providing a clear view of the open floor plan interior. Bree could see into a large, modern kitchen and family room. There was too much glass to call the house a fishbowl. It was a frigging aquarium.

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Todd said, "It was clear he was dead, so I thought it best not to remove the plastic."

"Good call." Bree pointed her flashlight at the body. The visible skin of the hands and neck looked gray in the artificial light. Saving a life was always the number one goal, but if that wasn't possible, preserving the evidence was the next priority.

Once evidence was moved, there was no putting it back.

Todd exhaled. "I notified the medical examiner's office and called for a forensics team."

"We'll need additional deputies too," Bree added, turning her attention to her chief deputy. Back in September, he'd been kidnapped, beaten, and nearly killed in an investigation. He'd recovered and even resumed both his work and his triathlon training, but he'd lost weight from his already-lean six-foot frame. Bree was concerned about his emotional well-being.

This would be his first murder investigation since his trauma.

Though he'd been cleared for duty by a psychiatrist, she would keep a close eye on him.

Todd nodded. "On the way."

"Call in everyone you can get. Get an ETA from the ME.

If she's going to be long, set up a tarp or tent over the body.

Prioritize searching outdoor areas." Bree eyed the sky. Flurries drifted in the damp wind. The big, wet flakes melted as they landed, but the temperature was dropping. Normally, she preferred daylight to search outdoor crime scenes, but tonight, they couldn't wait. "We need to find evidence before it's covered in snow. We'll need a generator and portable lights."

"Already requested," Todd said.

"Good." Bree was impressed with the improvement of his investigation skills since she'd taken office.

The distant wail of a siren signaled the approach of additional responders. She heard voices and vehicle doors being

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slammed. Bree exhaled, the tightness of her lungs indicating she'd been restricting her breath. "Sounds like reinforcements are here. Matt, you take over out here. Todd, take me to the 911 caller, then get that ETA from the medical examiner."

With a fresh corpse, the sooner the ME arrived, the more accurate her assessment of time of death would be.

As Bree followed Todd from the backyard around the side of the house toward the street, she heard Matt check in with a deputy setting up barriers and stringing up crime scene tape.

When she reached the front of the house, she saw a red Prius in the driveway and two more patrol vehicles parked on the street. The road was a dead end, with only two other houses in sight.

“Did you knock on the neighbors’ doors?” Bree asked.

“Yes, ma’am.” Todd pointed to the house next door, which sported a for-sale sign and a fair amount of neglect. “That one looks vacant.” He indicated the house across the street. “No one answered there, but the place looks occupied.”

He led Bree to the second patrol car. A woman was huddled in the back seat.

A deputy stood next to the vehicle. “She was shivering. I put her in the car and turned on the heat.”

Peering into the vehicle, Bree recognized a dark sheriff’s department blanket wrapped around the woman’s shoulders.

Todd opened the rear door. “Ms. Ledger?”

The woman looked up. Tears spilled from red-rimmed eyes and streaked down her face. “You can call me Avery.” Her voice was small and trembly.

“Could you step out of the vehicle, please?” Todd asked.

“The sheriff would like to speak with you.”

“Of course.” She climbed out, wobbling on her high heels. She was in her midtwenties, and she’d put effort into her appearance that night. Tight jeans, thigh-high boots, and 20

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a cute puffy jacket flattered her young figure. But crying had taken its toll. Her hair was tangled. Long strands stuck to her tear-dampened face, mascara ringed her eyes, and her lipstick was smeared. Though she was wearing a jacket, she kept the blanket around her shoulders, clutching the edges together in front of her chest.

Todd introduced Bree, then bowed out.

Bree pulled a pen and notebook from her jacket pocket. “I understand you found Mr. LaForge?”

Avery nodded and pressed a hand over her mouth.

Swallowing hard, she closed her eyes, visibly composing herself.

She opened her eyes. “Yes,” came out in a shaky whisper.

Bree gave her a few seconds to elaborate, but Avery just blinked, like a raccoon caught in the beam of a flashlight. Bree prompted, “What brought you here?”

Avery regarded the ground, her eyes unfocused, like she was seeing something other than the asphalt. “We had a date.

He was going to make me dinner. He didn’t answer the door.

I went around back because he’d said he was going to grill steaks. I thought he might be outside. But he was . . . He was

. . .” Her voice broke. “He was dead,” she sobbed.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” Bree said. Interviewing witnesses required a delicate balance between empathizing and extracting information. She felt terrible making shocked people recount their trauma, but the early hours of an investigation were critical. She wanted to catch the killer before he inflicted suffering on anyone else. She gave the woman a few seconds to compose herself, then asked, “What time did you get here?”

Avery wiped her face with two shaking hands. “Around six.” “Where were you before that?”

“Work,” Avery said. “I left the office at five and stopped home to change before driving out here.”

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Melinda Leigh

“How well did you know Spencer?” Bree asked.

Avery sighed. “This was only going to be our third date, but we’ve been messaging a lot.”

“How did you meet?”

“On the dating app TechLove.com,” Avery said.

“I assume that’s a dating app for people who work in tech?”

Avery nodded. “I’m a social media content creator with Get Fit Apparel. Spencer is—was—a digital marketer, but he’s self-employed.”

“Have you met any of Spencer’s friends, family, or coworkers?”

“No.” Avery sniffed. “I’ve only known him about two weeks. On our first date, we were supposed to just meet for coffee. I don’t like to commit to anything more than that. There are too many creeps out there. But Spencer and I seemed to connect right away, so we ended up walking around town after the coffee. It was a nice day, so we got ice cream and sat

on a bench at the park. We talked for hours. The next weekend, we had dinner together.” She hiccuped. “I thought I might have found The One.” She bawled out the last word. Her breath hitched, and she pressed her fingertips to her closed eyes.

After Avery lowered her hands, Bree asked, “Did he mention family nearby?”

“His parents are dead, but he has a brother here in Grey’s Hollow. His name is Jasper.” Avery pressed a knuckle to her lips. “They were really close. Jasper named his oldest boy after Spencer. He’s going to be devastated.”

Bree motioned toward the farmhouse. “Had you ever been to Spencer’s house before tonight?”

Avery shook her head. “No, and he hadn’t been to mine either.”

“When was the last time you communicated with him?”

“He called me last night to confirm our date and tell me 22

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to wear something warm. He wanted to light his firepit and watch the snow. I thought it was a really romantic idea. That’s the last time I spoke with him.” Avery swiped the back of her hand across her face.

“Thank you for your help. We may need to ask you additional questions.” With no reason to doubt her story, Bree collected Avery’s contact information and summoned a deputy. “See that she gets home safely.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the deputy said.

Bree found Todd standing behind the open trunk of his patrol vehicle, cell phone held between his chin and shoulder.

As she approached, he lowered his phone and shoved it into the clip on his duty belt. “I called in four more uniforms to help search the crime scene.”

Bree brushed a snowflake from her sleeve. The flurries were thickening. “We have no time to waste.”

23

CHAPTER FIVE

An hour later, Matt scanned the rear of the property. A generator hummed, and portable lights blazed across the yard, brightening it like a football stadium. Spread out every ten feet or so, deputies walked in a line across the yard. At the end of that line, Matt pointed his flashlight at the

ground. Flurries drifted through the cold air. Despite the falling temps, the ground had not yet frozen. The snowflakes melted as they landed, and his boots squished in a thin layer of mud.

The cold-bloodedness of the murder set off all his instincts. Matt had plenty of experience working crime scenes.

He'd worked as both an investigator and a K-9 handler for the sheriff's department until a shooting—and the previous corrupt sheriff—had ended his career as a deputy. But the details of this killing made all the hairs on the back of his neck not only stand up but wave a flag as well. Only a psychopath could wrap plastic wrap around a man's head and watch him suffocate. Matt wanted this sick bastard in a cell before anyone else appeared in his crosshairs.

He moved slowly, carefully scanning his section of the ground for evidence. In the area next to Spencer's driveway, Matt's beam fell on a footprint. Had the killer walked around the house? Maybe casing the place? Matt squatted and examined the print closer. The grass was too thick to see much more than vague impressions. No tread was visible, and he 24

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doubted they'd even be able to determine the size of the shoe.

Still, the prints needed to be documented.

He called out to the closest deputy. "We need to block off this area."

A deputy jogged over with stakes and crime scene tape.

They cordoned off the footstep impressions.

Matt didn't find anything else of interest. At the overhead garage door, he shone his flashlight through the high window.

A pickup truck and lawn mower sat side by side.

Matt went looking for Bree. He found her on the back patio, examining the doorknob. Her duty belt and bulky sheriff's jacket camouflaged a lean, athletic body. She was shining her flashlight on the patio door handle, no doubt looking for scratch marks or other indication that the lock had been picked or the door forcibly opened.

Snow dusted the shoulders of her jacket. A canopy had been erected over the body to protect it from the precipitation.

The medical examiner had not yet arrived, so the body remained *in situ*. Deputies and forensics techs moved around the sprawled victim, photographing and sketching the scene, setting up evidence markers. It felt clinical, almost obscene, to work around the corpse as if it weren't there.

“Any sign of forced entry?” Matt asked.

“No.” She straightened and clicked off the light. “And the other doors and windows are secure. Spencer didn’t have a security system. He didn’t even have a doorbell camera.”

“Spencer is dressed for a run. Maybe he left the back door unlocked.” Matt knew plenty of people who lived out in the country didn’t bother locking their doors, particularly in the daytime. He told her about the footprint. “There’s no tread to cast.” “Damn.” Bree shook her head. “Ready to take the search inside?”

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Melinda Leigh

“Let’s do it.”

They donned shoe covers and gloves before they went inside. The kitchen was sleek and modern. The adjoining living room took clutter-free to new heights. A leather couch faced a fireplace with a TV mounted above it. Every surface shone.

“No photos. No knickknacks. No fingerprints or smudges.” Matt’s gaze swept the bare space. “Except for the dinner prep, it doesn’t look like anyone lives here.”

“When I lived in my apartment in Philly, I hardly ever made a mess that needed to be cleaned up. I ate over the sink.”

“That’s sad.” Matt had watched her change since she’d moved to Grey’s Hollow. The Bree of the past had been alone, even in a roomful of people. But to help the kids process their mother’s death, Bree had been forced to give up her aloof loner ways. Matt was profoundly grateful.

She lifted a shoulder. “It didn’t seem so at the time, but now that I’m used to general chaos, I think a little mess is homey.”

“I’m a bachelor too, but my house looks lived in.”

“You have a big dog.”

Surveying the operating-room sterility of Spencer LaForge’s house, Matt was grateful for the clumps of dog fur and drool trails on his own tile.

Bree took a photo of a steak marinating in a dish on the counter. “Avery said Spencer had planned to grill steaks for them for dinner.”

A laptop sat on the kitchen island. Matt lifted the lid with one gloved finger and touched the space bar. The computer woke. The screen brightened to show a dating site called Cool Beans. The tagline at the top of the screen described it as a low-key app for no-pressure dating.

Bree peered over his shoulder. “Avery said she met him 26
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through a different site.”

“Plenty of online daters use multiple apps.”

Bree frowned. “Avery thought he might be The One for her. If Spencer was actively seeking more dates, maybe he didn’t share that sentiment.”

“The app logged him out, so I can’t see his account.” Matt closed the laptop, then scanned the delicate wineglasses and general tidiness of the space. “No sign of a struggle in here.”

“And we’d know if anything was out of place. This guy was particular about his space.” Bree pointed to a drawer she’d just opened.

Acrylic organizers separated pencils from pens from paper clips. Writing implements all pointed in the same direction.

She moved to another drawer. “That’s weird. This one is empty.”

Matt opened cabinets. “Half his cabinets are empty too.

He has the basics, but not the amount of equipment I would expect with this fancy kitchen setup.”

“Maybe the renovation is recent.”

“Or he ran out of money.”

Bree opened the fridge. “His condiments are lined up by bottle height with all the labels facing the same direction.”

“That’s beyond neat.”

“After living on a farm with two kids, a big dog, and a cat, I find this level of organization disturbing.”

They walked through the rest of the first floor, finding nothing that looked out of place.

“Let’s try the upstairs.” Bree led the way to the second floor. The first bedroom was a home office. Matt checked the desk drawers. “Not much in here. Plans for his kitchen renovation, receipts. A few bills. Aha. Here’s a collection notice.” He riffled through a neat stack of papers in a drawer.

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Melinda Leigh

“And another one.”

Bree opened the closet. “There’s a firesafe in here. He might keep his important records in that. We’ll have to get someone to open it.”

Matt ducked into the next room. “This is strange.” Glass tanks in varying sizes lined shelves. The tanks were outfitted like mini habitats with

branches, water bowls, and heat lamps for the reptiles that occupied them.

Bree followed him in. “Turtles, lizards . . . what is that?”

She pointed to a tank on the end.

“A snake.”

Bree sighed and shot him a *Really?* look. “What kind? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

He leaned in to get a better view. About three or so feet long and slender, the snake was mostly white with scattered red scales. He pulled out his phone. “Google says it’s a Palmetto corn snake. It seems corn snakes are friendly, easy to care for, and popular as pets. This one is rare because of its color.”

Bree’s face did not approve.

“It’s harmless and kind of cute,” Matt said.

Bree scanned the tanks below it. “There are five of them.”

“This could be a hobby *or* a side business,” Matt suggested.

She stopped in front of an empty space on the middle shelf. “What do you think of these empty spaces? Looks like three tanks were removed.”

“He could have sold some animals.” Matt leaned closer.

“But the surface is very dusty, and the rest of the house is spotless. Feels like he would have dusted the shelf if he had the time.”

“Maybe he’s been busy with work.” Bree opened the closet.

“Gross.”

“What?” Matt walked over and peered over her shoulder.

The closet was fitted with industrial shelves lined with 28

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containers of turtle pellets, live crickets, and mealworms.

A small chest freezer squatted on the other side of the closet. “Not sure I want to open this.” She lifted the lid, then quickly let it drop. “Ugh.”

“What?”

She raised the lid again and turned her head to read a label. “Pinkies.” She grimaced. “Baby mice.” Her gaze shifted.

“There are larger mice and rats too.”

“Snake food.”

“Yeah.” Bree shivered. “Not a fan.”

Matt shrugged. “Personally, I prefer furry animals, but lots of people keep snakes as pets. Most of them are completely harmless, even beneficial.”

Bree waved a hand. “I know they keep the rodent population in check. I wouldn’t want to hurt one. But I also don’t want to hug one.”

Matt surveyed the space. “Since it appears three habitats are missing, the most likely conclusion is that the animals were either stolen, sold, or died. But we should keep an eye out, just in case.”

Bree stopped cold. Searching the floor, she made a noise he couldn’t quite identify, but she didn’t sound happy. They stepped into the primary bedroom.

“Someone will have to care for Spencer’s animals,” Matt said. “I’ll call animal control.” Bree turned right. “I’ll take the bathroom.”

Matt crossed the pale gray carpet to stand by the bed.

A wallet sat on the nightstand, next to an iPad. He took a picture, then picked up the wallet and thumbed through it.

“Cash and credit cards are still in his wallet.”

Bree poked her head out of the bathroom and frowned. “I found a two-year-old bottle of Vicodin in the medicine chest.

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More than twenty pills are left.”

“So it’s unlikely he was a drug addict. And this wasn’t a burglary gone wrong unless the stolen items were rare reptiles.”

Matt closed the wallet. Cash, drugs, and electronics were the most commonly stolen household items.

“Gunshots or blunt force trauma say burglary gone wrong.

Plastic wrap around the head feels personal.” Bree ducked back into the bathroom.

Matt turned to the closet. Clothing was organized by type, with color subgrouping. He checked labels and pockets.

There were no dry-cleaning bags shoved onto shelves, not a single stray dirty sock. Shoes were lined up in a neat, polished row on the floor.

“Find anything?” Bree asked from the doorway.

“Every pocket is empty.” Matt straightened the hanger of the suit pants he’d been searching. “Spencer liked designer labels.”

“He used pricey personal grooming products too,” Bree said. Her phone buzzed. She tilted the phone, still attached to her belt, to view the screen.

“The ME is here.”

Matt followed her out the front door. In addition to the medical examiner's van, several news crews had also arrived.

A deputy was barring them from the property, so they were setting up to deliver sound bites from the road. Bree made a sharp turn, clearly avoiding the media, and they walked along the side of the house to the rear yard. When they reached the back patio, Todd joined them at the edge of the pavers.

The medical examiner, Dr. Serena Jones, was a tall African American woman. She was all business, from her unflinching gaze to her ground-eating stride. On the cases Matt had worked over the past months, she'd proven to be an excellent ME. Thorough, compassionate, dedicated. She stood a few 30

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feet from the body, scanning the scene. She wore rubber boots, a parka, and a knit hat over her close-cropped hair.

She exchanged a pair of leather gloves for surgical ones. While she sized up the crime scene, her assistant took pictures. He moved in a spiral pattern around the body, photographing the victim and scene from all angles and distances.

"Killer did a thorough job of it." Dr. Jones leaned closer to the victim's head. "That's a lot of plastic wrap. I'm going to wait to remove the plastic until I get him to the morgue. Don't want to lose any evidence."

Bree nodded in agreement.

Dr. Jones tilted her head, assessing the victim's hands. "I don't see defensive wounds, but I'll have to confirm that on autopsy."

The ME pressed the skin on the back of the victim's hand and moved a finger. "He looks relatively fresh. Rigor hasn't set in yet." Rigor mortis was the postmortem stiffening of muscles, which typically began about two hours after death, though the cold could slow the process. "Hard to judge lividity with a fully dressed body, but I doubt he's been dead more than two hours. Body temp should give us a decent approximation of time of death."

In general, a dead body lost approximately 1.5 degrees of heat after death in a process called algor mortis. But using body temp to determine the postmortem interval, or PMI, was complicated by factors such as ambient temperature, the body's state of dress, and leanness of the corpse. Once a dead body reached ambient temperature, algor mortis was no longer useful in determining the time of death.

Once her assistant stepped back, Dr. Jones pulled a scalpel from her kit. Squatting next to the body, she began to raise the hem of the jacket and underlying T-shirt. Liver temperature was the most accurate way to measure the body's core body 31

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temp. "Look here." She pointed to a pair of small red marks on the victim's hip. "Burns from a stun gun."

"Now we know how he was overpowered," Bree said.

"Was it definitely a stun gun and not a Taser?" Matt asked.

"Yes." The ME pointed to the burns. "There are no punctures from barbs."

A Taser fired a projectile that attached to the target, while a stun gun was a close-range weapon that required the user to physically hold the device in place to deliver the shock. A Taser could be used from ten feet away. A stun gun was up close and personal.

The ME continued. "There are multiple strikes here at the hip. There's a nerve center at the hip. Hitting him here maximizes the effectiveness of the stun gun."

Matt leaned over to see the marks more clearly. "So, the killer or killers knew what they were doing."

"Great." Bree's voice rang with sarcasm. "Just what we needed, an experienced killer who likes to get close to his victim."

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CHAPTER SIX

Several hours later, Bree drove toward Jasper LaForge's address, dreading the news she needed to deliver. In the passenger seat of her official SUV, Matt leaned sideways to access the dashboard computer. They'd dropped off his Suburban at the sheriff's station.

A death notification was one of the worst duties she had to perform. But it needed to be done that night, before Spencer was identified by the press or on social media. No one should accidentally find out about a deceased loved one. It was bad enough to find the police on your doorstep late at night.

"What do we know about the brother?" Bree asked. The purpose of their visit was to deliver the death notification, but they were also investigating a murder, a dual process that required a delicate balance of compassion and intrusion.

“He’s fifty-seven. He’s lived at his current address for eleven years.” Matt tapped on the keyboard. “I don’t see any legal issues other than a couple of speeding tickets. He has a motorcycle license in addition to a regular auto license.”

The GPS announced their arrival. Most of the homes on the block were neat. But not this one. Not much light managed to penetrate the filthy glass of the front porch lamp, but even in the dimness of a half moon, Bree could see mold spreading over the siding and weedy vines crawling through cracks in the driveway. Darkness and neglect gave the house 33

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a menacing air. It was the sort of house neighborhood kids dared each other to tag.

Bree studied the run-down property. “Are we sure this is the right address? It doesn’t look much like Spencer’s place.”

Matt checked the screen of the dashboard computer. “This is it.” They got out and walked toward the small, one-story house. The rusting carcass of an ancient sedan perched on cinder blocks in the side yard. There was no garage, but a tarp-covered motorcycle occupied the carport. Blinds covering the front window were closed tight.

Next to her, Matt pressed the doorbell. No chimes echoed inside. The house remained quiet. He rapped his knuckles on the door next to the peephole.

She’d left Todd at the scene, assisting forensics and requesting the appropriate warrants for Spencer LaForge’s cell phone, financial, and other personal records, including his dating app profiles and history. The ME had taken away the body, but the forensics techs in Tyvek coveralls were still crawling over the house and patio, dusting and swabbing surfaces and bagging and tagging evidence.

The door opened. A big bald man in his late fifties stood in the opening. Spencer had been a clean-cut, sharp dresser.

This man was tall, with a shaved head and an unkempt gray beard. He wore dirty jeans, a sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off, and huge biker shitkickers. He looked nothing like the victim. Could they have the wrong address?

“We’re looking for Jasper LaForge.” Bree’s nerve endings prickled. She tried to look past the man and into the house.

The interior was dark.

Bree was suddenly very aware of the weight of her weapon on her hip. Next to her, Matt tensed. He didn't carry a gun.

He'd been shot in the hand years before and had never 34

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recovered his accuracy with a handgun. But his hand-to-hand was first-rate.

"What do you want with him?" The man scanned her uniform.

If this was Jasper, his reaction was weird.

Also suspicious.

Bree's belly cramped, but this wasn't the first time she'd delivered a death notification to someone who didn't trust the police. "No. I'm afraid we have some bad news. Are you Jasper?"

The man's eyes narrowed to wary slits. "Why do you want to know?"

Fabric rustled inside the house. He wasn't alone.

Bree introduced herself and Matt. "May we come inside?"

Jasper crossed his arms. "Do you have a warrant?"

"No," she said.

"Then you can say whatever it is right here." Jasper stepped toward her.

She moved backward to make room for him on the small stoop. Before his motorcycle boot hit the concrete, a gunshot sounded from inside the house. A bullet whizzed through the open doorway. Bree dropped into the flower bed, her heart jackhammering. Matt jumped off the stoop.

Jasper crouched, covering his head with his arms, and shouted into the house, "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He shifted to duck back into the house, but Matt launched himself through the air and tackled Jasper to the dormant grass. They hit the earth and rolled. Matt landed on top, of course. He cuffed Jasper and patted him down. Lying flat on the front lawn, Matt and Jasper were protected by the concrete stoop. The shooter didn't have a clear shot at them, but they couldn't make it to the SUV without passing through the shooter's potential line of fire. They were pinned.

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On her knees in the dirt, Bree drew her weapon and used her lapel mic to call dispatch and request backup, though her department was small and most of her on-duty deputies were across town at the crime scene. Unless a state trooper happened to be nearby, she and Matt were on their own.

But the shooter didn't know that.

She called out, "This is the sheriff. Drop your weapons and come out with your hands on your head!"

"Fuck you!" someone replied.

Matt lifted Jasper's face off the ground. "How many people are inside?"

"One," Jasper hissed as Matt dropped his head and his cheek hit the grass. "One fucking moron."

A second shot rang out. The bullet hit the stoop next to Bree, kicking up bits of concrete.

Stupidity got people killed.

"Knock it off, Ricky!" Jasper yelled.

"Where is he?" Bree aimed into the darkness.

"I don't fucking know," Jasper answered.

Bree's finger curled around the trigger. She was trained to stop a threat, but she didn't want to shoot blindly into the dark, with no visible target. She needed to deescalate the situation, not make it worse.

But how?

She spotted rocks in the flower bed. She curled her fingers around one the size of a golf ball. She lobbed it toward the corner of the house. It struck the siding with a loud crack. She tossed a second rock and struck the house closer. Then she yelled to no one, "Go around back!" She threw another stone right through the window, breaking the glass.

A yelp sounded inside the house.

Bree turned back to the open doorway and shouted, "You're surrounded. This is your last chance. Drop your weapon and 36

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come out of the house with your hands on your head."

Something moved in the dark. Bree held her gun steady and listened. A faint scratching sound came from the house.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw a shape moving inside.

"Don't shoot me," came the desperate-sounding plea. "I'm coming out."

Bree kept her weapon trained on the doorway. A shadow appeared.

"Let me see your hands!" she yelled.

"They're up. They're fucking up." The figure stepped over the threshold, his hands raised as high as he could get them.

"Where's your weapon?" Bree scanned his clothing for suspicious gun-size bulges.

“Inside! On the floor,” Ricky cried. “Don’t shoot.” He stepped into the dim light of the porch lamp. Blood bloomed on the sleeve of his gray hoodie.

“Why are you bleeding?” she asked.

“A piece of glass from the window hit me,” Ricky sniveled.

Bree was on him in a second, taking control. She spun him around, shoved his face into the doorjamb, and cuffed his hands behind his back. She lifted the hem of his shirt, looking for weapons in the waistband of his low-riding jeans.

“Anything sharp in your pockets? Is anything going to stick me?” “No,” he cried. “You’re hurting me.”

Bree turned out his pockets. She found keys, cash, and two small packets of white powder. “What’s this?”

Ricky didn’t answer.

“You know I’ll get it tested,” Bree said.

“It’s just a little H.”

Heroin.

“I need a doctor,” Ricky whined.

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Melinda Leigh

“You’ll get one.” Bree pressed her lapel mic and called for an ambulance.

“You can’t arrest me.” True disbelief rang in his voice. “I didn’t shoot anybody.”

“You opened fire at law enforcement officers.” Bree turned him around to face her. Her heart clenched. He was just a kid.

A high schooler, maybe fifteen or sixteen years old.

“I didn’t mean to shoot. I got scared. I freaked out.” Panic lifted the pitch in the boy’s voice.

He’s about the same age as Luke.

Bree felt sick. If the situation had gone sideways, she could have shot a kid. She’d thought of an alternative at the last moment, but if her diversion hadn’t worked . . .

Yes, the situation was Ricky’s fault, but when she looked at him, her mind’s eye saw Luke’s face. Her throat tightened.

“Everything OK?” Matt stood over Jasper, who was sitting on his ass on the lawn, his legs outstretched, his hands cuffed behind his back.

“I’m bleeding,” Ricky complained.

Bree took a deep breath, buried her emotions, and refocused on the job at hand. She widened the rip in Ricky’s sleeve to check the boy’s injury. A thin stream of blood ran down his arm. The wound was definitely not life-threatening.

The skin below the wound revealed Ricky’s real problems. Red welts and scars ran down his pale inner arm. Track marks.

Ricky’s wound was superficial, but he was an addict.

“I’m gonna pass out,” Ricky cried.

Bree assured him, “You might need a few stitches, but you will not bleed to death. You will be fine.”

“I’m not fine. I’m gonna barf.” Ricky retched. Vomit hit the concrete and splashed onto Bree’s shoes.

“Sit.” Bree guided Ricky onto the step. “Put your head between your knees.”

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Lie to Her

The kid obeyed, the arrogance and overwhelming dumbassery apparently scared out of him. Tears and snot streamed down his face. “It hurts.”

But it could have been so much worse. Bree could have shot and potentially even killed him. The realization swam like mud through her gut until *she* wanted to puke. This wasn’t the first time she’d been involved in a shooting, but the other incidents had been with adults. They’d made the choices that brought them into her sights. This felt different. For all of Ricky’s faults, he was just a kid, and she couldn’t see him the same way.

Ricky lifted his chin. “My dad’s gonna sue.”

Bree had no doubt he would. She’d resolved the situation without anyone getting seriously hurt, but the truth didn’t always matter. “Are you related to Jasper?”

Ricky shook his head.

“Did you come here to buy heroin?” she asked the teen.

“I don’t sell drugs!” Jasper yelled from the grass. He sounded indignant, as if the question was offensive.

“Are you sure there’s no one else inside the house?” Matt asked him again.

Jasper hesitated, then said, “Yeah.”

Bree didn't like the way he'd paused, but she couldn't clear the house until backup arrived.

A siren wailed in the distance.

Ricky's posture stiffened. "I'm not saying anything else without a lawyer."

Great. Now he uses his brain.

Bree suppressed an eye roll. "I need your parents' contact information."

"I don't have to tell you anything," Ricky balked.

Bree rubbed an ache in her temple. "You know I have to call them."

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Melinda Leigh

Ricky grumbled but gave her his father's phone number.

She glanced at Jasper, to the bleeding teenage shooter, to the vomit spatter, which she now noticed had splattered her pants as well as her shoes.

She almost said, *Could this night get any worse*, but stopped herself.

Because it could always get worse.

Two deputies arrived. Lights swirled from the tops of their patrol cars. Bree instructed them to lock the prisoners in their vehicles. She stopped at her SUV and retrieved her AR-15 for Matt. He couldn't aim a handgun, but he could shoot a long gun just fine.

Working as a team, she and Matt entered through the front door. Ten steps into the house, a foul odor hit the back of her throat. The smell was unmistakable. "Decomp."

"Yes." Matt coughed.

Something—or someone—was dead.

The front door opened directly into a living room. The black vinyl couch was peeling and ripped. Several piles of cash and a game controller occupied the coffee table. The only other furniture was a huge, new-looking recliner that faced a big-screen TV mounted on the wall. A video game console sat beneath the TV.

A pistol lay on the floor.

Bree gestured to it. "That could be the one Ricky used to shoot at us. He said he left it on the floor."

They moved quickly through the rooms. In the hall closet, they found a sawed-off shotgun under legal limits. Once the rooms were cleared, they'd wait for the warrant to come in before conducting a detailed search. Bree didn't want any recovered evidence to be thrown out of court.

The kitchen was worn but surprisingly clean. The master bedroom contained a king-size bed, one nightstand, 40

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and another big TV. The second bedroom held a desk and computer. They checked closets and peered into any spaces large enough to conceal a person. But they found no one.

A short hallway led to the laundry room and another door.

Bree had seen narrow windows in the foundation.

“Basement?”

With a nod, Matt stopped beside the door. Their eyes met.

She silently counted to three, exaggerating the words with her lips. On three, Matt opened the door. The smell that rushed out pushed them back a step.

Belly roiling, Bree covered her mouth and nose with her lapel.

“Something is definitely dead down there.”

Matt’s face pursed in disgust. He pulled out his flashlight and shone it down a set of stairs. They could hear movement in the darkness. Bree reached past him and flipped a wall switch. Light illuminated a narrow set of wooden steps.

Bree sized up the stairwell. Stairwells were the worst—

which is why they were called *fatal funnels* in training. If someone was hiding down there waiting to ambush them . . .

To control her heartbeat and minimize the onslaught of adrenaline, Bree took a few deep breaths—then regretted it.

She gagged as the smell of rotting flesh filled her sinuses and mouth.

Matt’s face tightened and his skin had paled. He was breathing shallowly.

“Let’s get this over with.” Bree kept her shoulder to the wall and started down. She moved slowly but steadily, making sure she could see each slice of the room before any potential armed suspect could see her. The basement had been roughly finished. Sheet vinyl covered the concrete floor, and the cinder blocks had been painted a pale shade of blue. Three walls had been fitted out with metal shelving units. Rows upon rows of glass tanks lined the shelves.

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The movement she’d heard from upstairs had been slithering.

Snakes occupied the tanks.

Next to her, Matt muttered, "Fuck."

"Seems to be the best word to sum up our entire night,"

Bree agreed.

"There must be fifty of them."

Bree began counting. "More than fifty." Her gaze locked on a tank that contained a rotting snake carcass. "At least seventy-five. Plus, a few dead ones."

"That explains the smell."

"Bright side," Bree said. "Dead snakes are better than dead people."

"You make a good point."

A thin rattling sound drew her toward a tank. With her gun raised, she approached. The snake inside was thick-bodied and reddish brown in color. A diamond pattern flowed down its back. The animal lifted its triangular-shaped head, stared at Bree, and hissed. The tip of its tail quivered, sounding like a small maraca.

See? Her night could get worse.

Matt drew in a sharp breath. "That's a rattlesnake."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Matt watched the ambulance containing Ricky and a deputy pull away. Another deputy had taken Jasper to the sheriff's station.

Bree approached, cell phone in hand. "Warrant's in. Ready to search the house?"

She'd obtained an emergency search warrant for Jasper's house. Shots fired at law enforcement gave her a compelling reason for a late-night phone call to a judge.

"I guess." Matt didn't mind snakes, at least the ones that weren't venomous. "Handling rattlesnakes feels like it's above our pay grade."

"No kidding. We're not handling anything in the basement." Bree started toward the house. "We have a guy who handles snakes at animal control, but he doesn't have the capacity for the sheer number of animals we're dealing with.

I called the zoo. They're sending over a team of specialists.

When they get here, we'll revisit the snake pit."

Matt followed Bree into the house. They started in the living room, donning gloves. Bree started lifting couch cushions. "Found a Glock."

Matt opened a drawer in the coffee table. "I've got a bag of weed."

"How much?"

Matt held it up. "Enough for a couple of joints."

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"Personal use." She sounded disappointed.

After the furniture had been searched, he checked the corners and sides of the carpets, looking for a loose edge.

Criminals were known to keep secret hidey-holes. But the wall-to-wall was nailed down tight. They looked inside heat vents and appliances. He even opened a plumbing access panel but found nothing behind the wall but insulation and dust.

In the home office, he pulled out desk drawers to look behind and under them, as well as riffle through the contents.

"We haven't come across any heroin or drug dealer paraphernalia." Bree scanned the room.

Drug dealing required equipment like scales and baggies.

"No," Matt agreed. "Jasper didn't seem high either. Maybe he was telling the truth when he said he didn't sell drugs."

"Stranger things have happened," Bree said.

Matt removed a spiral binder, opened it on the blotter, and skimmed pages. "Seems Jasper breeds snakes and keeps detailed records."

"Maybe it's a family business."

Jasper's house was small, and he lived Spartanly. The search didn't take long. Not only did they not find any drugs, but they found nothing to link him to his brother. There wasn't even a photograph of Spencer anywhere.

Activity drew Matt's attention to the front window. A minivan with the zoo's emblem on the side had arrived. Three people dressed in khaki jackets appeared at the door. They carried plastic containers with air holes and several long-handled hooks.

Bree motioned for them to come inside. The lead keeper introduced herself. She wore cargo pants and heavy boots.

"I'm Sheriff Taggert," Bree said. "This is Investigator Flynn."

Matt nodded. "There are some decomposing animals 44

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down there."

Bree handed Matt an N95 respirator mask at the top of the steps. No one wanted to inhale decomp if they didn't have to. Matt adjusted the straps around his head. The zookeepers had brought their own. They filed into the basement.

"The homeowner kept breeding records," Matt said.

"We'll send copies."

"Thanks." The keeper gestured around the room. "We've got this," he said, as if he wanted them to go away and let him work.

"We'll leave you to it, and thank you." Bree inclined her head toward the stairs.

Matt followed. "Are we running away?"

"You betcha." Bree hurried upstairs and through the house to the front door. "I'll assign a deputy to inventory everything the keepers take with them."

Matt's beard prevented a good seal with his mask, and the smell of rotting snakes had found its way inside. Outside, he ripped off the mask. The night air hit his grateful lungs. "I'm glad to be out of that stink."

Bree peeled off her mask and sniffed her jacket. "I'm going to need to bribe my dry cleaner. She hates me."

"Can't blame her." Matt followed her to her vehicle to wait. "We stink."

Thirty minutes later, the zoo people emerged.

The lead keeper approached. "Sheriff, we catalogued seventy-seven snakes, eleven different species, including pythons, rattlesnakes, and several endangered Asian vipers."

The keeper paused. "And six alligators."

Matt lifted his brows. "What?"

"Baby alligators. About this big." The keeper spread her hands in the air to indicate the gators were about a foot long. "Some of the animals appear to be in rough shape. It's 45

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common in these situations. Illegal breeders buy, sell, and trade constantly. All it takes is one diseased snake to infect a whole collection."

"Will they recover?" Bree sounded concerned.

The keeper lifted a shoulder. "I don't know. The last time we had a haul this big, half the snakes were infected with a virus. Most of them died." She exhaled, anger vibrating in her breath. "Mites are also very common.

Alligators are hardier, which is why they are living dinosaurs. The care of exotic species is complicated.”

“And Jasper wasn’t up to the task.” Bree’s brows drew into a flat line.

Anger heated Matt’s chest. Some of the snakes might be potentially deadly, but neglecting any animals in one’s care was inexcusable.

“Considering that he left dead animals to rot in their tanks, I’d say he didn’t try very hard.”

The keeper nodded but looked sad. “We’ll do our best to save as many as possible.”

“Thank you,” Bree said. “It’s illegal to possess either constrictors or venomous snakes in New York without a special permit, which Jasper does not have. I’ll bring up every charge I can think of. Snakes are living creatures that deserve to be treated with the same level of compassion and care as any other animal.”

Matt’s work with his sister’s dog rescue told him Jasper would not be adequately punished for his callousness. It was hard enough to charge people with cruelty toward cute and furry animals. Jasper would probably walk away with a fine.

But he also knew Bree would do her best to nail his ass on the weapons charges.

“Thank you, Sheriff.” The keeper inclined her head. “We’ll get these snakes out of here tonight, and I’ll send you a full report after they’ve been evaluated by our veterinarian. We’ll 46

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need to run tests. It’ll take time to process this many samples.”

The two other keepers had retrieved additional plastic containers.

Matt pointed to a hook. “What is that for?”

“Moving the snakes into transport containers without touching them,” the keeper said.

“You’re opening the tanks?” Bree asked, one brow raised.

“Yes.” The keeper laughed. “You don’t want the glass to break on a rattler’s enclosure while you’re driving down the interstate.”

“I guess not.” Matt swallowed, thinking of a loose rattler slithering under the car seats. *Snakes in a Van?*

“Don’t worry,” said the keeper. “This is what we do.”

The three keepers returned to the house.

“Why does anyone want venomous snakes or alligators as pets?” Bree asked.

“People are weird.” Matt froze, a light bulb exploding in his mind. He turned to Bree. “We have possible missing reptiles at Spencer’s house. His brother keeps snakes.”

The wind kicked up. A few hairs escaped Bree’s ponytail and whipped across her face. “Maybe they bought snakes from the same person. Maybe Spencer bought snakes from Jasper.”

Matt zipped his jacket. “Maybe Jasper stole Spencer’s snakes.”

“Only one way to find out. Let’s go talk to Jasper.” Bree issued instructions to the remaining deputy, then slid behind the wheel of her SUV.

In the passenger seat, Matt rubbed his hands together. The bullet scar on his palm ached from the cold. He flexed his fingers to ease the stiffness.

Bree drove to the sheriff’s station and parked in the fenced lot behind the building. They entered through the rear door, and she headed to her office. Starving, Matt beelined for 47

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the break room. He considered another cup of coffee, but it looked—and smelled—like tar, and his stomach was already brimming with acid. Instead, he crossed to the vending machine and chose a snack-size bag of almonds. He went to Bree’s office and peered inside. Elbows on the desk, she was rubbing her temple with one hand, her phone pressed to the opposite ear. He waited for her to finish her call.

She put down the phone and waved him in. “That was the deputy with Ricky at the ER.”

“How is he?” Matt popped an almond into his mouth and offered the bag to Bree.

She opened her hand, and he poured a few nuts into her palm. “Ricky’s full name is Richard Sanderling. The wound was superficial. They gave him a tetanus booster, stitched him up, and sent him over to juvie. Ricky told the deputy that he went to Jasper’s to buy a rattlesnake. He said they were”—Bree used air quotes—“cool.”

“Jasper was right about one thing. Ricky is an idiot.”

“Jasper has no room to criticize. He has a basement full of dangerous reptiles,” Bree pointed out. “This is not Ricky’s first visit to juvie. He’s been picked up for narcotics possession, shoplifting, petty theft . . .” Stealing was common among addicts. They needed money to buy their

drugs and could rarely hold a job. “The only thing longer than his arrest record are the track marks on his arms.”

“School?” Matt asked.

“I doubt it.” Bree sighed. “The deputy called his father, who came down to the hospital. Ricky’s mother left three years ago. She had an Oxy addiction. Ricky’s drug use began by stealing her pills. No one knows where she is. Mr. Sanderling says he doesn’t know what to do with Ricky. He’s repeatedly brought guns and drugs home. He can’t be trusted around his brothers. The youngest is only six.”

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“So, a rattlesnake is a perfect choice of pet.” Matt blew out a disgusted breath.

“Then Ricky and his dad had a blowout argument in the ER, which ended with Mr. Sanderling telling Ricky not to come home.” Bree scrubbed both hands down her exhausted face. “The only good news is that Mr. Sanderling expressed no interest in suing the sheriff’s department.”

“Can you write off your own kid?” Matt couldn’t imagine, but then he also couldn’t imagine having a teenager who was completely out of control and constantly endangering his younger siblings.

“I don’t know the whole story, so I won’t judge the dad yet. But I will reserve the option to judge him later. Maybe he’s done all he can and is simply out of options except to protect his younger kids.” Bree moved toward the door.

“Thankfully, Ricky is only fifteen.” In New York State, he couldn’t be processed as an adult until he turned sixteen.

“He’ll be processed as a juvenile. They’re trying to find a spot in rehab.”

“That’s the best possible outcome,” Matt said. “When can we talk to him?”

“Probably tomorrow. He has to get through intake at the juvenile detention center today.”

Bree’s administrative assistant, Marge, poked her head into the room. Her hair was a halo of dyed brown curls. “Jasper LaForge’s attorney is here.” Somewhere around sixty years old, Marge was a wonder of efficiency and common sense. Today, she’d layered a turtleneck under her cardigan, and she’d traded her sensible shoes for sensible boots.

Bree pushed up from her desk with both hands. She grabbed a notepad and jotted down a few notes. "Let's see if we can get some answers."

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CHAPTER EIGHT

"How do you want to handle him?" Matt finished his almonds and tossed the bag into the trash can. He was still hungry, but his snack would have to suffice for the moment.

"I didn't get a good feel for Jasper at his house," Bree said.

"Yeah. He seemed . . ." Matt reached for the right word.

"Indifferent?"

"That's a nice way of saying he didn't give a fuck about anything, and that attitude will make questioning him a challenge." Bree grabbed a water bottle from her desk. "Let's see how it goes. If he responds better to you, go ahead and take the lead."

He glanced sideways at her. "You know you've become a very good sheriff."

She laughed. "Because I'm learning to delegate? You know I still *want* to do everything myself. It's just impossible if I also want to raise two kids. And you're an excellent interviewer."

"Because you know how to let people do their jobs without your own ego getting in the way. That's a rare quality. Among politicians, you're practically a unicorn."

Sheriff was an elected position, so technically, Bree was both a politician *and* a law enforcement officer, though he knew politics drove her crazy.

Color flushed her cheeks, and she opened her mouth.

He could tell by her expression that she wanted to protest his *50*

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compliment. Then she nodded and said, "Thank you. Now, let's get to work."

Questioning suspects was a skill. You had to be willing to play whatever role encouraged the subject to talk. Sometimes, you had to lie to get the job done. You had to side with abhorrent opinions. Matt had once agreed with a man when he said women needed a punch in the face now and then. The process could feel a little slimy. But getting information or a confession was worth the temporary discomfort. There was no law against lying to a suspect. Cops did it all the time.

But first, they needed to know what motivated Jasper, and so far, they hadn't found anything.

They headed down the hall toward the interrogation room, where a deputy was babysitting a handcuffed Jasper.

On the way in, Matt activated the video camera that would record the session. Jasper's lawyer sat next to his client. He wore an off-the-rack suit, but his gaze was hard and sharp.

Matt judged him as street smart rather than fancy. He had no time for bullshit and would be willing to scrap in the dirt.

Bree eased into the chair, facing Jasper over the table. Matt sat next to her, across from the lawyer. To better read body language, he preferred to sit next to the subject, without a barrier between them. But the lawyer had taken the spot next to his client.

Tossing her notepad on the table, Bree removed Jasper's handcuffs. Then she read the names of all present, gave the date, and read Jasper his Miranda rights. Jasper signed the acknowledgment without fuss.

Bree sat down and stared at Jasper. "This would have been easier at your house."

"No shit." Jasper sounded disgusted. "Ricky is a fucking moron. I told him to sit down and shut up, and everything would be fine, but no. He panicked."

"How did he get your gun?" She folded her hands on 51

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her notes. They didn't know if the gun belonged to Jasper or Ricky, but sometimes a bluff paid off.

Jasper was too smart to fall into her trap and answered without missing a beat. "What gun?" Fake innocence and mild amusement lit his eyes, as if he was enjoying the interview process.

Or even playing with them.

"We found several illegal weapons in your house." Bree recited the list.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Jasper blinked at the question. Matt could see the lie plainly enough, but Jasper had no guilt, no remorse. He didn't even seem nervous.

Ownership of the handgun Ricky had used was questionable, but Matt was 99 percent sure the other weapons found in the house belonged to Jasper.

“You’re in deep trouble, Jasper.” Bree fixed her gaze on his face. “We found guns, cash, and a basement full of illegal reptiles.”

Jasper held eye contact.

The attorney said, “My client will not comment on the charges against him.” He glanced at Jasper. “You are under no obligation to answer any questions.”

Jasper nodded. “I know.”

Matt changed tactics. “Don’t you even want to know why we came to your house?”

Jasper’s head bobbed. “Yes.”

Matt continued. “Your brother, Spencer LaForge, was found dead at his home this evening.”

“Spencer is dead?” Jasper’s mouth hung open. “You’re not shitting me?”

“He’s dead,” Bree assured him.

Jasper looked from Bree to Matt and back again. Confusion flashed in his eyes. As a reaction to learning of his brother’s death, it seemed weak, but at least they’d provoked an

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emotion.

Considering the circumstances, Matt’s next statement felt ridiculous, but he said it anyway. “We’re sorry for your loss.”

“I can’t believe it.” Jasper leaned back, as if distancing himself from the conversation.

“When was the last time you talked to your brother?” Bree asked.

“I don’t know.” Jasper blinked hard. “We weren’t close.”

Matt picked a soft question, one that didn’t feel important.

He needed to get Jasper talking. “Are your parents still living?”

“No.” Jasper’s mouth flattened, and his eyes went hard.

“Spencer didn’t even show up at Dad’s funeral last year. He was embarrassed by his family. He didn’t want to be reminded of where he came from.”

Gee, wonder why? Matt swallowed the sarcastic response.

They needed information. They needed Jasper to cooperate.

With most subjects, coaxing was more effective than hostility.

But at least Jasper apparently did care about his brother’s estrangement from the family.

He was angry. How could Matt poke at that sensitive subject?

Bree sat back, her posture deceptively casual. "When did you see him last?"

Jasper lifted both hands, and the effort to return to his casual posture looked forced. "Before last month, I hadn't seen him in years."

"What happened last month?" Bree asked.

Jasper leaned sideways and whispered something in his attorney's ear.

The attorney held up a hand. "My client isn't going to answer that question."

"How many times did you see him last month?" Bree asked.

Jasper cocked his head and contemplated her question for 53

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a few seconds. "Once."

"Phone calls? Texts?" Bree asked.

Jasper exhaled hard through his nose. "We had a couple of phone calls before and after."

Matt leaned forward. "Did Spencer call you or did you call him?"

"He called me," Jasper said.

"About reptiles or guns?" Matt guessed.

"Nope." The lawyer shook his head. "We're not going there."

But Jasper didn't flinch. His lie came out as smooth as satin. "He just wanted to catch up."

Matt's guess was reptiles, since they hadn't found any guns at Spencer's house.

Bree made a note. "Prior to that, when did you communicate with him last?"

"I called him on his birthday back in July. He didn't answer. I left a message. He didn't call back." Jasper scratched his chest. "Did he fall or something? I can't imagine he had a heart attack. He's always running and shit."

"No." Matt watched his eyes. "Your brother was murdered."

Jasper didn't response for several seconds, then he blinked.

"What?"

"He was murdered," Bree repeated.

"How?" Jasper's shock seemed genuine.

With the investigation still in its infant stage, Matt didn't want to give out any information yet. Jasper's attorney would want to draw on any

incident that might help Jasper's case.

The attorney would contact the press if he or she felt that would benefit his client's defense. He stuck with a vague, "The medical examiner hasn't officially declared a cause of death at this time."

Anger flashed in Jasper's eyes. "But you saw him. Was he shot?"

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"No," Bree said. "He wasn't shot."

Jasper's brows dropped. "Then how was he killed?"

"He suffocated." Matt left out the details in case they needed to differentiate false leads or confessions from real ones. Jasper's brows shot up. For one brief second, he actually looked horrified and speechless.

While Jasper's emotions were engaged, Matt dived in.

"Where were you between four thirty and five thirty p.m. yesterday evening?"

The ME had narrowed down the time of death to a one-hour window.

Seemingly surprised, Jasper touched his own chest. "Me?"

"You don't have to answer that question," the attorney interrupted.

Jasper ignored him. "I was home. Why?"

"Can anyone verify that?" Matt asked.

"Stop talking." The attorney put his hand on Jasper's forearm.

Jasper stiffened. "You aren't going to pin Spencer's murder on me. I didn't kill that little prick."

The lawyer looked bored. "They have zero evidence.

They're fishing, and you don't have to answer any of these questions."

"If you didn't kill Spencer," Matt shifted forward, "help us find who did."

Jasper didn't break eye contact. "How?"

"Do you know of anything dangerous your brother could have been into?" Matt asked.

Jasper scratched the back of his neck. "I don't know what he's been doing recently, but Spencer liked to spend money.

He liked fancy clothes and shiny shoes. When he was younger, he was always running some kind of scam."

"What kind of scam?"

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Jasper turned up a palm. “Little side gigs, like telling old people their computer is compromised, then charging them to fix it.”

“But there was no problem,” Bree said.

“Exactly.” Jasper tapped a finger on the table for emphasis.

“Or if there was, Spencer caused it.”

“Was his business profitable?” Matt asked.

“What business?” Jasper swept a hand over his sweaty, stubbled head. “Last time I saw Spencer, he was the assistant manager at Electronics Depot.”

“Wait.” Bree lifted a hand. “He’s not a digital marketer?”

Jasper lifted an indifferent shoulder. “Not that I know of.”

“Did he know about your reptile business?” Matt asked.

“Don’t answer that,” the lawyer interrupted.

Bree jumped in. “Did your brother breed reptiles?”

“Don’t answer that,” the lawyer said.

“Why do you like snakes?” Matt asked.

Jasper scratched his arm. “Our old man always had reptiles.

We grew up with them, and we both like them. It’s probably the only thing we have in common.”

Bree flattened a hand on the table. “So, you didn’t sell or give him any rare species?”

The lawyer leaned closer to his client. “Don’t answer that.”

Jasper clamped his molars together. He was smart enough to listen to his lawyer.

Instead of a direct question, Matt circled around. “What kind of reptiles did your brother like?”

But Jasper didn’t fall for it. He crossed his arms and kept quiet.

“Did Spencer keep any venomous snakes?” Matt asked.

Jasper dropped his hands to the table. “Venomous snakes aren’t evil or even aggressive. You just have to know how to handle them.”

Matt deserved a medal for not rolling his eyes or yelling

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bullshit. Exotic—and deadly—animals should be cared for by professionals. But he wanted to keep Jasper talking, so he agreed. “Lots of animals can be dangerous if you don’t know how to handle them.”

“Right?” Jasper rapped his knuckles on the table.

“Did Spencer have any other pets?” Bree asked.

“Hell no,” Jasper protested. “A dog or cat would mess up his fancy house. Spencer could never tolerate fur balls or muddy footprints. Plus, he’s too in love with himself. Not much left over for other creatures. He liked snakes because they’re clean and low maintenance. They don’t get attached.”

“Do you know anyone who is close to your brother?”

Matt asked.

“Nope,” Jasper said. “Spencer never had friends.”

“Never?” Bree’s voice rang with skepticism.

“Nope. Not even as a kid.” Jasper’s brows knit, as if he was recalling a memory. “He could fake it around other people, but he never got close to anybody that I saw.”

“Fake what?” Bree pressed.

“Caring? Connection. I don’t know the terms, but Spencer really didn’t give a fuck about anyone but himself.” Jasper’s voice left no room for doubt.

Matt tried another approach. “Were you close as kids?”

“Not really.” Jasper shook his head. “We’re ten years apart, and neither one of us is the warm-and-fuzzy type.”

“How about girlfriends?” Bree tapped her pen on the table. “He dated, but Spencer wasn’t a one-woman man,” Jasper said. “He kept them around long enough to get some sex, but not long enough for them to develop any attachment.”

Silence hovered for a couple of seconds. Then the lawyer shifted forward. “My client has answered all of your questions.

You have nothing to link him to his brother’s death.”

Bree sat back. “We’re charging him with illegal weapons 57

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possession. The sawed-off shotgun is under the legal limit.

Also, your client doesn’t have a permit for the handgun.”

The lawyer referred to his notes. “You can’t prove it’s his handgun. The kid could have brought it with him. In fact, maybe the kid brought all of the weapons.”

Bree’s gaze never left the lawyer’s. “Nice try, but we’ll prove it.”

“You’ll need to,” the lawyer said, his voice matter of fact rather than cocky. His gaze moved from Matt to Bree and back again, studying them. No, he was sizing them up.

Definitely shifty.

“The kid didn’t bring seventy-seven snakes with him,”

Matt added. “Including illegal constrictors and rattlesnakes.”

“Don’t forget the endangered species,” Bree said. “And all the equipment in that basement.”

“We’re done here.” The lawyer didn’t blink. “Jasper, don’t say anything else.”

And that was that.

The lawyer left. Bree handcuffed Jasper and handed him over to a deputy to be transported to the jail and processed.

Matt stood and stretched. “The lawyer is right about our lack of evidence to tie Jasper to his brother’s murder, other than the shared interest in snakes.”

“The phone calls will show on his cell provider records.”

“He volunteered that information. He didn’t try to hide them.” Matt thought Jasper was pretty damned smart. “And there’s no way to prove the subject of the phone calls was anything other than what he stated.”

Bree collected her notes. “We have him on a weapons violation for the sawed-off and not having a license, illegal possession of wildlife, and illegal possession of venomous reptiles. If Ricky’s statement holds, we can add illegal sale of wildlife. Considering the dead animals, we try to make animal cruelty charges stick too.”

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“We can try for reckless endangerment as well.”

Bree agreed with a nod. “I was hoping we’d be able to hold on to him for a day or so, but that slick lawyer will have him bailed out tomorrow. He has no priors. You know the drill.”

They left the interview room. Stopping in the break room, she took two bottles of water from the fridge and handed one to Matt. Twisting off the cap, she took a deep swallow, her expression thoughtful. “He seemed surprised about his brother’s murder—and disturbed about the method. Could that have been an act?”

They headed to Bree’s office. Matt followed her example and drank some water. His eyes felt dry and gritty. “I wouldn’t rule him out. Some of his reactions seemed genuine, but at other times, he was clearly toying with

us. Plus, he sells venomous snakes to minors, so I doubt ethics are an issue for him.”

“No kidding.” Behind her desk, Bree rapped a palm on her desktop. “Who sells a rattlesnake to a kid?”

“A psychopath.”

“Exactly. There are few lines a man like Jasper won’t cross,”

Bree exclaimed. “We’ll have to wait for more evidence. On that note, Todd applied for warrants before he went home to grab a couple hours of sleep.”

Matt checked the time on his phone. Nearly four a.m.

“Something we should both do.”

The first hours of an investigation were critical, but a catnap could keep them functioning better than no rest at all.

Bree nodded. “You’re right.” She shut down her computer, then they walked out of the station together. Their vehicles were parked side by side in the employee lot behind the building.

“Coming over?” Matt paused, one hand on the door of his Suburban.

“Yes. If that’s OK.”

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“Of course it is.”

She’d taken to sleeping over when work kept her out late.

She didn’t like to wake the kids or Dana by coming home in the middle of the night. Matt understood her struggle to balance work and family, but he wished she’d stay over occasionally when they weren’t preoccupied with a murder.

“You have a standing invitation,” he said. “You don’t need to ask.” He searched her eyes. “In fact, I’d love to have a weekend alone with you. Maybe we could go somewhere?”

“I’d love that.” But her smile was apologetic. “But I can’t even think about leaving the kids right now.”

“Maybe we can revisit the idea after this case.”

“It’s not just the case.” Pain slid across her face. “This will be their first Christmas without their mother. I don’t know how they’re going to cope.”

Guilt stabbed Matt in the heart. “I’m sorry. I should have thought of that. Of course, you can’t leave them right now.”

Her eyes warmed. “You know I would love to take a trip with you.” She touched her own chest. “There’s nothing personally that’s holding me back.” She touched his forearm.

“I’m committed to you—to us.”

He smiled. “Back atcha.”

But as he drove toward home, he wondered if there would ever be enough of her to go around. Between her job and the kids, there wasn’t much time left for a relationship.

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CHAPTER NINE

“You need a name,” I say to one of the serpents in my living room.

The dirt-colored body is coiled in its water bowl in the corner of the aquarium. When I think about a snake, I envision a slender, lithe animal, but this one is short and thick, only about four feet long from its primitive-looking rattle to the blunt, wedge-shaped head.

The snakes had hissed and rattled as I moved their aquariums to my SUV and drove home. I check the latches on the top of each tank. No one wants an agitated rattlesnake loose in the house. The lids are secure. But I don’t kid myself.

I did plenty of research before I embarked on this step of my plan. The glass between us creates an illusion of control, but these animals are angry and dangerous.

Like me. Maybe that’s why I identify with them—why I had to have them the moment I first saw them. I, too, am poised to strike.

Snakes sense vibrations. I did my best to minimize their stress, but riding in the back of my SUV must have been sensory overload for such creatures. The other two have gone quiet, but not this one. I can feel its animosity with every flick of its tongue. Or perhaps I’m projecting my own hostility.

Dawn is hours away. I watch the serpent with a macabre fascination. Even motionless, it exudes power and confidence, 61

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as if aware of its deadly capabilities.

I would love to have its self-assurance, its lack of complication. The snake doesn’t worry about its purpose or understand the constructs of past and future. It can’t comprehend regret. It lives in the moment. It exists.

It simply *is*.

And there is something magnificent in its single-mindedness.

I wish I could harness its coldness, but my rage feels hot.

The snake feels no emotions. I feel too many.

“I know it’s not a politically correct term, but considering what I’ve done—and what I’m still planning, I shouldn’t be concerned with social boundaries. You are my spirit animal, and you’re going to be part of my signature.”

The animal stirs. The head rises, slowly, intently. The tongue flicks out; the head turns a few degrees. Another tongue flick, as the snake pulls my scent into its mouth over and over, processing the smells of its new environment—of me.

“You’re a bit smaller than the other two. I’m going to guess you’re female.” The smile spreads across my face like the Grinch. Who is the most famous female killer? “I’m going to call you Lizzy. Those two can be Ted and Jack.”

Now, I need to learn their triggers. My voice didn’t do it.

I wave my arm and jump up and down a few times. The floorboards shudder under me. The lid on the tank shakes.

It—Lizzy—seems to coil more tightly, as if preparing to strike. I sense her tension. The tip of the snake’s tail shivers in response. A soft rattle emanates from the tank. The other two are a few feet away, but they also begin to show signs of agitation, restless movements and tongue flicks. Another’s tail rattles.

“Yes,” I croon. “That’s it.”

The rattling sound both thrills and scares me. I can’t 62

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imagine the terror of being close to one without the benefit of its secure enclosure.

Snakes strike when they feel threatened. The natural response to being trapped with a venomous snake is to panic.

Sudden movements scare the snake. My plan is going to work nicely.

I’m almost giddy as I imagine it. “Won’t they be surprised?”

But for now, I’ll concentrate on the most important detail: my next target.

I read my list to the snakes and hold up each person’s profile picture, turning the image to the animals so they can see my prospective victims’ faces. “Who do you think should die next?”

CHAPTER TEN

Bree opened her eyes to darkness, but her internal clock told her she needed to get up. She liked to be home before the kids woke for school. She tried to roll over, but her movement was impeded by a huge dog head resting on her ankles. Matt's German shepherd, Brody, was wedged in between their bodies.

She flexed her toes. Pins and needles shot up her calves. She slid her feet out from under his head, making a ridiculous attempt not to wake the dog.

"He'll move," Matt said in her ear.

"I hate to disturb him."

Matt chuckled. "It's not like he has to get up and go to work. He's going to sleep approximately twenty hours today."

Bree laughed. "As a retired hero should."

Brody had been Matt's K-9 partner. He'd been shot in the same friendly-fire incident that had ended Matt's career as a deputy.

"I'll make coffee." Matt kissed her neck, then slid out of bed. His movement triggered a motion-sensing nightlight, which cast a semicircle of light on the floor. Wearing only a pair of boxers, he cut a fine figure even in the dimness.

Watching him, Bree smiled. He made her happy in ways she hadn't known were possible ten months ago. She slid out of bed and padded to the bathroom in one of Matt's T-shirts, which was warm enough when she was under a comforter 64

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with his heat-producing body. A minute later, she hurried back to bed, shivering.

Brody army-crawled up the bed and stretched out alongside Bree, his body pressed against her from her ribs to her toes. The dog produced as much heat as his owner. She stroked his shoulder, then scratched behind an ear. "Who's a good boy?" she crooned.

The dog's tail thumped on the mattress.

A childhood mauling had left Bree terrified of dogs for most of her life. Ten months ago, she hadn't imagined spooning with one.

Yet here she was. And that phrase described so much of her current life.

Matt carried two mugs of coffee into the bedroom. He set one on her nightstand, then rounded the bed and climbed back onto the mattress. “Hey, Brody, how about a little room here?”

The dog ignored him. Matt tugged a section of the comforter out from under the dog and tossed it over his bare legs. Then he leaned back against the headboard and sipped his coffee.

Bree wiggled to a sitting position, tucked a pillow behind her back, and reached for her cup. “Your dog sure understands passive resistance.”

“He taught himself to play dead.”

Bree ruffled Brody’s ears. “He’s a smart boy.”

“The smartest,” Matt agreed, stroking his dog’s head.

“Do you think he’s missing Greta?” Bree asked. Matt had fostered a young German shepherd for his sister’s canine rescue group. He’d recognized Greta as a potential K-9 working dog.

Bree’s department hadn’t had a K-9 unit since Brody had retired. The rescue had helped raise the money for Greta’s equipment and training. She and her handler were currently 65

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at the academy.

“Maybe a little, but her energy was wearing on him.” Matt laughed. “What’s on the agenda for this morning?”

Bree took a long, deep swallow of coffee, hoping the caffeine made a speedy entry into her bloodstream. Three hours of sleep were not enough. “Stop home and see the kids off to school. I want to drive by the crime scene to get a look at the yard in the daylight and see if the across-the-street neighbor is home. After that, we should review progress and plans with Todd.”

“Do we know when the autopsy will take place?”

Bree reached for her phone and checked her email. She opened one from the ME. “Dr. Jones has it scheduled for eleven thirty.”

“Sounds like a busy morning.”

She sighed. The day already seemed like chaos, and it hadn’t yet begun. “It does.” She set her phone back on the nightstand and drained her coffee.

Matt peered into her mug. “Damn. Impressive.”

“Necessary.” She stretched. “I need to wake up.”

Matt set his coffee aside and checked his own cell phone.

“You’re ahead of schedule this morning.”

“We could get in a really fast mile or two. I could use the cardio.” Bree hadn’t run in a few days.

“I can think of another way to raise your heart rate.” He turned, leaned over her, and kissed her softly on the mouth.

His lips trailed down her jaw, over her neck, and lingered on her pulse point.

Heat zoomed through Bree’s limbs. She wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders. “I have fifteen minutes.”

He lifted his head and grinned. “I’d prefer an hour or so, but I can work with a tighter deadline.”

Already more awake, she kissed him back and repeated 66

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firmly, “I have fifteen minutes.”

“Twenty,” he countered, sliding a hand under the covers.

Bree groaned. “Deal.”

His voice went husky. “I know how to push all the important buttons.”

You certainly do. Bree arched into his touch.

The next twenty minutes were totally worth rushing through her subsequent shower. Bree tugged on a sweatshirt as she breezed through the kitchen.

Matt wore jeans and a T-shirt. Despite the chill, he was barefoot. And Bree wished she had another twenty minutes.

She glanced at her phone screen.

“Your hair is still wet.” He scooped kibble into a bowl.

Brody sat patiently.

“Someone used up my blow-dry time.”

“That was me.” He smiled broadly. “Hold on.” He set down the bowl and ducked into the laundry room. He came out carrying a knit hat, which he tugged over Bree’s still-damp hair. “It’s cold.”

“Thanks.” She leaned against him for a goodbye kiss. “I’ll meet you at the station.”

“You got it.”

It was still dark as Bree hurried to her vehicle. Barking erupted from the kennels as she hurried past. Matt’s sister, Cady, waved from the doorway. After his initial retirement from the sheriff’s department, Matt used his settlement to buy the house and build the kennels to house K-9s in training, but his sister had filled them with rescue dogs before he could get his

business off the ground. Now, he was focused on finding homeless dogs like Greta to train for law enforcement.

Blasting the heat, she drove home nursing a stupid smile.

As she turned into the driveway, she was surprised to see her brother's junker SUV. She parked next to it and jogged to the 67

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kitchen door. Inside, Ladybug slammed into her legs, almost taking her out at the knees. Bree steadied herself with a hand on the wall and stopped everything to pet the dog. The dog's tail nub wagged in a frantic circle.

"How can you be this excited to see me every single day?"

"She loves you." Adam sat at the kitchen table inhaling a cappuccino. Paint splattered his sweatshirt and jeans. He looked like he hadn't combed his shaggy hair in a few weeks.

"I love that you're here, but it's early. Is something wrong?"

Bree hung up her coat and tossed her keys on the counter.

Dana crouched in front of the oven, staring through the tiny window.

"Morning."

Bree echoed the greeting.

Vader immediately jumped onto the counter. The cat made eye contact with Bree, then deliberately sent her keys flying off the edge. Bree picked up the keys, stowed them on a higher shelf, and gave the quirky feline an ear scratch. He was an asshat, but he was her asshat.

Adam shrugged. "I worked all night. The new painting isn't cooperating. I thought I'd come over, bum breakfast, and clear my head."

"The kids will be thrilled." Dana pulled a baking sheet out of the oven.

Bree stopped to toe-off her boots. "What is that smell?"

Dana set the pan on the stovetop. "Blueberry lemon scones.

Sit." She motioned to the table. "I'll bring you a cappuccino."

Adam sipped his coffee and sighed in contentment. "She's in a baking mood. Don't fight it."

"I never do." Bree gave him a one-armed hug. She turned to Dana.

"Please make it a double. Maybe a triple."

Dana worked the fancy-ass coffee machine she'd brought with her from Philadelphia. Then she dusted cocoa powder over the foamy mixture and brought it to the table. "This 68

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should jump-start your heart."

Adam gave Bree a side-eye. “You’re in a good mood for someone involved in a murder investigation.”

“I am.” Bree pushed back the creep of guilt. She deserved a life—a realization she still struggled with when a big case landed in her jurisdiction.

Adam smiled. “I’m happy for you. I’m glad you and Matt found each other, though I am just a little jealous.”

“Same.” Dana drizzled glaze over the scones. “These are supposed to cool before you eat them, but I’m not waiting.”

Bree’s mouth watered. “What about that guy you dated last week?”

Dana shook her head. “The lawyer? Zero chemistry.” She brought the plate of scones to the table. “I haven’t really been attracted to any of them. At this point, I wonder if it’s them or me.”

“Dating apps seem backward to me.” Bree broke a scone in half, releasing steam. “You’re supposed to date someone because you’re attracted to them, not date them and then see if they’re hot.”

“That would be optimal, but if I wait to meet someone organically in this town, I’ll be alone at ninety.” Dana sipped from her mug. “Don’t get me wrong. I love living upstate. Life is slower. The air is cleaner. I don’t hear traffic and sirens 24/7.

But the dating pool in Grey’s Hollow is barely a puddle.”

“No kidding.” Adam shoved half a scone into his mouth.

His eyes closed for a second. “These are amazing.”

Dana sighed. “Maybe I need to fully accept that love at first sight doesn’t exist.”

Bree didn’t believe in love at first sight, but lust at first sight? That was real. Matt had made her blood hum the first time she’d met him. Bree shot her brother a look. “When did you start dating?”

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“I’ve always dated.” Adam shook back his wavy hair. “It’s not like I’ve been a monk my whole life. It’s just that things have been crazy this year. My social life got put on hold.”

But he never mentioned dating to Bree. Nor did he talk about friends. She’d assumed he was an introvert. But then, before January, they’d barely known each other. They’d been separated after their parents’ deaths. Since

they'd reconnected, their lives had definitely been upended. But they clearly needed to talk more.

Kayla slumped into the kitchen, still in her pajamas, her eyes bleary. She was not a morning person. She gave Adam a sleepy smile, pulled a chair close to his, and rested her head on his shoulder. "Hi. Why are you here so early?"

He kissed the top of her head. "I came to have breakfast with you."

Dana set a glass of milk in front of Kayla. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"Can I have scrambled eggs?" Kayla asked.

"Of course." Dana whipped them up in a few minutes.

Luke walked in, fully dressed. He plopped into a chair, ate a plate of eggs and two scones in what seemed like four bites, then drained a glass of orange juice.

"I have to get ready for work." Bree finished her scone and picked up her cappuccino to take upstairs with her. Dana must have loaded it with espresso because Bree's brain was clearing. She changed her uniform, pinned her still-damp hair into a quick bun, and said her goodbyes.

Then she picked up Matt at the station before heading to the crime scene. They slid out of her SUV at the base of Spencer's driveway.

Their breath fogged in the cold morning air. They'd gotten lucky overnight. The snow never accumulated beyond a patchy layer on the grass. But the temperature had dropped, leaving 70

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the ground frozen.

Bree's phone vibrated. She glanced at the screen. Nick West, a local reporter, was calling. She had no time to answer his questions right now, so she ignored the call. A minute later, her phone beeped with a new voice mail, which she also ignored.

Matt pointed to the house across the street. A black Honda Accord sat in the driveway. "Looks like the neighbor's home."

Bree started across the road. "Let's talk to them." She didn't want to miss the opportunity. The crime scene would still be there in twenty minutes. Who knew if the neighbor would?

They climbed the steps of the front stoop. Footsteps approached. A man who looked to be around forty in scrubs opened the door. He took in their uniforms with tired eyes.

“What happened? I saw the crime scene tape at Spencer’s house.”

Bree introduced herself and Matt.

“I’m Dean Unger,” the man said. “Did Spencer get robbed or something?”

Bree shook her head. “Unfortunately, Mr. LaForge is dead. His body was discovered yesterday evening.”

Dean’s mouth opened then closed. He gave his head a small shake.

“Shit. He’s dead? Really?”

“Yes,” Bree said.

Dean rocked backward, as if the news had been a blow.

“How’d he die? I always saw him out running. He seemed healthy.”

“He was murdered,” Bree said bluntly, watching for his reaction.

Dean’s posture snapped straight. “Whoa. How?”

Bree skirted the question. “The medical examiner hasn’t declared a cause of death yet.”

Dean didn’t move for a couple of seconds, as if he was 71

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processing the information. “Wow. I don’t know what to say.

I deal with death every day, even shootings, but I’ve never known anyone personally who was murdered. It doesn’t seem real. You know?”

“I assure you that it’s real,” Bree clarified.

Dean shook his head.

“We’d like to ask you a few questions,” Matt said. “May we come in?”

“Yeah. Sure. Sorry.” With a quick shake of his upper body, as if rousing himself, Dean motioned them inside. “Come back to the kitchen. I was just making breakfast before I go to sleep. It was a long night.”

Bree and Matt stepped into the house and followed Dean down a hallway into the 1990s. The pickled oak kitchen cabinets, Formica counters, and faded blue-and-pink wallpaper were original, not retro. But beyond the dated kitchen was a wall of sliding glass doors and tall windows that overlooked a rolling meadow and a large pond. Thick woods framed the view.

An open carton of eggs sat next to pieces of eggshell piled on a paper towel. Four eggs had been broken into a large mixing bowl.

“Nice view,” Matt said.

Dean moved behind the kitchen island and seasoned his eggs with salt and pepper. “Thanks. The view is why I bought the house. I wish I had time

to renovate.”

“How long have you lived here?” Bree asked.

“Two years.” Dean picked up a whisk and whipped his eggs with an experienced hand. “Can I get you anything? Tea?”

“No, thank you,” Bree said. “We won’t keep you long.”

“Do you work nights?” Matt asked.

“Yes.” Dean poured the eggs into a frying pan. The mixture sizzled. “I’m a physician’s assistant at the hospital.”

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“What time did you go to work yesterday?” Bree perched on the edge of a stool.

Dean moved his eggs around with a spatula. “I left here at four thirty. Same as always. Got home around seven this morning. We had a patient code . . .” Deep lines bracketed his frown as he remembered what had clearly been a disturbing incident. “Anyway, I usually work a twelve-hour shift. I was late getting home.”

Bree folded her hands on the counter. “Have you seen any unusual activity at Spencer’s house?”

Dean lowered the flame under the pan. “I saw police cars this morning, but before that, everything seemed normal.”

Matt leaned a hip on the counter. “What about strange cars on the street?”

“Not that I’ve noticed.” Dean slid two slices of bread into the toaster. “We don’t get much traffic here.”

“How well did you know Spencer LaForge?” Bree asked.

Dean returned to the stove, scraped the eggs from the bottom of the pan, then adjusted the burner. “Well enough to wave at him when I’m getting my mail or bringing in the garbage can.”

“Did you know his family or friends?” Matt asked.

“No.” Dean turned off the heat, lifted the frying pan, and dumped the scrambled eggs onto a plate. “We were not buddies. We didn’t barbecue, drink beer, or watch football together. I moved here because I wanted solitude. I spend twelve hours a day with people. When I get home, I’m done peopling.”

“I get that,” Matt said.

Bree tried to remember the last time she'd been alone, not counting trips to the bathroom, and couldn't. Now that she thought about it, the dog even followed her into the bathroom, and sometimes Kayla talked to her from the other 73

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side of the door.

She spotted an unopened package on the counter. "When was that delivered?"

Dean glanced at it on his way to the toaster. "I assume it came yesterday after I left for work. It was at the front door when I got home this morning." He tossed his toast onto his plate. Matt took a photo of the shipping label. "In case the delivery driver saw something."

"Have at it." Dean went to the fridge and took out a bottle of hot sauce and single-serve containers of guacamole. He shook hot sauce on his eggs and spread the guac on his toast.

"Thanks for your help." Bree left a business card on the counter. "We might be in touch if we have any more questions.

Until then, we'll let you get to your breakfast."

"Thanks." Dean took a fork from a drawer. "I'm beat.

Should I be concerned, Sheriff? Without Spencer, my nearest neighbor is . . . Actually, I don't even know the distance."

"At this moment, we have no reason to believe there's any threat to the community." Bree's instincts told her that Spencer's murder had been personal, but instincts weren't evidence—and they could be wrong. "You don't have an alarm?"

"No," Dean said.

"It might be worth considering," Bree said. "Be sure to lock your doors."

"I will." Dean frowned at his breakfast, as if he was no longer hungry. Bree couldn't blame him. "Call if you have any concerns."

"OK." Dean pushed his plate aside, and his gaze drifted to the expanse of glass that spanned the rear of the house.

Great view.

So open.

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But also vulnerable.

“We can see ourselves out.” Matt led the way back to the front door. They went outside.

“It’s a good alibi.”

“Yes.” Matt glanced back at Dean’s place. “I didn’t get any deceptive vibes from him at all, but I’ll call the hospital to confirm his story.”

Bree scanned the woods that loomed behind the house.

The beautiful view came with a price. Isolation.

Matt tracked the package online. “We’re in luck. The package was delivered at 5:20 p.m. I’m going to call the distribution center and see if we can talk to the driver.” Matt lifted his phone to his ear and talked his way to a supervisor.

A few minutes later, he lowered it.

“The driver is finishing his morning run now. He’s due back at the distribution center in about twenty minutes to load up for his second route. If we hurry, we can catch him.”

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

In the passenger seat of the sheriff’s SUV, Matt checked the driver’s motor vehicle records on the dashboard computer while Bree drove toward the distribution center.

“The driver’s name is Kent Barone. He’s been with the delivery service for eight years.” Matt scanned Kent’s motor vehicle records. “He has a couple of speeding tickets, but that’s all I see.”

She turned into the parking lot of a huge warehouse near the entry ramp for the interstate.

“Park at the office. The supervisor is calling Barone in to talk to us while his truck is being reloaded.”

Bree drove past the loading bays full of delivery vans and parked in front of the office. They went inside. The supervisor met them in the lobby and escorted them down a fluorescent hallway. “Kent’s waiting for you in the break room.” He jerked a thumb at the doorway.

“We won’t keep him long,” Bree said.

Matt led the way into a typical break room. A single refrigerator stood in the corner. Microwave ovens were lined up on the counter. Plastic chairs clustered around a few small round tables.

A tall, thin African American man in a gray uniform sat at a table. He stood as they entered, and they crossed the scuffed linoleum floor.

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“Mr. Barone?” Bree asked, stopping in front of him.

“Yeah. You can call me Kent,” he said.

“I’m Sheriff Taggart.” Bree gestured to Matt. “And this is Criminal Investigator Flynn.”

Bree took the chair across from Kent and waited for him to sit. Matt pulled another chair up to the table next to Kent.

Kent’s gaze darted back and forth between Matt and Bree.

“Is something wrong?”

“No,” Bree assured him. “We just need to ask you a few questions about your route from yesterday evening.”

“Why?” Kent asked.

Ignoring his question, Bree read off Dean Unger’s street address. “You delivered a package to this house yesterday evening?”

Kent nodded. “Yeah.”

“Do you deliver to that street often?” Bree asked.

Clearly uncomfortable, Kent shifted in his chair. “A couple times a week. What the hell is going on?”

“Did you notice anything unusual yesterday evening?”

“What do you mean by unusual?” Kent’s voice rose. “I dropped the package and left. I’m on a tight schedule, especially this time of year. Business is already up for the holidays. It’s like folks are already in a rush this year. Why do you want to know? Tell me what’s going on,” he demanded.

Bree and Matt exchanged a look. They wanted information without bias, but Kent was too worried.

“A man was killed at the house across the street,” Matt said. Kent paled. “Killed?”

“Yes,” Bree said.

Kent stood abruptly, sending his chair sliding backward with a high-pitched scrape. "I didn't have anything to do with that."

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"We didn't suggest that you did." Matt kept his voice calm.

"You are not pinning this on me." Kent lifted his chin.

"Of course not." Bree looked puzzled. "I assure you, you're not under suspicion."

Kent's mouth turned down in a doubtful frown.

Matt decided to stop dancing around Kent's attitude.

"You're clearly upset. Can I ask why?"

"I was pulled over two weeks ago by locals for no reason."

Kent spit out the words. "They pulled me from my vehicle and made me do every sobriety test they could think of. They tried to provoke me into doing something stupid. Thankfully, I am not stupid."

"Did they give you a Breathalyzer?" Bree asked.

Kent shook his head. "Nope. They knew I wasn't drunk. It was pure harassment."

Bree's brows lowered. "Were they sheriff's deputies?"

"No." Kent's jaw tightened. "And I won't say which department they were with. I don't want to start any trouble.

But now you know why I'm so touchy."

"I'm sorry you experienced that, Kent." Bree's voice softened. "I assure you, we only want your help."

Matt scanned their positions. He'd wanted a clear view of Kent's body language, but he'd inadvertently boxed him in. Matt understood that he was a very large, sometimes intimidating person. Usually, that worked to his advantage, but occasionally, his stature got in the way.

Like now.

He leaned back to give Kent some room. If the man had been recently harassed by police, Matt invading his personal space wouldn't convince him to cooperate.

Kent pulled out his chair and sat back down, leaving more distance between himself and Matt. Then he gave Matt and Bree each a long look, as if making a decision. "I did see 78

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something different on that street."

Matt and Bree waited, not rushing him.

Kent licked his lips. “There’s a house for sale across the street from delivery address. I’ve never seen anyone there. But yesterday, I saw a vehicle in the driveway.” He shrugged.

“Can you describe the vehicle?” Bree asked.

Kent closed his eyes. “It was white.”

“Sedan, SUV . . . ?” Matt prompted.

Kent’s eyes opened. “It was bigger than a sedan. Maybe an SUV or minivan?” Was that a statement or a question?

“You’re not sure?” Bree confirmed.

“No.” He looked thoughtful for a few seconds. “Sorry. I didn’t pay better attention. I noticed it as I was driving away. I didn’t stop to get a better look. I just noted it as odd and kept going.” He brightened. “I’m pretty sure it was white, though.”

Pretty sure . . .

“That’s OK,” Matt assured him. “We appreciate the information.”

Bree drew a business card from her pocket and set it on the table. “If you remember anything else, please call me.”

He took the card and nodded. “I have to get back to work.”

“Thank you for your help.” Bree held out her hand.

Kent shook it, then Matt did the same. Kent gave him a wary eye, but he also accepted the handshake.

Back in the SUV, Bree gave the steering wheel a light punch. “I really hate asshole cops.”

Matt shrugged. “There will always be assholes in every walk of life. It’s part of the human condition, unfortunately.”

“I know, but sometimes, that garbage behavior makes our job even harder.”

Matt pulled out his phone. “On the bright side, you gave Kent a positive experience—and we got an important piece of information.”

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Bree started the engine. “Let’s check with the realty company and see if anyone was scheduled to be at the vacant house yesterday.”

“Already on it.” Matt made the call. He had their answer in a few minutes. Lowering the phone to his lap, he said, “There were no showings

scheduled for that house yesterday. In fact, no one has been to that address for any reason for months.

The property has generated no interest.”

“Let’s go back and expand the scene to include the house next door.”

Bree turned back toward the crime scene.

She parked at Spencer’s house, and they walked up the driveway of the vacant house.

“I found a footprint impression in the grass over there.”

Matt pointed to the area staked out with crime scene tape about thirty feet away.

“Here’s a partial tread.” Bree squatted at the edge of the driveway. “It looks like the vehicle parked crookedly, with the outer edge of the tire in the mud here.”

Matt crouched beside her. “It’s only a small slice of tread.”

Juries loved forensic evidence that reminded them of an episode of *CSI*, but in the real world, criminal investigations weren’t as sexy.

“Not enough for a tread comparison.” Bree straightened.

Matt stood. “But now we know where the killer parked.”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Bree leaned a hip on the conference room table, blew across the surface of her steaming coffee, and studied the murder board. Todd sat at the table, his laptop open in front of him.

Matt paced the narrow space behind the chairs. Folders and papers lay in stacks on the long table.

The victim’s driver’s license photo smiled back at Bree.

Spencer had been a good-looking man, but there was something about him that put her off. She glanced at the next picture, Spencer with his face shrouded in plastic wrap. She imagined his last moments, and cold horror sliced through her. She shook off her revulsion and studied the picture.

“Why so many layers of plastic wrap? A few would have been sufficient, but the killer kept wrapping until Spencer’s features were unrecognizable.”

“It wasn’t to conceal his identity,” Matt said. “Or they would have moved the body, not left it at the victim’s own house. Sometimes killers cover their victim’s faces if they don’t want to be reminded of who they

killed, but I'm feeling the opposite here, as if the killer's intention was to obliterate Spencer as a person."

Bree could imagine the killer winding the plastic around Spencer's head, over and over, filled to the brim with determination—and rage.

"The overkill could have been driven by emotion," she *81*

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added. "Anger, resentment, jealousy . . ." She took a deep sip of coffee, and the liquid burned her tongue, but she welcomed the heat sliding down her throat. "Which brings us to the women in Spencer's life. We know he was active on dating sites. Let's start with Avery Ledger. She found him. What do we know about her?"

While she waited for Todd to pull up the information, Bree pinned Avery's photo to the board with a magnet.

Todd turned to his laptop. "Her background check is clean.

She's had some minor acting roles, but her main employer is Get Fit Apparel, where she works as a social media content creator. The company maintains office space in Scarlet Falls.

Her commute is about ten minutes." Todd scrolled. "As far as the timeline goes, she said she left work at five. I called the office. No one could confirm the exact time she left, but the manager said it was probably around then."

"Spencer was dead by five thirty. How long would it take Avery to drive to his place?"

"Maybe another ten minutes," Todd answered.

"That only gives her another ten minutes to incapacitate and kill Spencer." Bree picked up a dry erase marker and wrote out Avery's timeline.

"What if she went straight to Spencer's house from work?"

Matt suggested.

Bree rolled the timeline around in her head. "The scene didn't feel rushed. Let's see if we can get some kind of physical confirmation of the time she left her office—as well as a photo to see if she changed clothes, et cetera. A few minutes either way could make a difference in the timeline. The company probably has parking lot or video surveillance cameras."

"I'll send a deputy," Todd said.

Bree filled in Todd on the package delivery development.

“I wish he gave us a better description than SUV or minivan, probably white, but that’s all he would commit to.”

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“Better than being overly sure of himself and incorrect,”

Todd said.

“This is true,” Bree agreed. Nothing was worse than bad information that sent the investigation in the wrong direction.

“Too bad the tire tread was insufficient.”

Rarely did one piece of obscure forensic evidence break a case. Most police work was boring drudgery: interviewing witnesses, comparing statements for discrepancies, writing and reading reports, studying photos, logging every small piece of evidence in hopes it all points to the same suspect.

Investigations were largely built on meticulous paperwork and painstaking attention to detail.

Matt spun on his heel. “Avery Ledger drives a Prius, and she would have no need to park next door. She was supposed to be at Spencer’s house.”

Bree tapped on Avery’s photo. “Who is to say she did it alone? Maybe she had help.”

“It’s possible.” Matt paused, his head cocked. “The murder would have been an easier job for two people, that’s for sure.”

Bree turned away from Avery’s photo. “Do we have Spencer’s phone or financial records yet?”

“No,” Todd said. “But the warrants were signed first thing this morning. They’ve been forwarded. Records should start coming in later today.”

Some companies were more cooperative than others.

Banks, as highly regulated institutions, tended to be hard-asses about dotting i’s and crossing t’s.

Matt leaned over the table and opened a manila folder.

“The techs opened Spencer’s firesafe. He kept physical copies of his tax returns inside. There is no business listed. His only income came from his job at Electronics Depot.” He shifted papers. “Looking at the invoices from his kitchen reno, unless he had some sort of windfall, I expect to see some deep debts on his financials.”

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“His brother did say Spencer lived above his means.” Bree drank from her mug.

Matt stopped and rubbed his beard. “His tax returns verified he’s worked at Electronics Depot for years. There’s no self-employment income listed.”

“So, he’s not a digital marketer.” Bree set down her cup.

“He lied about other things as well.” Todd tapped on his keyboard. “Spencer used two dating apps, TechLove and Cool Beans. Both companies are cooperating fully. We have full access to his accounts.”

Most people didn’t read the terms of service before they clicked the little box at the bottom of their screen, but many smartphone apps included a disclaimer that the company could share personal information with law enforcement.

“I’m still digging into the data,” Todd said. “So far, I’ve found nine women he dated in the past thirty days.”

“Busy guy,” Matt said.

“How much detail do the apps provide?” Bree asked.

Todd checked his notes. “Messages are saved for thirty days, unless the user deletes them. After thirty days, messages are purged.”

“Did he date any of the women repeatedly?” Matt asked.

“One bad date doesn’t seem like enough to generate the kind of rage that wraps layer upon layer of plastic on a man’s face.”

Todd tapped his computer keyboard. “Six of Spencer’s dates didn’t make it beyond the initial coffee meet. According to in-app messages, three of the women refused a second date.

Spencer broke it off with the other three. He actually told one woman she wasn’t as attractive in person as in her dating app photos. He accused her of photo editing the pictures.”

“Wow.” Matt’s brows lifted. “That seems harsh.”

“Yeah.” Todd blew out a hard breath.

“He didn’t text with these women using his cell number?”

Bree asked.

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Todd shook his head. “He was very regimented in his approach. He didn’t give any of the women his cell number until a third date was agreed

upon. Three women made it to that magical third date, and in-app messaging ceased. Their conversations likely moved off the app to the cell provider at that point.”

Matt said, “Then his phone records will likely pick up where the app messages leave off, but most cell providers don’t keep actual texts very long.”

“We’ll have the time and date of his texts, just not the content.” Bree held up one hand, fingers crossed. “We can hope for more data.”

“An interesting note on the in-app messaging I’ve reviewed so far,” Todd said. “Not only did Spencer lie about everything, it seems he tailored his imaginary background to what he thought they wanted to hear.”

“Example?” Bree asked.

The chair legs squeaked as Todd rocked back and stretched his back. “In their first conversations, Avery talked about her niece. Spencer responded with a story about his brother’s kids, but we know Jasper doesn’t have any children. Another woman told stories about her dog. Spencer responded with his own story about the golden retriever he lost to cancer last year. He told her he was so heartbroken that he couldn’t bring himself to get another dog yet.”

“Didn’t Jasper say Spencer was too much of a neat freak for pets that shed?” Matt asked.

“He did.” Bree nodded.

“Basically, he lied to all of the women he dated.” Todd shifted forward again. “He created the persona he thought they’d like.”

“How would you keep all the lies straight?” Matt’s question sounded rhetorical. “Seems like a lot of work.”

“Right?” Bree agreed. “I’d never be able to keep track.”

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Todd shrugged. “Since it appears he didn’t go out with any one woman more than five or six times, it didn’t matter. He wasn’t looking for a long-term relationship.”

“Jealousy is a potential motive,” Bree said.

“So is anger and revenge,” Matt added.

Bree frowned. “What do we know about the three women?”

“We already discussed Avery Ledger.” Todd scrolled on his computer. “Monica Linfield is a model-slash-actress, and Farah Rock is a technical

writer. They're both attractive—and local. I'll print their photos." He clicked the touchpad. The printer in the corner chugged and spit out two images.

Matt retrieved them and put them on the board next to Avery Ledger's photo. "It seems Spencer has a very specific type."

All three women were in their midtwenties, slender, with long dark hair.

"Is Spencer's brother, Jasper, still on our suspect list?"

Todd asked.

"For now, yes," Bree answered. "But we have no evidence to link him to the scene—or to his brother."

Todd pointed to his laptop screen. "We have his computer and his cell phone. The techs are working on getting access to those today."

"The autopsy is schedule for eleven thirty." Bree checked the time on her phone. It was nearly eleven o'clock. "Matt and I will attend. Todd, dig into the backgrounds of the three women Spencer recently dated at least three times. See if you can rule any of them out." Her gaze slid to the murder board.

"We have more than enough motivation. Now, we need evidence."

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

By eleven thirty, Matt stood in the autopsy suite and stared through his face shield at the body on the stainless-steel table.

Next to him, Bree crossed her arms and did the same. The ME had started the autopsy ahead of schedule. In front of them, Spencer LaForge's naked body lay exposed, except for the plastic wrap that still covered his head. His full-sleeve tattoo was unimpressive, a hodgepodge of unrelated, mediocre ink.

Overhead lights glared down mercilessly, exposing every dark secret. Nothing could hide.

It wasn't the gore factor that made an autopsy hard for him to watch. It was the cold, sterile surroundings. He knew the victim was no longer present in a sentient way, but the clinical treatment of their body still made him a little heartsick. Every dead body was also a spouse, sibling, or child. He worked hard to never forget that.

But there was only one way to determine how someone died. Dr. Jones treated every victim with respect, yet she still had to dissect their body.

“You haven’t missed too much. We’re still on the external exam.” Dr. Jones waved a hand over the corpse. The body would have been painstakingly photographed and searched for trace evidence before it was undressed. Then the entire process was repeated after the clothing was removed. The clothing would be sent to the crime lab for further analysis.

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“The victim is male and in good physical condition. I found no sign of sexual assault on external examination.” She drew a circle in the air over the hip area. “As we discussed at the scene, these burn marks indicate the use of a stun gun to incapacitate the victim.”

Matt counted. “He was zapped three times.”

Bree said, “Which explains why the ligature marks are so faint.”

“He didn’t do much struggling.” Dr. Jones pointed to the victim’s left elbow. “There are bruises and abrasions on the left side of the body, likely from falling and hitting a hard and rough surface after being stunned.” Dr. Jones indicated a scrape on the underside of the victim’s jaw.

“Like the paver patio?” Matt asked.

“Yes.” Dr. Jones picked up a pair of scissors. “I’m going to cut the plastic and remove the layers intact, as this will be the best way to preserve both the method of wrapping and any trace evidence in the layers.”

She snipped the plastic wrap from bottom to top and carefully separated the edges. Silence fell over the autopsy suite. The victim was definitely Spencer. Matt had seen his driver’s license photo. A piece of duct tape covered Spencer’s mouth, but that wasn’t the biggest shock.

The word *liar* had been carved into Spencer’s forehead.

Matt swallowed, his mouth dry.

Bree cleared her throat. “Did the mutilation occur before or after death?”

Dr. Jones examined the inside of the plastic wrap. “Before.

There’s blood here, so probably before.”

If the wounds had occurred after death, they would not have bled much. Once the heart stopped beating, blood no longer circulated but began to pool in the lowest parts of the body.

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“The edges of the wounds are clean, so they were carved by a sharp blade.” Dr. Jones continued to peer at the plastic wrap. “See this moisture? It’s a by-product of respiration.”

Bree shifted her weight. “So, the plastic was definitely put on while he was alive and breathing.”

“Yes,” Dr. Jones agreed. “Its presence supports asphyxia due to suffocation as the cause of death. Smothering is also confirmed by presence of cyanosis.” Lack of oxygen tinted the skin blue. “And petechial hemorrhages on the eyelids.” She pointed to red dots that appeared when blood vessels in the skin ruptured due to intense pressure. They were common in deaths by strangulation, hanging, or smothering. After the morgue assistant took photographs, Dr. Jones peeled off the duct tape. “I see more petechial hemorrhages in the mouth. What’s this?” She picked up a magnifying glass and leaned closer to the plastic wrap. “Looks like some kind of animal fur.” Using tweezers, she plucked the item from the plastic, then moved to a microscope on the other side of the room. Holding the end of the tweezers under the lens, she said, “Don’t hold me to this. We’ll need to send this for DNA analysis, but cat fur tends to be finer than dog fur or human hair. This looks like fur from a long-haired black cat.”

Dr. Jones reached for a scalpel and approached the victim’s side. The next step was for her to make the Y-incision and begin the internal examination.

Matt inched away from the table. Bree caught his eye and nodded toward the exit. Seemed they were of the same mind.

He’d watch the entire autopsy if he felt it would help him solve the case, but autopsies were gross, and the investigation was short on time.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Bree said.

“I’ll call you if I find anything else interesting.” Dr. Jones pressed the tip of the scalpel to the victim’s collarbone.

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Matt turned toward the exit. He pushed through to the antechamber with Bree right behind him. The saw started up with a high-pitched whine as the autopsy suite doors swung shut behind them.

“The cat fur could have come from anywhere.” Bree stripped off her face shield and mask. “It’s impossible to have pets without the fur getting

everywhere. I find Ladybug and Vader fur in the weirdest places. It's worse than Kayla's glitter."

Matt tossed his used gown into the labeled bin. "Brody's undercoat almost seems magnetic. I keep a lint roller in my glove compartment."

"And one in my desk." Bree stopped, her head cocked.

"Fur from a long-haired black cat goes on the list."

"We can hope forensics pulls more evidence from the plastic wrap." Matt stopped at a sink to scrub his hands, even though he hadn't touched a single thing in the autopsy suite.

"I doubt they'll be prints." Bree did the same. "Everyone knows to wear gloves nowadays."

"True." Matt dried his hands. "We can hope for a human hair." "What do you think about the word on his forehead?"

Bree asked.

"I think it confirms the possibility that his murder was personal and suggests we're on the right track by investigating the women he dated."

"I agree." Bree checked her phone. "I need to get to the horse auction. We don't really have the time, but I promised the kids. I won't let them down."

Matt checked his watch. "We'll consider it our lunch hour."

Bree snorted. "As if we ever actually take a lunch hour."

"Todd is still working the investigation. You're delegating now, remember. That means you get to share the load. We'll 90

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have time to interview Monica Linfield and Farah Rock afterward."

They reached the SUV and Bree opened her vehicle door.

"I know the work is being done, and Todd is more than capable."

"But?"

"I still have control issues."

"At least you know your faults." Matt shook his head, and they climbed into the SUV. "You know you can't keep Todd busy with phones and paperwork forever."

"He was in charge of the crime scene."

Matt gave her a look. "You know what I mean."

"You're right." Bree huffed. "But last time he got more actively involved in an investigation, he was kidnapped and almost killed."

“Yep,” Matt agreed. “But he needs to get back out there before he starts to doubt himself. There’s a horseback-riding analogy . . .”

“Ugh. Am I damaging his self-confidence?”

“Not yet,” Matt said. “But if you keep him under wraps, he could interpret that as you losing faith in him, which would be a serious blow to his confidence. Has he given you any reason to doubt his ability to do his job?”

“No.” Bree blew out a long breath. “Have you seen any signs that he isn’t up to the task?”

“No. He seems OK. Eager to get back to it.”

She pulled out her cell phone and called Todd. “Matt and I are tied up with something. Would you interview Spencer’s manager and coworkers at Electronics Depot? He’s been there for years. See if he made any enemies or anyone there noticed unusual behavior recently.”

“Really?” Todd sounded almost excited.

“Yes.”

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“I’m on it.” Enthusiasm rang in Todd’s voice as he signed off. Bree pocketed her phone. Stress lines bracketed her mouth. “That was hard.”

“It was the right thing to do. Todd needs to get back into the field.”

“I know, but I don’t want anything bad to happen to him.

We’ve already been shot at on this case.”

“Todd’s a cop. You can’t shield him from what he wants to be,” Matt said. “Besides, statistically patrol is more dangerous than working investigations.”

“I know.”

Domestic disturbances and traffic stops were the worst.

Bree’s phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen. “Nick West. Again.”

“You have to deal with the press,” Matt warned.

“I know. I’ll do a press conference later today, after we have a little more information.” Because if she didn’t release enough details, the media would speculate and dig. No good ever came of that.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Trying to suppress her worry about her chief deputy, Bree started the engine. Matt was correct. This was Bree’s issue, not Todd’s.

“Are we stopping for the horse trailer?” Matt asked from the passenger seat.

“We are. I’m being optimistic today.” Bree started the engine.

“Nice.”

She drove home, where they hooked the horse trailer to the farm truck. Matt drove the big pickup, and Bree followed in her official SUV because she needed to be prepared to respond to an emergency if necessary.

They parked in the dirt lot at the auction. The sun shone from a dazzling blue winter sky. Bree grabbed a halter and lead rope from the trailer and slung them over her shoulder.

Matt gave the ground a dubious glance. “Let’s be quick. If this mud thaws, the trailer is going to get stuck.”

Bree quickened her pace. They left the sunny parking area for the large auction barn. Inside felt colder than outside.

They walked between rows of pens. Steam rose from animals’ backs. Some milled around, stamping nervous feet. Others stood with heads hanging. An occasional thin whinny pierced the freezing air.

“So many horses.” Matt stepped around a pile of manure.

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“I want to take them all home.”

“I know it.” Bree focused ahead, bypassing a corral containing seven mules and another full of yearlings. A gorgeous chestnut quarter horse caught her eye. But he shied away, his eyes wide and white-rimmed, as she approached him. She backed away. “I don’t need fancy. I need sound and sensible.”

Not only was Adam an occasional rider at best, but Bree didn’t have the skill or time to train a youngster properly.

Plus, she had to consider Kayla, who ran through the barn and pasture like a wild child. A well-mannered, mature horse would fit into their lifestyle best.

Ahead, a half dozen horses crowded together in the corner of a pen. Resting her elbows on the top wooden slat, she assessed the animals. “I like the looks of the Standardbred.

Number three sixty-five.” She referred to the number on the horse’s hip sticker. Bree slipped into the pen and easily moved the Standardbred aside. His dark brown coat was shaggy and caked with mud. His gaze was soft as

Bree slipped the halter over his head. He cooperated like a gentleman, lowering his head a few inches so she could easily fasten the buckle. She rubbed the crest of his neck, and he leaned into her touch.

Matt opened the gate, and she led the brown horse into the aisle. Four of the animals stood back, but a huge black draft horse crowded the gate, trying to squeeze his enormous body through before Matt closed the latch. Matt halted him with a hand on his nose. The draft horse pressed his chest against the slats. The boards groaned.

“Easy, big boy. Your pal will be back in a few.” Matt gave his big head a scratch.

While Matt held the lead rope, Bree examined the Standardbred gelding.

“I’m no expert, but he looks younger than I first thought.”

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She ran her hand along his side. Under the mud, his ribs protruded a bit more than they should have, but he wasn’t in terrible condition. “Some weight and a good grooming would help.”

“He’s quiet,” Matt said.

“He does have nice manners.” She felt along the horse’s spine. He didn’t react. She bent a knee and asked Matt to give her a leg up.

“Sure.” He lifted her by the shin and boosted her onto the horse’s back as if she weighed nothing.

Even in the busy stockyard barn with only a halter and lead rope, the brown horse trotted up and down the aisle, turning and stopping politely when asked. She didn’t detect a limp in his gait as she brought him back to Matt.

Bree slid to the ground. “Erin was the more experienced horsewoman. I wish she was here.” She rubbed at the sudden pressure behind her heart.

Most of the time, she felt as if she’d come to terms with her sister’s death, but grief still ambushed her at random moments, and she occasionally felt guilty, as if her own joy had come at the expense of her sister’s life. Her new life with the kids—

with Matt—held a richness she’d hadn’t even known possible.

Matt rested a hand on her shoulder. His touch brought her back to the present. “Your sister would want you to be happy, and she’d be thrilled about what you’re doing today.”

“How do you always know what I’m thinking?”

“We’re in tune.” His smile sent warmth radiating through her. “We are.” Feeling all sorts of content, she turned back to the horse.

“It’s nice that Adam wants to continue the family tradition of rescuing unwanted horses.”

“It’s all he wants for his birthday,” she said.

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Her relationship with her brother had also deepened since she’d moved back to her hometown. They’d both made the effort, and they were becoming a family in more than just name.

She checked a sheet posted on the side of the pen. “Number three sixty-five, Amish buggy horse, broke to ride and drive.

Seventeen years old. That’s all it says.” She slid the paper back into the hanging folder.

“I like him.”

“Me too,” Bree agreed. “Amish buggy horses have high mileage, but they’re accustomed to traffic and noise, so they’re generally easygoing. He seems sound.”

She ran her hands up and down the horse’s legs. He had some lumps and bumps, to be expected for a horse with a lot of blacktop under his hooves. She lifted his feet and examined his hooves. “Needs trimming but his feet are in decent shape.”

After years of being a working beast, living on Bree’s farm and going on an occasional easy trail ride would be a nice retirement for this handsome boy.

“Are you going to bid on him?” Matt patted the horse’s neck. Dust billowed.

“I am.” Bree hated to put him back in the pen, but he went willingly. “It feels right.”

The draft horse nickered as the two horses greeted one another.

“What about his buddy?” Matt pointed to the draft horse.

Bree consulted the sheet again. “Percheron, also broke to ride and drive. Fourteen years old.”

“That’s a lot of horse.”

“Yes.” Bree forced herself to look away. She couldn’t rescue them all. But damn, his sad nicker renewed the ache in her chest—in the same place

that housed her grief for Erin. What would she do with a draft horse? He was enormous, standing 96

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close to eighteen hands high.

“He has a gash on his rear leg,” Matt said.

Bree turned back and craned her head to assess the Percheron’s wound. Blood dripped above his hock. “That looks fresh. He was probably kicked.”

Matt’s voice went tight. “Lameness won’t improve his chances of scoring a decent home. He’ll probably get picked up by the kill buyer.”

Bree sighed. “Probably.”

“Can you ride a horse like that?”

“Definitely. Percherons were war horses. They needed big, strong horses to carry knights and heavy armor.”

“If I were interested in a horse of my own, what kind would you recommend for me?” Matt asked, his eyes on the Percheron.

Bree shoved her cold hands into her jacket pockets and surveyed the pen. The Percheron was nudging the Standardbred with a giant nose. A true beast of burden, he had probably done the heavy moving on the farm. She bet he’d pulled everything from plows to tree stumps.

She turned back to Matt. He was a big-boned six foot three. With his reddish-brown hair and trimmed beard, he often reminded Bree of a Hollywood Viking, but today maybe a medieval knight would make a better comparison. He was certainly capable of swinging a broadsword or battle ax.

She glanced between Matt and the giant horse and smiled.

“A big one.”

Matt grinned back. “Can we check him out?”

“Let’s do it.”

The Percheron followed Matt out of the pen as eager as a puppy. Luckily, he was wearing a halter, because the one Bree had brought wasn’t big enough for his ginormous head.

One by one, Bree lifted his dinner-plate-size feet. He stood 97

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quietly as she ran her hands over his body and legs, looking for sore spots. Like his pal, he was a little underweight but not drastically. The gash worried her. “He’s favoring that leg. I can’t really assess his soundness.”

Matt ran a hand across collar marks at the base of the muscular neck. “He’s worked hard.”

“He has.”

“Interest in that one, Sheriff?” a shaky voice asked.

Bree turned to see a wiry old man in a heavy canvas coat and work boots approaching. He looked like he’d walked out of a Louis L’Amour novel.

“Maybe.” She pointed at the Standardbred. “We’re also thinking about that gelding. Do you know anything about either of them?”

“I do.” The old man held out a hand. “I’m Stanley Dutt. I work here.”

Bree gave his arthritic hand a gentle shake and introduced Matt.

“They came from the Abrams farm. Old Josiah died about a month ago. His son doesn’t want to take over the farm, so he’s selling everything.” Dutt shook his head. “Anyway, those are two nice animals. They have a bit of wear on them, but they’re both still willing to work. The Standardbred was a solid buggy horse.” He reached forward and gave the Percheron a nose rub. “This big guy looks intimidating, but Josiah’s grandkids used to run under his belly and pile on him bareback, not that I’m advocating such behavior. Just saying the horse isn’t spooky or shy. He can’t get enough attention.”

“Thanks for the information.” Bree turned back to the horse. Now was the time to test the old man’s story. “Boost me up.”

“OK.” Matt gave her a leg up.

Bree felt like a child on the broadback. In deference to the 98
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horse’s leg injury, she simply walked him a few paces down the aisle. She neck-reined with the lead rope and turned him around like a bus in a tight parking lot. She brought him back to Matt. “He acts like a gentleman.”

“Of course he does.” Dutt pulled a can of chewing tobacco from his back pocket and stuck a pinch between his cheek and gum. “Good thing.” Matt grinned. “He must weight close to two thousand pounds.”

“You really want him?” Bree asked.

“I do.” Matt put the Percheron back in the pen. “Can I board him at your place?”

“Of course. You’re there almost every day anyway.”

His grin widened. “I am.”

“Then let’s go buy some horses.”

“I’m glad.” Dutt spit in the dirt. “I was worried for them.”

He turned away. “Good luck to you.”

“Do you know their names?” Bree called to him.

“They deserve new names for their new lives, don’t cha think?” he answered over his shoulder.

Bree picked up the Standardbred at a reasonable price.

But the kill buyer was very interested in the Percheron, and Matt had to bid over the going price per pound. Still, a short time later, they completed the paperwork and walked the two horses through the parking lot.

“I only prepped to bring one horse home.” She offered both horses a drink from the single bucket. “They’ll have to share the hay net.”

“They’ll be fine.” Matt relocated the net to the trailer’s divider so the animals could share their snack. “It’s a short drive.”

The animals both loaded with no hesitation. Though the Percheron had to duck his head a little, he did so willingly.

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Matt slid behind the wheel of the farm pickup truck.

“This is nice.”

“It is.” She stepped back, allowing him to close the vehicle door. He lowered the window. “I know we’ve only been together for a short time, but everything about this”—Matt waved in the general direction of the trailer hitched behind the truck—

“feels right.”

Like they were building something together—something that still had plenty of room to grow. The feeling filled Bree with warmth, like standing in a patch of sun on a clear winter day. She stepped up on the running board and kissed him through the open window. “I agree.”

Matt kissed her back. “Let’s take our new babies home and get them settled in.”

“The kids are going to be so excited.” And Bree was looking forward to sharing their joy. Nothing gave her pleasure like seeing them happy.

“Maybe some animals in need of TLC will help the kids get through Christmas.”

“That’s going to be hard for all of you, the first without Erin.”

“It will.” Bree glanced back at the trailer. Could she make it easier, or was rebounding grief a part of the healing process they needed to work through? She wished for the former but suspected she’d have to accept the latter. “Kayla will want to name them both.”

Matt laughed and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “That big boy doesn’t look like a Pumpkin,” he said, referring to Kayla’s own little horse. “Or a Disney character.”

“Ha! Good luck with that.” She couldn’t wait to watch Matt field hundreds of name suggestions from an enthusiastic and persistent eight-year-old.

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Bree returned to her own vehicle and followed the horse trailer out of the lot. A half hour later, they parked at the farm.

Contentment bloomed inside her. Who would have thought she would enjoy such domesticity?

She jumped from the SUV and opened the barn doors.

Pumpkin, Riot, and Cowboy stood at the pasture gate, curious about the newcomers. “Give me a few minutes to prep another stall.”

She raked the dirt, spread fresh straw, and filled a water bucket. Back outside, she spotted Dana and the kids emerging from the house. School had been a half day for some administrative reason. Bree couldn’t keep track. Dana sported a bright blue hat over her short and shaggy blonde-and-gray hair. Luke wore a grin as wide as his face. Kayla bolted from the porch steps with an excited squeal.

Luke caught his little sister by the hood. “Easy. They’re new. Let’s not spook them.”

“OK.” Kayla slowed to a deliberate walk.

Dana shoved her hands deep into the pockets of her down parka. “Did you get one?”

“We got two.” Matt lowered the ramp at the rear of the trailer, then opened the side door. He backed the Standardbred down the ramp. “This guy is for Adam.”

Dana reached out to give his neck a pat. “He’s sweet.”

“I love him!” Kayla clamped her hands under her chin, prayer-style.

Bree took the brown horse’s lead rope. The kids came over to pet him. The horse dropped his head and sniffed their pockets. She suspected his

former owner's grandkids had brought him treats.

Matt backed the Percheron out of the trailer.

"Holy hell—cow," corrected Dana. "He's a tank."

"He's my tank." Matt rubbed behind the draft horse's ear.

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When he stopped, the Percheron gave him a gentle nudge, as if asking for more pets.

"You got a horse too?" Luke asked. "He's cool."

"Is he really yours, Matt?" Kayla bounced over.

The Percheron didn't even blink at her exuberance.

Instead, he lowered his head so she could pet his nose, then he snorted and blew snotty hay all over Kayla's clothes. As a farm kid, she barely blinked at the mess on her jacket. Kayla rested a small hand between his nostrils. Her mouth opened in a nearly reverent O. "He's beau-ti-ful." She drew out the word.

"What's his name?"

"I don't know yet," Matt said.

"He looks like Mulan's horse, Khan, or Angus from *Brave*."

Kayla was an expert on Disney animals. "But he could be the Beast too."

"Beast." Luke laughed. "I like it."

"He's too big to name after a cartoon," Matt protested.

"Wow." Dana circled the horse, giving him a wide berth.

"He's huge."

"He's been pretty docile so far," Matt said.

Dana inched closer and held out a tentative hand. As a born-and-bred city girl, she hadn't had much exposure to horses until she'd moved to Bree's farm. She would pat noses and hand out carrots, but Bree had not been able to tempt her friend to learn to ride yet.

The Percheron arched his neck, and Bree swore the horse batted his eyelashes at Dana.

"You are a charmer." Dana stepped forward and stroked his neck.

Bree turned to Luke. "I have to go back to work after I get them settled. The vet is coming to stitch the Percheron's leg in about an hour. Can you handle it?"

"Sure." Luke had inherited his mother's horsemanship. He 102

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took the lead rope from Matt. "I'd better hose off his leg for now."

"Good thinking." Bree led the Standardbred into the barn, settled him in his new stall, and gave him some hay.

A few minutes later, Luke brought the draft horse inside and put him away.

Kayla followed them in. "Should we call Uncle Adam and tell him? He's going to be so excited."

Bree tossed a flake of hay over the big horse's stall door. She looked at the enthusiastic little girl. "I thought you wanted to surprise him?"

"I do. But I want to tell him right now too." Kayla bounced on her toes.

Bree pulled out her phone and dialed her brother's number on speaker. The call rang three times before Adam's recorded voice asked her to leave a message. "Adam, it's Bree. Call Luke when you get this message." Bree pressed "End." "There.

You two can decide what to tell him when he calls back."

Because her brother could be forgetful and spacey when he was working, she also sent him a text with the same message.

"I can't decide!" Kayla bounced again, her face scrunched in happy conflict.

Bree grinned. The decision would be a good distraction for Kayla, better than thinking about celebrating the upcoming holiday without her mom—or even worse, the anniversary of Erin's death, which was also approaching fast.

"You can go, Aunt Bree." Luke latched the door. "I've got this." "I know you do." In the midst of a seemingly endless growth spurt, he was several inches taller than her. She rested her head on his shoulder. "I just wish I could hang out and share the moment with you guys."

"What you do is important," Luke said. "We'll hang out 103

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later."

"Thanks for helping." Bree's eyes misted. Damn. Why did that happen so often? And for no reason other than she was proud or happy.

"It's what family does, right?"

"Right," Bree agreed, even though she felt like she was still learning what families were supposed to do. Until then, she was totally winging it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

On the way to Scarlet Falls, Matt watched the scenery flash past the passenger vehicle window. The literal enormity of what he'd done dawned on him. "I can't believe I bought a horse."

"Me either." Bree grinned at him from behind the wheel.

"And that's a *lot* of horse."

Matt suffered a quick jolt of unease, then shoved it back.

"Don't look so worried." Bree glanced at him. "His leg will probably heal just fine. But what's the worst that can happen?"

He's lame, and you are the proud owner of a two-thousand-pound dog? You love big dogs."

"I do." Matt laughed. "And you have a point."

"You rescued him because he stole your heart. You didn't buy him as a show-jumping prospect."

"You're right." Matt shoved aside his buyer's remorse. The horse wasn't a new car he'd bought on impulse. It was a living, breathing creature that needed a safe place to land, which Matt would give him regardless of his potential as a riding horse.

The GPS announced their arrival, and Bree turned into Monica Linfield's condo complex.

Matt surveyed the rows of luxury vehicles. The small town neighbored Grey's Hollow. Though Scarlet Falls had its own police department, as part of Randolph County, it was also included in Bree's jurisdiction.

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Bree pointed to a dark blue sedan. "There's her Audi Q5."

"A white one," Matt noted.

Empty parking spaces were marked with numbers that clearly corresponded with the actual units. Bree pulled her SUV into a row marked Guest Parking. They stepped out of the vehicle and walked past the cluster mailbox. Units were arranged in a U-shape around a rectangle of well-manicured green space.

Matt knocked on Monica's front door. Bree stood on the other side of the stoop, so they flanked the door. The previous day's shooting was fresh on his mind.

The door opened, and a tall, slender brunette blinked at them. Monica Linfield's driver's license photo did not do her justice. Matt considered

Bree to be the most beautiful woman in the world. But he couldn't fail to recognize this model was gorgeous in an artsy way, with long, shiny hair and a lean, bony face highlighted with dramatic makeup. Black yoga pants and a slim white sweater draped her long-legged frame.

She was stunning, but there was something about her that was also . . . too poised? No, too posed. Her stance seemed as unnatural as the deep red of her lips and the thick sweep of her fake eyelashes.

She scanned their uniforms, then her eyebrows dipped in a concerned V. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Sheriff Taggart." Bree gestured toward Matt. "And this is Criminal Investigator Flynn."

"Ma'am." Matt nodded.

Bree turned back to the woman. "Are you Monica Linfield?"

Her eyes widened and her posture tensed in alarm. "Yes. What's wrong?"

Police on the doorstep rarely meant good news.

Bree didn't keep her waiting. "Do you know Spencer 106

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LaForge?"

She nodded, and her shoulders curled forward.

Bree continued. "We'd like to ask you a few questions about him."

Her eyes brightened with moisture, as if she were going to cry. She blinked hard. She clearly wasn't over Spencer. She hugged her own waist with both arms. "Why?"

Matt felt eyes on him and turned his head. A neighbor watched from the mailboxes. As he met her gaze, the older woman quickly averted her eyes, shoved her key into the slot, and retrieved her mail. Matt faced Monica again.

Bree hesitated. Clearly, she did not want to tell Monica about Spencer's death while they stood on the doorstep.

"Can we come inside?" Matt asked in a gentle voice.

"OK." Though Monica sounded reluctant, she opened the door wider and moved back to give them room.

Bree and Matt stepped across the threshold into a sleek, modern space that looked weirdly perfect, more like a photo shoot than a living room.

Monica closed the door. "Please sit down."

She crossed the room, her steps gliding, as if she were walking the runway instead of pale gray wall-to-wall. She stopped in front of a white leather couch. Elegantly folding her long limbs, she sank onto the cushion, pulled a throw pillow onto her lap, and hugged it.

Bree sat next to her. Matt eased into a pencil-legged chair, almost surprised it held his weight. Those skinny legs must be titanium.

Bree rested her folded hands on her knees. "Have you seen the news, ma'am?"

"No." Monica shook her head. "I was in a bathing suit shoot all day yesterday. The wind machine kept malfunctioning.

When they got it running, it would only function on high.

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The director yelled for hours. I thought his head was going to explode. What a disaster." She touched her temple, as if the memory gave her a headache. "I got home late, went straight to bed, and slept in this morning. I have to work again tomorrow, and I needed the rest."

"Spencer LaForge died yesterday evening," Bree said. Her words sounded more like a death notification than questioning a witness.

"Spencer is dead?" Shock turned Monica's expression blank for a few seconds as she seemed to process the news.

Then she burst into tears.

Without a word, Matt picked up a box of tissues from an end table and handed it to her.

She accepted the box and sobbed, "Thank you," in a breaking voice.

"We're sorry for your loss," Matt said.

Monica and Spencer had only dated a few times, but the news of his death had upset her. Yet there was something about her emotions that didn't feel entirely genuine. Tears poured from her eyes, but her face remained strangely devoid of expression. Monica was a model. Maybe she was a decent actress. Her shock could be fake. Something about her felt off.

Usually, Matt was better at reading people's emotions.

"I'm sorry." Her breaths hitched. She plucked a tissue from the box and dried her face. Composing herself with a deep, shaky inhalation, she brushed a strand of long hair off her face. "What happened to him?"

"He was killed." Bree stuck with vague.

"Killed?" Monica's voice squeaked. "In a car accident or something?"

“No, ma’am.” Bree paused, as if deciding how much information to give her. “He was murdered.”

“Murdered?” Monica sobbed.

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She cried into a tissue for a few seconds, then shuddered and lifted her head. Somehow, crying didn’t make her eyes red or puffy. Her skin was still flawless. She managed to look both devastated *and* camera-ready.

She pulled an elastic band off her wrist, gathered her long hair, and arranged it in a bun on top of her head. Long tendrils framed her face. “He broke off our relationship last week.” More tears threatened to spill over. Her eyes went bright, sparking with anger before shifting back into sadness.

“Did he say why?” Bree asked.

She shook her head hard. “Not really. He said some stuff about our chemistry not feeling strong enough.” Her face tightened, and her next words sounded bitter. “But our chemistry was good enough to sleep with me.”

Bree made a noncommittal yet empathetic noise. “How many dates did you have with him?”

Instead of answering, Monica started sobbing again. Was she trying to evade the question? Again, her response didn’t feel entirely authentic, and Matt couldn’t identify why.

Bree waited for Monica to compose herself, then repeated the question. “How many times did you go out with Spencer?”

“Five.” Monica sniffed. “But to me, it felt like more. Then, after our fifth date, he sent me a text saying we were through.

He wasn’t *feeling it*. Can you believe that? He broke up with me in a damned text.” Monica looked to Matt.

“That was rude,” he said, commiserating. Then took a poke at her anger. “Did that make you mad?”

“I would have been furious,” Bree agreed.

“Of course I was mad,” Monica snapped. Then she pressed a knuckle to her mouth. “I was angry and sad and depressed.”

She swiped a tear off her cheek. “I’ve never been dumped before.”

Now that Matt could believe.

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“I can’t believe he’s dead,” Monica said.

Bree jumped in. “Did you go to his house?”

Monica nodded at her. “Twice.”

“Did you see his snakes?” Matt asked.

She frowned, her eyes narrowing. Her words were clipped, as if she were offended. “I hope that isn’t an inappropriate euphemism.”

“No, ma’am,” Matt said with no trace of humor. He held eye contact. “Spencer had a reptile collection, including snakes.”

“Oh.” Monica shuddered. “I didn’t see one, and he never mentioned having any weird collection.”

“You said you were on a shoot all day yesterday. What time did you finish?” Bree kept her voice casual, but the question was key.

Monica wasn’t fooled. Her tears shut off like she’d tightened a spigot. “Are you asking me for an alibi?”

“It would be great if you had one.” Bree lifted a shoulder.

“The more people I can rule out quickly, the better. When and where was the shoot?”

“We worked from eight in the morning until nine last night.” Monica gave them the address of a studio in an office park. “You were there all day?” Bree asked.

Monica nodded. Matt pulled his phone from his pocket, opened the note app, and typed in the address. “Can you give us a name or two, people who could corroborate your hours?”

“Sure.” Monica picked up her phone from the coffee table and read off two names and phone numbers. “They’re both models who worked the shoot with me.”

“Thank you.” Matt noted the names and numbers, then dropped his cell phone back into his pocket. “Did Spencer ever mention getting a threat or having an altercation?”

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Monica lowered her phone to her lap. “No, but I’m not sure how honest he really was with me. The breakup felt . . .

insincere. One week he was falling in love with me. After we slept together twice, he was over me. Frankly, I felt used.”

Bree wrapped up the interview, and they returned to the patrol vehicle. She slid behind the wheel. “Real or fake tears?”

“Both.” In the passenger seat, Matt fastened his seat belt.

“She was mad and sad about the breakup. The tears over his death didn’t feel as authentic.”

“That was my impression too.” Bree glanced over. “I’m not a good judge of tears, though.”

Matt shrugged. “While I was growing up, the house was full of Cady’s friends. When they were teenagers, someone was always crying. In my limited experience, real tears tend to be messy. Ms. Linfield didn’t smudge her lipstick or mascara.”

“Good observation.” Bree pulled away from the curb. “We need to verify her alibi anyway. Can you plug the address of that film studio into the GPS? I want to drive by.”

When they reached the studio, Matt went inside and spoke with a cameraman, but it wasn’t the same crew that had worked the previous day. He stopped at the receptionist’s desk, where the young woman checked the studio schedule and confirmed the hours of the shoot. She also obtained the surveillance videos for the previous day and emailed the video to Matt.

When he returned to the car, Bree was writing in a spiral notepad. “Both of Monica’s model friends confirm her alibi.”

“But they’re her friends, so that doesn’t mean all that much,” Matt said. “I have the surveillance video from the studio.”

“Forward it to Todd. He can have a deputy review it.”

The evidence was mounting. Hopefully, they would accumulate enough to separate the truth from the lies.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Todd hovered over a stack of paperwork. His stomach grumbled. He’d missed lunch. He considered running through a drive-through but resisted. He was in training for an IRONMAN competition and tried to avoid fast food.

Instead of giving in to temptation, he texted Cady.

HAVE TIME FOR A LATE LUNCH?

YES, she responded. YOUR PLACE?

He typed, PERFECT.

He’d been dating Matt’s sister for a few months. After the trauma of being kidnapped, Todd had learned that taking a small chunk of time for a

normal activity, even in the middle of an important investigation, could help him maintain balance, manage his stress, and curtail burnout.

He used to roll his eyes at the term *self-care*, but no more.

He would actively try to not work 24/7 in the future. Everyone needed to breathe.

He drove home. Cady had a key and was already inside when he arrived. His yellow lab, Goldie, met him at the door. At seven months, she was a long-legged, good-natured chewing machine. Todd had adopted her after a friend had died on the last major case—the one when Todd had been kidnapped.

Goldie jumped on his leg but sat when asked, though her *112*

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butt bounced on the floor. Todd toed off his boots and set them in the closet next to Cady's. Seeing their shoes lined up together made his house feel more like a home.

"I already walked her." Cady stood at the stove, wielding a spatula. She wore jeans, a sweatshirt, and thick socks. Her face was bare, and her long strawberry blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail. "I know you're short on time, so I thought I'd start lunch."

Todd swept aside her ponytail and kissed the back of her neck. "What are we having?"

She leaned back against him. "Grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup." She flipped the sandwiches, then gave the saucepan of soup a stir.

They brought the food to the table and sat for a quiet lunch. Goldie slept with her head on Todd's foot. Cady talked about the process she was making with her current crop of rescue dogs. Todd, needing a mental break, just listened.

As if she knew he needed the time, she talked for ten minutes before asking, "How is your case?"

"It's OK."

She gave him the assessing look he'd grown accustomed to, the one that double-checked that he wasn't answering on reflex.

"Really," he said. "I'm paying attention, which is why I'm taking this break."

"Good." She picked up the crust of her sandwich and dunked it in her soup.

When lunch was over, Cady waved him toward the door.

“I’ll take the dog out again before I leave. Let me know if you need me to pick her up later. I can always take her to my place for the night. It’s good for her to socialize with my crew.”

Cady had four dogs of her own.

“Thanks.” Todd kissed her on the mouth.

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“I promised I would help with her when I talked you into adopting her.”

“You did.” A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. An early marriage and divorce had left him lackluster on dating.

Then Cady had come along, for which he was ever grateful.

“I’ll call you later.”

The comfort food and her company cleared his head better than if he’d taken a long nap. With his belly and heart full, he drove to Electronics Depot. The freezing wind cut into his face as he crossed the parking lot. His nerves jangled as much as his duty belt. Interviewing a store manager should be routine for him, but this was the first time since he’d been kidnapped that the sheriff had assigned him an investigative task out of the office. He hoped she hadn’t lost faith in him.

Bree said it wasn’t his fault, but he still felt stupid about letting himself get ambushed.

He wasn’t nervous about his safety. It was the interview itself that worried him. Talking to the manager of an electronics store was a low-risk endeavor. But he was out of practice, and he did not want to fuck up the case.

He stepped through the sliding doors into the big-box store. After the cold wind in the parking lot, the warmth burned his cheeks. He made his way to the register and asked to see the manager.

The clerk spoke into a phone at the register, then waved toward the back corner of the store. “She’s in the office. Go on back.”

Todd weaved his way through the aisles to a doorway that led to a narrow corridor. He passed a set of restrooms and an Employees Only sign.

The manager leaned out of her office. “Officer?” She motioned with her hand for him to join her. “Please, come in. Have a seat.”

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Todd walked in. The restroom might be larger than the small, cramped office. The manager sat on a tiny wheeled chair behind the desk. To her right, a row of monitors showed live black-and-white images of the store's interior.

A single plastic chair faced the desk. The metal feet scraped obnoxiously on the commercial tile as he dragged the chair backward and sat. Even with the chair pushed all the way to the wall, his knees touched the desk.

"Sorry for the tight space." The manager was a fiftysome-thing woman with short blonde hair. "I'm Brandy Malone.

How can I help you?"

"Chief Deputy Harvey." Todd touched his own chest. "I have some questions about Spencer LaForge. He worked here, correct?"

"Yes." Brandy looked troubled. "What do you mean, *worked*?" She emphasized the past tense.

"I'm sorry to inform you that Spencer died last evening."

"No." She shifted back in her chair as if the news was a physical blow. "He didn't show up for work this morning . . ."

Her voice trailed off, and regret dragged the corners of her mouth down. "I called him, but he didn't answer. I assumed he'd had a personal emergency. I never imagined . . ." Her eyes lost focus, as if she was thinking instead of seeing him. She digested the news for about thirty seconds, then shook off her shock and made solid eye contact. "How did he die?"

"He was murdered," Todd said simply. The family had been notified, and the sheriff was going to give a press conference in a couple of hours anyway.

Brandy just stared, speechless for a few seconds. "I don't know what to say. I've never known anyone who was murdered before."

"It's distressing."

She leaned forward again, resting her forearms on the desk 115

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and reengaging with him. "What can I do?"

"The only thing you can do for Spencer now is help us catch whoever killed him," Todd said.

Brandy's head bobbed in an enthusiastic nod. "Of course."

Todd began. "How long did Spencer work here?"

“Six years,” she said without needing to look up his personal information. “He’s been with the store longer than I have.”

“Did he start out as the assistant manager?”

“No.” Brandy looked down at her keyboard. Her blonde bangs dropped into her eyes. She brushed them away with a fingertip as she tapped on the keys. She lifted her face to read the monitor. “He worked as an associate for two years, then was promoted to assistant manager just before I started here.”

“Was he a good employee?” Todd asked.

Brandy gave him a weak nod. “He was generally punctual, and we didn’t have any customer complaints about him. He never stole anything.”

That bar felt low, but Todd knew little about running a retail store. “But?”

“But he wasn’t what you would call a go-getter, if you know what I mean.”

Todd did, but he didn’t want to assume her definition matched his. So he waited for her to explain. He’d learned from watching Bree and Matt conduct interviews that people disliked silence and tended to fill it. They often gave up more—or different—information than when asked a direct question.

“I don’t mean to say he wasn’t a good employee. His reviews are all just fine.” Guilt softened her features. “He did his job, but he never went the extra distance. He wasn’t personable. He didn’t relate to customers. He didn’t connect with coworkers. Spencer came and left with almost zero social 116

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interaction, not even a *how are you?*” She looked puzzled. “I could never quite figure him out, but retail is a tough industry.

Employee turnover is expensive. So, I was content to keep him as one of the assistant managers, but I didn’t consider him promotable. His job performance was . . . average.”

“Have you noticed any strange behavior lately?” Todd asked.

“No. He seemed normal all day yesterday.”

“What time did he leave work?”

“Four o’clock,” she said. “He was just as punctual about clocking out as in.”

“Did Spencer express any concerns for his safety in his personal life recently?”

She lips flattened. “Not exactly.”

Todd waited.

“A week or two ago, this woman came into the store.”

She hesitated, clearly looking for the right words. “She was wearing sunglasses and a hat pulled low on her face. One of the staff immediately flagged her as a potential shoplifter and notified me and security. Sometimes thieves try to shield their facial features from the security cameras.” She took a breath.

“But she wasn’t a shoplifter. The security guard and I watched her on the monitor. She was acting very shifty. Hiding at the end of aisles, peering around displays. But we didn’t see her try to steal anything.”

Todd sensed the story wasn’t over.

Brandy seemed to mull over her next words. “Finally, by following her on the cameras, we determined she was following Spencer. I called him into the office, and the security guard went out to intercept her.”

“Do you remember her name?”

She looked at the ceiling and scrunched her face. “Farah something. The name stuck with me because it’s not common, 117

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and I’m old enough to remember Farrah Fawcett.” She turned back to her computer and clicked the mouse. “I filled out an incident report. Let me look.” Her eyes moved as she scanned the monitor. “Here. Her name is Farah Rock.”

“What happened after security intervened?” Todd asked.

“Spencer came out of the office and confronted her, and she went ballistic. Yelling about him lying to her and using her. She said, ‘I’ll get even with you. No one treats me like that.’”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.” Brandy lifted both eyebrows. “She stopped ranting when I told security to call the police.”

“Did you?”

Brandy looked regretful. “No. She immediately apologized, but it didn’t feel like she really meant it. She left the store without resisting, and Spencer said he didn’t want to make an issue out of it. He was mortified. It was the first time I’d ever seen him show real emotion. We filled out an incident

report and let it go.” She met Todd’s gaze. “Maybe I should have made a bigger deal out of it, but at the time, I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“I don’t know what else you could have done,” Todd said.

“Spencer could have filed for a restraining order. She didn’t physically attack him or anyone else?”

“No, she yelled, and then she cried. Once she calmed down, she cooperated with the security guard, giving him her name and ID, et cetera.”

“Do you have a copy of the security video?”

“I do.” Brandy’s mouth split in a satisfied smile. “I kept a copy with the report in case she ever came back to the store, which I expressly asked her not to do.”

“You banned her?”

“Not exactly.” Brandy huffed. “Technically, she didn’t

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commit a crime or attempt to commit a crime. Coming to the store and looking for an employee isn’t illegal. This is private property. The store could ban her, but I’m not sure corporate would have backed me up if she complained.”

“That’s sad.”

“That’s business.” She lifted both hands off the keyboard in a *whatever* gesture. “Anyway, I hoped the embarrassment and stern lecture would be enough to keep her away.”

“Did she come back?”

“Not that I know of,” Brandy said.

“Could I speak to Spencer’s coworkers?” Todd asked.

“Yes.” Brandy stood. “You can use my office. Should I send them in one by one?”

“That would be good. Thanks.”

Todd spoke with five store employees. None gave any more information than Brandy. Before he left, Brandy emailed him a copy of both the incident report and the security video of the confrontation.

He left the store with more energy and confidence than he’d had going in. In his vehicle, he used his computer to write up a quick set of interview notes before he forgot any details.

Then he dialed the sheriff’s number.

Bree needed to know Farah Rock had stalked Spencer before she interviewed her.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Nice job, Todd.” Bree ended her call with her chief deputy and turned to Matt, who sat in the passenger seat of the SUV.

“Well, that’s some interesting news. Todd is sending me an email. Would you open it?”

He took her phone and accessed the email. Skimming it, he summarized Todd’s interview with Spencer’s boss.

Excitement whirled in Bree’s belly. She loved the feeling of an investigation developing, shifting the small pieces around until the puzzle began to take shape.

“Good thing we’re headed to Farah Rock’s place,” Matt said. The GPS chimed in, telling Bree to prepare for a turn.

Farah lived outside the town limits. Bree followed the audible direction, taking a narrow country lane that cut through the forest. Twenty minutes later, she turned into a gravel driveway that led through the woods. The driveway ended in a large clearing occupied by a rustic cabin and matching barn. In most of the county, the dusting of snow had melted early that morning, but in the thick woods, white patches remained wherever the sun’s rays couldn’t penetrate.

Matt gestured toward a white Toyota Highlander parked next to a little blue Subaru that was registered to Farah.

“I see that.” Bree snapped a photo, making sure to capture the license plate.

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Gravel and ice crystals crunched under their feet as they walked to the front door and knocked. No one answered.

A muffled thud sounded behind the house. Bree and Matt walked around the cabin to the rear yard.

“That sounded like it came from the barn.” Bree started across the clearing. The double doors weren’t completely closed. She peered through the gap, with Matt looking over her shoulder. The inside of the barn had been renovated into a home gym. Dividers had been removed to make the interior one large open space. An interlocking rubber puzzle-piece mat covered the floor. Dumbbells, a balance ball, and resistance bands filled one corner. Another corner was utilized for storage of sporting equipment. A

kayak hung on the wall, and what appeared to be camping equipment occupied ventilated metal shelves. A mountain bike hung on a rack.

But the rest of the space had been converted into a homemade climbing wall. Plastic handholds dotted the two-story walls. Under what had once been the hay loft, more handholds had been affixed to the ceiling. A woman clung like a spider about ten feet above the floor. Bree recognized Farah from her driver's license photo. She wore a snug long-sleeve shirt, black tights, and pointy-looking climbing shoes.

Her hair was bound in a ponytail.

A space heater in the middle of the room was inadequate for the size of the space and did little to chase out the chill.

Still, sweat dripped from Farah's forehead. She reached for a grip, pushed off the wall with her legs, and swung her second hand to a new hold like a competitor on *American Ninja Warrior*.

Bree knocked loudly on the door. Farah looked over, releasing one hand and dangling upside-down from the remaining hand and two toe grips. Bree flinched, expecting her to fall on her head. Farah slowly released her toes and 121

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unfurled her body to hang straight down. The movement was controlled and deliberate. Bree could manage a yoga headstand, but Farah's core strength was impressive. Farah landed lightly on the mat. She brushed her hands on her thighs, leaving white streaks on the black fabric. Her nails were short, but Bree was surprised to see bright red polish.

Rock climbing and nail polish didn't seem to go together.

Superficially, she resembled Avery and Monica—tallish and thin, with long dark hair—but Farah was less polished, more outdoorsy and rugged than the other women.

"Can I help you?" she asked in a *you must have the wrong address* tone.

"Farah Rock?" After she nodded, Bree introduced herself and Matt.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions about Spencer LaForge."

Farah's eyes narrowed to an annoyed squint. "What did the creep do?"

No love lost there.

"He died," Bree said in a blunt voice.

Farah blinked. Shock erased her irritation. "What?"

"May we come in?" Matt asked.

Farah recovered and headed toward them. “Let’s go up to the house. I’ll get cold if I’m not moving.” She turned off the space heater, changed her climbing shoes for rubber duck boots, and grabbed a jacket on the way out. They trooped across the clearing and entered the cabin through the back door into a mudroom. Farah sat on a boot bench and slipped off her duck boots. Standing, she removed her jacket and stepped into fuzzy slippers.

The combination kitchen and living space was the size of an average hotel room. Through a doorway, Bree could see a small bedroom. The inside of the cabin reflected its rustic exterior. The floor and walls were rough-hewn wood.

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Inside, Farah added logs to a wood stove in the corner then closed the door. Orange flames glowed in the small window, casting soft light on Farah’s face. Her features were strong, maybe Italian or Greek, and her olive complexion was free of makeup. She turned and stared at them, puzzled. “How—?”

Realization changed her eyes. Her head tipped forward, and she squeezed her eyes shut for a few seconds. When she opened them, her expression was resigned. “It was him on the news last night. The murdered guy.”

Bree nodded. “Yes.”

“Well, shit.” Farah backed up to an overstuffed chair and dropped into it. One arm curled around her waist. The other hand covered her mouth. Her eyes darted from side to side as if her mind was working.

Bree sat on a leather ottoman facing her. “When was the last time you saw Spencer?”

“Um. I don’t know exactly. Let me check my calendar.”

Farah’s hand dropped, and she shifted back in the chair to reach for a cell phone on an end table. She scrolled, then stopped. “I last saw him two weeks ago. He broke up with me in a text two days afterward.”

Bree pulled out her notepad and jotted down the dates.

“Did that make you mad?”

“Yes!” Farah snapped, then huffed. “Of course it did. It was a lousy thing to do, but in hindsight, all the signs were there that he was fucking around. I just wasn’t paying attention.”

“What do you mean?” Matt perched on the arm of a sturdy chair a few feet away.

“He was too smooth,” Farah began. “He agreed with everything I said. If I told him I loved the color blue, he was like, ‘Me too.’ My favorite movies were also his favorites. It was as if he would say anything to make me like him, to connect with me. Of course, I didn’t see any of this until afterward, but 123

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hindsight and all that, right?” She paused, her face creasing with resentment. “After the breakup text, I checked up on him. His profile was a lie. He didn’t found his own digital marketing firm. He didn’t run his own business. He worked at the fucking Electronics Depot.”

Bree tilted her head. “How did you find out?”

“I saw him there.” Farah folded her arms.

“That’s random,” Bree said. “Do you go there often?”

“No.” Farah folded her arms across her waist, one hand shooting to her mouth again.

Bree waited, letting the quiet grow like a silent crescendo.

Farah squirmed but she held out.

“So you followed him,” Bree said.

Farah looked away. “Yeah. I was sure he’d met someone else. I wanted to see who she was.”

“Did you?” Matt asked.

Farah bit off a piece of her thumbnail. “Yes.” She let out a huge puff of air. “Look, I was mad for about a day. I followed him. He went to the store. I thought he was going to buy something, but he didn’t come out. I put on a hat and sunglasses and went inside. Can you imagine my surprise when I saw him wearing the blue vest and everything? So much for owning his own business.” Her voice went bitter.

“What a fucking liar.”

“Did you confront him?” Matt asked.

Farah’s head jerked in one abrupt nod. “But then I left.”

Bree waited until her gaze lifted, then forced eye contact.

“The manager didn’t make you leave?”

Anger flared in Farah’s eyes, and her jaw sawed back and forth. Instead of answering, she asked her own question.

“How do you know?”

“The store has an incident report and surveillance video.”

Bree didn't blink.

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Farah looked away. “I admit, it wasn't my proudest moment. I shouldn't have gone to his workplace. But he broke up with me in a *fucking text*.” She spit the final words out through gritted teeth. She took a deep breath. “I'm sorry. I was mad.”

“Sounds like you're still mad,” Matt said.

Farah shot him a look. “I left the store without issue.”

But the story wasn't over. Bree could sense it. “So when did you see the other woman Spencer was dating?”

Farah studied her torn thumbnail without answering, but there were only two ways she could have seen Spencer out on a date: accidentally or purposefully. The odds of a random encounter were low.

“You followed him again,” Matt prompted.

She picked at her cuticle with her other hand. “I followed him home after his shift. He changed clothes and headed out to the coffee shop an hour later.” She lowered her hands to her lap and stared at them for a few seconds.

Neither Bree nor Matt said a word. They just waited for her to continue. She was reliving the memory—and seething.

She was definitely not over it.

“He went to the same coffee shop where we'd met the first time. I watched through the window. The woman looked a lot like me. A lot of things became real clear in about ten seconds. One, he was a douche. Two, I was better off without him. Three, he was going to do the same thing to her. He was working a pattern.”

Bree leaned forward, invading Farah's space just a little, adding physical reinforcement to the verbal pressure. “What did you do next?”

“I bought brownies and ice cream, came home, and washed it all down with an entire bottle of prosecco.” Farah lifted her eyes to meet Bree's. “I had a whopping hangover 125

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and permitted myself twenty-four hours to wallow in self-pity.

Then I moved on. I'm dating again, and I've met several men since. They're all very different from Spencer. I'm over *him*.”

It sounded as if she was trying to convince herself because bitterness radiated from her like heat from the wood stove.

Bree paused before she asked the most important question.

“Where were you yesterday from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m.?”

She blinked three times before answering. “Here.”

Bree sought eye contact. “Was anyone with you?”

Their gazes locked for one long breath. Farah’s phone vibrated on the table. A man’s face and a name appeared on the lock screen. *Rhys*. She quickly touched the side of the phone and the screen went blank. “My friend Rhys came over.”

“What about before that?” Matt asked.

“I was here, alone. I’m writing a training manual. I work from home. Some days, I don’t see anyone at all.”

“What time did Rhys get here?” Bree pressed. If Farah was lying, she’d have to think fast and then remember all the details. Bree would ask the same questions again if a second interview was required.

“Around six, I think,” Farah evaded. “I don’t know exactly.

I wasn’t checking the time.” Her jaw set.

Bree made a note in her notepad. “What did you two do?”

“Talked.” Farah’s thin shoulder lifted and poked through the oversize neck of her hoodie.

“Did you eat dinner? Watch TV?” Bree continued to apply pressure. Lies would be caught in repetition.

“I said we talked.” Farah enunciated each word as if she wanted to be sure they heard her.

“You didn’t offer him a beverage?” Matt lifted a doubtful brow. “He drinks tea.” Farah’s gaze shot to him like a thrown dagger.

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“So, you made him tea?” Bree confirmed.

“Yes.” Farah bit off the word. “He takes it with honey, in case you were wondering.”

Well, that felt like the truth.

“Rhys is a good friend?” Matt asked.

“One of the best,” Farah said. “We like all the same things.

We have so much in common. I wish we had chemistry. He’d be the perfect life partner.”

Bree made a show of writing more notes. Farah frowned.

A few seconds of silence ticked by. Then Bree asked, “Did Spencer own reptiles?”

“Yes.” Farah’s voice returned to normal. She was more comfortable moving away from the topic of her alibi. “He had some gorgeous snakes.”

“He showed you?” Bree was surprised.

“He knew I have a gecko and like reptiles.” Farah pointed to the kitchen counter, where a small aquarium sat. Inside, a five-inch lizard basked under a heat lamp.

“What kind of reptiles did Spencer have?” Matt asked.

“Did you see his whole collection?”

“A whole room of them. He brought out this gorgeous, rare corn snake so I could hold it.” She nodded toward her gecko. “Flash is cute and easy to care for. I don’t have time for a high-maintenance pet.”

“Did you see any rattlesnakes?” Bree asked.

Farah nodded. “Yes. He had three.” She snorted. “I didn’t hold any of those.”

So, Spencer had recently owned three rattlesnakes.

Now there were three empty spaces on his shelves and zero rattlesnakes in the collection. Had the killer taken the snakes?

Bree wanted to scream but kept her voice level. “Did you know it’s illegal to keep a venomous snake in New York State without a special permit?”

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Farah shrugged. “It never occurred to me to ask.”

“This happened at his house?” Bree lifted her pen.

“Yes.”

Truth.

“OK. That’s all the questions I have right now.” Bree tapped her pen on her notepad. “I’d like your cell phone number in case we need more information.”

Farah gave it to her, then unfolded her long body and inched toward the door. Clearly, she couldn’t wait to get rid of them.

Bree looked up and blinked innocently. “And a number for your friend Rhys? I’ll need to confirm your alibi with him.”

Farah balked. “Why?”

“Because you stalked Spencer shortly before he was killed.

You had a public confrontation with him that was loud enough to warrant the store manager filling out an incident report and asking you to never return to the store. You threatened Spencer.”

Farah’s face went pale. “I never threatened him.”

Bree flipped backward in her notepad to her notes from Todd’s interview with the store manager. “You said, ‘I’ll get even with you. No one treats me like that.’”

Farah’s lips parted. Her olive complexion turned ashy gray.

“So, how about giving me Rhys’s number so I can verify your alibi?” Bree poised her pen over her paper.

Farah’s voice sounded tight, almost robotic as she read off a number.

Bree wrote it down. “His last name?”

“Blake,” Farah said, her voice gaining strength, almost defiance.

“One more thing,” Matt said. “Who owns that white Highlander outside?”

“My dad,” Farah said. “He’s working in Canada for a *128*

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couple of months and didn’t want to leave it unattended in his condo parking lot. Vehicles get broken into there.”

“Do you drive it?” Matt asked.

Farah nodded. “Sometimes. He asked me to drive it once in a while.”

Bree rose. “We’ll get back to you with additional questions if necessary.”

Matt stood and inclined his head. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

Farah said nothing as she followed them to the door, but Bree heard the dead bolt slide home once they got outside.

She and Matt returned to the SUV.

Back in her vehicle, she blasted the heat. “Well, that was interesting.”

“Talk about conflicting emotions.” Matt spread his hands over the vents, flexing his fingers as if they were stiff. “She was confident in her alibi—until we asked for her friend’s number to corroborate it.”

“Either she didn’t want to drag him into the investigation, or she was lying her head off. Whichever it is, I want to talk to Rhys ASAP.”

“I’ll call him now.”

Bree backed down the narrow driveway. After she’d pulled onto the road, she handed Matt her notepad.

Matt flipped to the right page and dialed the number on speaker. It rang, with several skips in sound, as if Rhys was on another line and ignoring the call-waiting beeps.

“I’ll bet she’s warning him right now,” Matt said.

“No doubt. It’s what most people would do.” Bree pressed on the gas pedal. “Give him ten minutes and try again.”

They were halfway back to town when Matt got through to Rhys and explained that they’d like to speak with him.

“Sure.” Rhys sounded stressed. “I’ve just finished with a 129

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client. Can you meet me at the Scarlet Cafe?” He gave them an address in Scarlet Falls.

“We can be there in ten minutes.” Matt ended the call. He rubbed his hand, the one with the bullet scar. The cold always seemed to affect his old injury. “This should be interesting.”

Bree had the same feeling.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Bree headed toward Scarlet Falls’s tiny retail section and found the Scarlet Cafe just off the main drag. The shops were surprisingly busy for late afternoon. Bree circled the block before parking in front of a bridal salon across the street.

Matt read from her vehicle laptop screen. “He lives in Grey’s Hollow, near the train station. No outstanding warrants.

He doesn’t even have any parking tickets.”

They got out of the car and walked toward the cafe. Inside, Bree scanned the dozen bistro tables. The cafe was empty except for two women huddled in the far corner. Rhys wasn’t here yet.

Bree inhaled the scent of fresh baked goods.

“Hungry?” Matt asked.

Bree eyed a ham-and-cheese croissant sandwich. “Just coffee. Thanks.” Her lack of exercise in the midst of a big case and Dana’s pre-holiday baking spree were a dangerous combination. “I can feel my arteries hardening just smelling them.”

She chose a table on the opposite side of the room from the other patrons. Matt went to the counter and returned with two coffees. The bell on the door rang and a man of about thirty walked in. He wore dark jeans and a

blue down jacket. The wispy ends of his blond hair poked out from under a gray beanie.

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He scanned the room and spotted them. Bree's uniform identified her. Rhys headed for their table, held out a hand, and cleared his throat. "I'm Rhys Blake."

Bree introduced herself and Matt, then gestured toward an empty chair. "Please sit."

"Let me grab a tea." Rhys went to the counter and returned with a cardboard cup. He sat, unzipped his jacket, and removed the lid to his cup.

"Thank you for meeting us," Bree said in a low voice.

Frowning, Rhys dunked his tea bag. "I've never talked to the police before—let alone about a murder investigation."

Bree nodded in understanding. "We appreciate your cooperation. What do you do for a living?" She started with a few general questions to let him get comfortable.

"I'm an IT consultant."

"Are you self-employed?" Matt drank his coffee.

Rhys shook his head. "No. My employer provides IT services for special projects or for companies that don't have or want their own tech staff. We service a lot of small businesses."

"Do you like your job?" Bree asked.

"I do." He added a packet of honey to his tea and dissolved it with a wooden stirrer. "For the most part, I set my own schedule. I'm not stuck in one office. My jobs are varied, and I can work from home sometimes. It's a good balance. I'm never bored."

"Sounds like a good job." Bree picked up her coffee and took a sip, but it tasted burned.

"But you didn't ask to meet me to discuss the merits of my job." His eyes went grim.

"No." Bree set down her cup. "We're trying to verify your friend, Farah's, whereabouts on Tuesday evening."

Rhys shifted his butt in his chair and refused to make eye contact, two classic signs of discomfort. "She's not that close

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of a friend."

“No?” Matt pushed his cup a few inches away.

Rhys shrugged. “She’s more of an acquaintance.”

“How did you meet?” Bree asked.

“Through a dating app.” Rhys removed his tea bag and set it inside the overturned lid. “When we got together in person, we had some good conversation, but there wasn’t enough attraction between us.”

“That happens,” Matt said.

“Yeah,” Rhys agreed, his gaze sliding to the wall for a few seconds. “But Farah decided, since we had a nice talk, she wanted to be friends. She keeps texting and calling me, wanting to meet for drinks or to hang out.”

“You don’t text her?” Bree asked. “Or want to get together?”

“I respond when she texts or calls, and we’ve gotten together a few times.” He looked away again, studying the street outside the storefront window. “I don’t know. I didn’t join dating apps to make friends. I don’t have anything against having platonic friendships with women, but I’m in a place in my life where I’m looking for more.” He sighed. “I probably sound like a jerk.”

“No,” Matt assured him. “I get it. You’re ready for a relationship, and you don’t want to waste your time when there’s no chance of one.”

“Exactly.” Rhys gave Matt an appreciative look. “Also, if I’m being totally honest, she’s not interested in me romantically, but *I’m* a little attracted to *her*, so . . .” He trailed off. “We hung out at her place last week. It was weird.”

“I can see how that would be uncomfortable for you,”

Matt empathized.

Rhys rubbed his thumb on the cardboard sleeve of his cup. “How long have you been almost friends?” Matt asked.

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“A few months,” Rhys said.

Now that they’d established a rapport, Bree gently steered the conversation back to Farah. “Did you see Farah Tuesday night?”

A flash of anger lit Rhys’s blue eyes. “No.”

Bree and Matt exchanged a look. Matt’s eyes took on the feral gleam that accompanied catching someone in a deception. Though chaffing for details, Bree forced herself to wait. Even though they weren’t besties, Rhys

seemed reluctant to squeal on Farah. Best to let him skewer her at his own pace.

“She called me right after you left her place. She told me what she wanted—no, *expected*—me to say to you.” He sighed and sipped his tea. “I shouldn’t feel guilty about not lying for her. I’m more than a little mad that she would ask.”

“So you weren’t with her Tuesday evening?” Bree confirmed.

“No,” Rhys said. “But she’d called me earlier that day. She knew I was planning to be home alone, so she said no one would be able to prove I wasn’t with her.” He shook his head and blew air out through his nostrils. “I don’t want to lie to the sheriff for her. That’s illegal, right?”

Matt nodded. “It’s obstruction of justice.”

Rhys’s frown deepened.

“We appreciate your honesty, Mr. Blake,” Bree said. “I’ll need you to sign a formal statement.”

“Really?” He rubbed the back of his neck, his face tight.

“So, she’ll know.”

“Yes,” Bree said.

Matt leaned forward and gripped his coffee cup between his palms. “Is there a reason you don’t want her to know? Did you promise you would corroborate her story?”

“I was vague and noncommittal,” Rhys said. “But I’m sure she heard my answer as an agreement. She assumes I’ll do

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whatever she wants.”

She sounded selfish, but Bree kept her opinion to herself and went with a less judgmental response. “Sometimes people see what they want to see.”

“I totally get that,” Matt sympathized in the man-to-man tone Bree had often heard him adopt when he was trying to establish a connection with a witness or suspect.

Bree pulled out a business card. “If she harasses you, call me.” “If she harasses me, I’ll block her. I’m done with her.”

Rhys looked at the card as if it were a hairy spider. But after a few seconds, he put it in his pocket. “I really don’t want to get involved with a murder investigation.”

Bree didn’t state the obvious. He was already involved.

“We understand,” Matt commiserated. “But this is on her.”

It was unfair of her to ask you to lie—to commit a crime—for her. You're doing the right thing."

Rhys's nod wasn't reassuring, and Bree hoped she'd get that signed statement out of him. She'd need it to obtain a search warrant for Farah's phone records. Cell phones could potentially be tracked, and Bree really wanted to know where Farah was on Tuesday evening. She'd get Rhys's records as well, to back up his statement.

Maybe Farah's could be tracked to Spencer's house when he was being killed.

Bree asked one last question. "Did Farah ever talk about Spencer?"

Rhys hesitated, then reluctantly answered, "She did."

"In what way?" Bree pressed.

Rhys picked at his napkin. "She was mad at him for the way he ended things. To be fair, dumping someone in a text is an asshole move. Sorry to speak badly of the dead and all, but the guy was a jerk."

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Bree collected his address and arranged for him to come to the station the next morning to sign his statement. "I'll have it ready. Ask for Marge at the counter."

"I'll be there." Rhys nodded curtly. On the way out, he threw his empty teacup in the trash with unnecessary force.

Matt and Bree left the restaurant, carrying their coffees outside. They returned to the SUV and climbed in.

"Now what?" Matt fastened his seat belt.

Bree checked the time on the dashboard. "We go back to the station and see which reports are in and if we have any additional evidence to support Farah as our prime suspect."

"Lying and fake alibis usually put suspects at the top of my list."

"Stalking too," Bree added. "While we're doing that, I'll send a deputy to bring Farah to the station for a more formal interview. Maybe a ride in a patrol car and the knowledge that she's being recorded will make her more honest."

Bree's phone buzzed. She answered the call. "Sheriff Taggart."

A female voice said, "This is Officer Kaminski over at the juvenile detention center. Ricky Sanderling has requested to speak with you."

“We’ll be there shortly.” Bree ended the call and relayed the request to Matt.

“*Ricky* wants to talk to *you*?” Matt asked.

“Apparently.” Bree changed direction, heading for juvie.

“I can think of only one reason he wants to talk to me. He knows something he thinks will give him leverage against the charges.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

The juvenile detention center was an ugly concrete box built in the ’70s, when all municipal buildings were designed to look like bunkers. Bree parked in the lot. Interest and dread warred inside her. She hated juvie. Hated seeing all the broken kids. She sometimes wondered how her life could have turned out differently. If the old sheriff of Randolph County hadn’t been the one to pull the traumatized Taggart siblings out from under the porch—if he hadn’t been the first adult in her life to make her feel safe. He was the reason she’d turned to the law instead of against it. What if that chapter of her life had ended differently? She could have easily ended up here or worse.

They met Ricky in a small interview room. A metal table and four stools were bolted to the floor. Bree took the seat across from Ricky. Matt sat next to her. Clearly twitchy, Ricky picked at a track mark on the inside of his elbow. His posture was all self-pity and resentment.

“You remember Investigator Flynn,” Bree said.

Fear flickered in Ricky’s eyes as he glanced at Matt. “Yeah.”

Matt pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Excuse me. I have to take this call.” He got up and left the room.

Bree refocused on Ricky. She could have been harsh—the kid *had* shot at her, but with her own miserable childhood in the forefront of her mind, she chose compassion. “How are

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you?”

He stopped picking at the scab and squinted at her, as if trying to assess if she was full of shit. “How do you think?”

Sucks in here.”

Bree thought he’d probably spent the night in worse places, but she could see the pain behind his belligerence.

He was lashing out. Unfortunately, the only person he was hurting was himself. "I'm sure it does."

His fingers found the scab again. This time he drew blood.

"I'm supposed to go to rehab later. That'll suck worse."

Bree nodded. "I'm glad they found a spot for you."

He scoffed. "Won't matter. I'm gonna be in juvie for a long time. I don't have anywhere else to go anyway." His eyes were moist with tears he struggled to hold back. "I really fucked up this time."

"You did." She saw nothing but misery in his expression.

The truth was that the court had flexibility in sentencing a juvenile offender, and Bree had some leeway with the prosecutor and the charges. She would rather Ricky receive substance abuse treatment than punitive sentencing.

"Why did you want to talk?"

"I heard people talking about the murder of Jasper's brother." Ricky's eyes turned shrewd. "Do you think he did it?" "We've just begun the investigation," Bree said.

"What if I know something about Jasper?"

"Then you'd better tell me."

His gaze dropped to his arm, and he ripped off another scab. "I want something in exchange: immunity."

Ricky clearly watched too much TV.

"That's not how this works," Bree said. "We're not asking you to testify against a major drug cartel." She paused, waiting until she caught his eye again before continuing. "I'm not a *138*

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game player, Ricky. I'll be straight with you. Always. I expect the same in return. Here's the truth. Rehab is your chance to turn your life around. Don't waste it. You won't be a juvenile much longer. If you think this is bad," she waved her hand in a circle, "then you don't want to experience actual prison."

He contemplated the thought of prison with an expression that made her wonder if he'd ever really considered that was the direction he was heading. "Then what? My dad won't let me move home. My mom . . ."

Bree mentally filled in what he couldn't say. *Left him.*

"That sucks."

His mouth turned down in a sullen frown. "But you won't help me?"

“If you volunteer information about Jasper, I will make sure the judge and prosecutor know you’ve been cooperative, but I won’t make any promises.”

He picked at another scab. “I went over to Jasper’s place a few weeks ago. He was fighting with his brother on the phone.

It got nasty.”

“Do you know what they were fighting about?”

Ricky nodded. “He had the call on speaker. His brother sold him some rare kind of python and it died. Jasper was pissed. He accused his brother of selling him damaged merchandise. The brother said it wasn’t his fault.”

Bree couldn’t imagine killing someone over a dead snake.

Ricky sniffed. “Jasper said, ‘You owe me twenty-five grand.’ And the brother was all, ‘Like hell.’ Then Jasper told him to go fuck himself.”

“That’s a lot of money for a snake.”

“Right?” Ricky agreed. “Crazy.” He sat back. Some of his resentment seemed to have faded. “You’ll tell the judge I helped?”

“I will,” Bree promised. “You’ll give rehab a real go?”

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His sigh deflated him. “Yeah.”

“Good.” Bree stood. Then she added, “I’ll be checking up on you,” just to let him know that someone actually gave a fuck. She called for a guard to return Ricky to his pod. Then she found Matt outside.

“Who called?” she asked.

“No one. It felt like Ricky would talk more if I left.”

“Good call.” Bree summed up Ricky’s info.

“Now we know why Jasper wouldn’t tell us about the phone calls with his brother,” Matt said.

“And we have twenty-five thousand reasons Jasper might want his brother dead.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY

It was approaching dinnertime when Matt fell into step beside Bree in the parking lot behind the sheriff’s station. Wind whipped across the asphalt, sending a few dead leaves and an empty plastic water bottle tumbling into the base of the building. Matt veered aside to pick up the bottle.

Bree hunched against the arctic blast. “Your jacket isn’t even zipped. Aren’t you cold?”

“Not really.”

“Must be that Scandinavian blood.” She opened the door and they stepped inside. “I’m freezing.”

Matt tossed the water bottle into the recycling bin.

Todd stopped them as they crossed the squad room. “Farah Rock declined our invitation to ride in a patrol car. When the deputy arrived at her house, her brother—who happens to be a lawyer—was there. They’re coming to the station together.”

“Thank you, Todd,” Bree said. “Let’s request dating app access for both Farah’s and Monica’s accounts. We don’t need warrants for those.”

“I’ll have someone work on that.” Todd turned toward a deputy sitting at a computer station.

Irritation flashed through Matt. “I know lawyers are integral to our system of justice, but they really get in the way of a good interview.”

“No argument from me.” Bree snorted as they continued *141*

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into her office.

Marge appeared at the door as soon as they got inside.

She waved a notepad in her hand and spoke while Bree and Matt took off their jackets. “The press has been calling about the murder case. Someone leaked details. They’re asking if the victim was suffocated with plastic wrap.”

“Ugh.” Bree sank into her chair, her face locked in a frustrated frown. “How I hate leaks.” She shook her head. “I’ll hold a press conference in thirty minutes. We’ll put some of the curiosity to rest and hope no one leaks the rest of the details.”

Marge scanned Bree. “There’s a clean uniform in your closet. You have dirt on your face, and is that hay in your hair?”

Bree reached up, felt the top of her head, and plucked out a wisp of hay. She tossed it into the trash can under her desk.

“She looks fine.” Matt hadn’t even noticed the hay.

Marge gave him a high school principal stare. “You’re not a politician, and even if you were, you wouldn’t get judged for wearing a wrinkled uniform. You have that ruggedly handsome thing working for you. Disheveled looks good on you.”

He tried to look sorry but couldn't quite manage it. Nor could he prevent the corner of his mouth from ticking up.

"Ruggedly handsome?"

Marge rolled her eyes. "But the public *will* judge the sheriff for her appearance." She turned back to Bree and scanned her with an assessing eye. "The dark circles are fine. Lets the public know you're working long hours to solve the case. Tired is one thing. Dirty is quite another."

"I'll clean up," Bree promised.

Matt coughed into his fist to cover a grin. Bree's idea of an accessory was her Glock. She didn't wear makeup unless she was on camera or they went out to a nicer restaurant. Don't 142

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get him wrong, she could clean up very nicely. But mostly, they were sweatpants, pizza, and Netflix people.

Marge gave them a serious look and left the office.

Bree leaned back in her chair, the mechanisms squeaking.

Her phone went off, and she glanced at the screen. "It's a text from Luke." She read it aloud: "Vet stitched the wound. Beast was a good boy."

"Beast." Matt shook his head at the name Luke had used.

"It's ridiculous."

"Then think of a better name." Bree's phone buzzed again, and she turned it around so he could see the screen. A photograph of the stitched gash came through, then a second picture of the giant horse nose-to-nose with Ladybug. Bree's dog stood on her hind legs, her paws on the horse's stall door.

The intercom buzzed. Bree pressed the "Answer" button.

Marge's voice came across the speaker. "Miss Rock and her attorney are here. Do you want me to show them to the interview room?"

"Yes. Thank you, Marge." Bree released the button. She stood, empty coffee mug in hand. "I'm going to grab a refill on the way."

"Good idea." Matt picked up his own mug and followed her out of the office.

They stopped in the break room, where Todd was stirring a cup of coffee.

Bree filled her mug and turned to Todd. "I'd like you to watch the interview from the monitoring room. I want your take on her." She set the pot down. "We've already caught her in a lie."

Todd carried his coffee toward the door. "OK."

Matt changed his mind about coffee. He'd had enough.

Acid already swirled around in his stomach. He rinsed out the stainless-steel mug and filled it with water.

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They walked down the hallway. Todd went into the monitoring room.

"I'll be right there," Bree said, heading for the restroom.

"OK." Matt entered the interview room. At the table, a man and a woman sat next to each other facing the door.

"Ms. Rock." Matt inclined his head toward Farah.

Without getting up, Farah gestured to the man beside her.

"This is my attorney—and brother—Benjamin Rock."

"I'm Criminal Investigator Flynn," Matt said.

Farah looked like a different person. Instead of her climbing attire, she wore dark jeans and a black sweater. Her shiny dark hair was tied in a loose ponytail and pulled over her shoulder.

The family resemblance between Farah and the attorney was obvious. Like his sister, he was olive-skinned and ultra-fit.

His tailored charcoal suit and blue silk tie screamed money.

He was no ambulance chaser.

"What kind of law do you practice?" Matt asked.

"Criminal." Benjamin named a large, pricy firm from the city. *Fuck.*

Matt had been hoping he was a corporate attorney who wouldn't be as familiar with the criminal justice system. No such luck.

"Thank you both for coming." Matt sat across from the lawyer. He'd let Bree have the chair opposite Farah. "The sheriff will join us in just a minute."

"I have a meeting, so I can't stay all morning." Farah pointedly touched the screen of her phone to read the displayed time.

"The sheriff won't be long," Matt assured her.

"My sister already answered questions regarding Mr.

LaForge's death." Benjamin rested his forearms on the edge of

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the table and interlocked his manicured fingers. "Which she shouldn't have done without an attorney present."

He was fishing for more information. Matt simply nodded.

The attorney scowled. “She wasn’t Mirandized.”

“She wasn’t a suspect.” Matt emphasized the past tense.

The attorney didn’t flinch, and Matt knew he would challenge any information they’d obtained in Farah’s first interview. Miranda warnings were only required before questioning if a suspect was in custody. But Benjamin wouldn’t be the first attorney to argue his client didn’t feel free to end the interview, which indicated they were actually in custody even if law enforcement hadn’t expressed it verbally.

The law was on Bree and Matt’s side, but much depended on the judge.

Bree walked into the room, took the seat across from Farah, and introduced herself. “Thank you for coming in, Ms.

Rock.”

Matt introduced the suit.

The lawyer huffed. “As I just said to Investigator Flynn, my sister already answered questions.”

“Yes, and we appreciate her cooperation. Today’s interview will be recorded.” Bree started the video camera, gave the time, and listed everyone in the room. Then she read the Miranda rights and presented Farah with a form of acknowledgment to sign.

Alarm flashed in Farah’s eyes. “Am I being arrested?”

“No,” Bree answered. “The form is routine for all formal interviews.”

Worried, she glanced at her brother. “Should I sign this?”

“Yes.” The brother never took his eyes off Bree. “It means nothing. They recorded the sheriff reading you your rights.

You can’t deny it.”

Farah signed with dramatic flourish. After setting down 145

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the pen, she shifted backward, folded her arms across her chest, and glared at Bree. “Why am I here?”

Farah sounded genuinely confused. Matt realized it hadn’t occurred to her that Rhys wouldn’t do what she asked. She assumed he’d follow her instructions. Was she accustomed to getting her way, to men doing what she wanted? Maybe she used their feelings for her to manipulate them.

Bree took the paper with a businesslike motion. “We have some follow-up questions to our earlier interview.”

“I already told you everything,” Farah whined.

“Yes.” Bree held up a typed paper. “So you said.”

The attorney leaned forward, his joined hands hitting the tabletop. “Would you get to the point, Sheriff?”

“Of course.” Bree nodded. “You told us that you were at home on Tuesday evening and that your friend Rhys was with you. Is that correct?”

Farah glanced at her brother, the first suggestion of doubt creeping into her eyes. “Yes.”

Bree dropped the bomb. “Rhys Blake says he wasn’t with you Tuesday evening. He says you called him and asked him to lie for you.”

Farah froze. Her mouth opened and remained gaped, like a fish struggling to breathe air. “I—”

Benjamin cut her off, covering her hand with his. “Don’t say anything.”

Bree raised her brows. “Do you care to amend your statement? Lying to the police during a major investigation is obstruction of justice.”

Farah’s lips parted, but no words came out. She leaned closer to her brother, as if to whisper in his ear.

He shook his head to stop her. “Sheriff Taggart, does Mr. Blake have any proof of these accusations?”

Bree tilted her head. “His cell phone records will show he *146 Lie to Her*

wasn’t with your sister.”

Benjamin smiled. “The records will prove where his phone was, not where he was.”

“It will prove where he used it,” Bree said.

“Where *someone* used it.” Benjamin squeezed his sister’s hand and turned his head to speak with her. “The sheriff doesn’t have any evidence tying you to the murder. If she did, she wouldn’t be fixated on disproving your alibi.” He released Farah’s hand. “You don’t even need an alibi. You haven’t been accused of a crime.” He turned back to Bree. “Right?”

Bree bared her teeth. No one could confuse it with a smile. “Your sister lied to law enforcement in an official investigation.”

“She could have been mistaken,” Benjamin said. “Or Mr. Blake could be mistaken. Did you record your first interview?”

Bree’s poker face didn’t budge. “No.”

“So, you have no evidence of anything my sister said,”

Benjamin said an *aha* voice. “Maybe *you* were mistaken.”

Matt leaned in. “She wasn’t mistaken. I was also present.

Farah asked Blake to lie for her.”

“So he says.” Benjamin didn’t sound concerned. “Or Mr. Blake is bitter because my sister rejected him and is getting even.”

She’d told him everything. Matt studied Farah. Her lips were mashed together, as if she was afraid she’d blurt out the wrong thing. But she was smart enough to let her lawyer do the talking. Some suspects couldn’t keep their mouths shut no matter what their counsel advised.

Benjamin lifted her hand an inch off the table. “Is my sister under arrest?”

“Not at this time,” Bree said.

“Then we’re leaving.” Benjamin pressed both palms flat on the table, preparing to rise. “Let’s go.”

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“But I—” Farah got to her feet.

“You are not answering any more questions.” Her brother stood up. “They won’t tell you this, but they can’t make you.

You are under no obligation to answer their questions. Unless you are under arrest, you are free to leave at any time. You came here voluntarily in a good faith effort to help with their investigation.” He gave Bree a hard stare. “That won’t happen again.”

He guided his sister toward the door with a gentle hand under her elbow. She glanced over her shoulder as they walked out. Matt read her expression as a mix of apprehension and anger.

Bree turned off the video recording. Todd stood in the doorway.

“What did you think?” Bree rose.

“She asked her buddy to lie for her. Definitely.” Todd grimaced. “And she seemed really surprised that he didn’t.”

“That’s the impression I got too.” Matt stood.

Bree stretched her arms to the ceiling. “I wonder how she would have answered if she hadn’t brought a lawyer.”

“A question we will never know the answer to.” Matt pushed his chair in. “But I think the fake alibi she gave us was an impulse. She didn’t think it through, and she knows it was a mistake.”

Bree lowered her hands and headed for the hallway. “She won’t make the same mistake again. Her brother won’t let her say a word.”

They walked to the break room together.

Matt filled a clean coffee cup with water. “If I was her lawyer, I’d tell her to choose silence as well. She already dug herself into an unnecessary hole. She could have just said she was home alone. We hadn’t accused her of anything.”

“Her brother was right,” Todd said. “She didn’t need an *148 Lie to Her* alibi.”

“So why would she invent one?” Bree asked. She contemplated the coffee machine, as if considering yet another cup.

Matt filled another cup with water and handed it to her.

She needed actual sleep tonight, not coffee. She took the water but gazed longingly at the coffee as she drank.

“I can only think of one reason,” Matt said.

Todd nodded. “Because she’s guilty.”

Bree drained the cup and refilled it at the tap. “Let’s regroup in the conference room. Our impressions of her behavior don’t mean squat. We need actual evidence. We all know high-profile trials are theatrical. Her lawyer is smooth, confident, and good-looking. Juries love those types. He’ll convince everyone that we’re taking advantage of an honest mistake and that we’re trying to railroad her. She’s pretty. No one will believe she committed a horrific crime without solid evidence.”

“Juries want forensic shit like they see on TV,” Todd said.

“That’s pathetic but true.” Bree set her mug in the sink.

Matt gestured toward the doorway. “Let’s go check our reports on forensic shit.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Matt stared at a bag of nuts inside the vending machine. He was really sick of nuts. Why couldn’t the vending machine dispense cheeseburgers? Grabbing a bottle of water, he retrieved the conference room key from Marge and unlocked the door. Bree brought her laptop and notepad. She held a mug in her hand. Matt smelled coffee.

He peered into her cup. “You’re not going to sleep at all tonight. Your blood is ten percent caffeine at this point.”

She nodded and sipped. “What can I say? I’m weak, but I’m also so tired that I doubt caffeine will be an issue.”

“You’ll be wired.” Matt checked the time on his phone.

“It’s five thirty. Let’s work for an hour, then quit for the day.

You need a couple of hours to unwind, see your family, and get some sleep. You can’t run flat-out for the entire investigation.”

“I know.” But she continued to drink the coffee.

Todd came in holding a manila file and a laptop. He took a chair and opened the computer. “I have a couple of updates.

First, you should know that Jasper made bail.”

Bree sighed. “Not a surprise. He didn’t have any priors, he’s lived in the area a long time, and his lawyer is street smart.”

Todd nodded. “Next, a preliminary report from forensics on the crime scene is in. I emailed copies to both of you.”

Matt opened the email on his phone and skimmed it.

“They found a few long dark hairs in Spencer’s bedroom.”

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“They could belong to Farah Rock or Monica Linfield,”

Todd suggested.

“Since it seems women with long dark hair were Spencer’s type, the hairs could have come from other women as well,”

Matt said. “Spencer was a busy man.”

“Unfortunately, both women already said they’d slept with him, so I’m not sure how that helps us solve the case.” Bree massaged her temple.

But Matt knew if they made an arrest, physical evidence that officially placed the suspect inside the house was always good.

“Anything else interesting?” Bree asked.

Matt closed the email. “Nothing else is jumping out at me, but time will tell about the usefulness of the trace evidence forensics collected.” If they gathered enough evidence on one of their suspects to obtain a search warrant, fibers, hair, soil, DNA, et cetera found at the scene could match those found at a suspect’s home. “I’m liking Jasper. He had a recent argument with Spencer. Money is always a motive. Plus, the murder felt like rage, and families bring high emotion.” In Matt’s experience, no one could hate quite as hard as a loved one.

“We need to set up another interview with him.” Bree made a note.

“Let’s move on to Farah Rock. She lied about her alibi and tried to get her friend Rhys Blake to also lie. She has access to a white SUV, her father’s Highlander.”

Matt raised a hand. “We still don’t have any physical evidence tying her to the crime.” But the lying bugged him.

“Which is why she’s not in a jail cell.” Bree sounded as if she’d really like to amend that.

“We didn’t see a long-haired black cat at either Monica’s or Farah’s.” Matt pictured each residence. “No cat at Jasper’s place either. We didn’t go to Avery Ledger’s house. We interviewed her on scene.”

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“Because she found the body.” Bree tapped a finger on the table. “Did the surveillance video from her employer confirm what time she left work?”

Todd nodded. “Juarez watched the video and verified she left at 4:56 in the afternoon.”

“So, the video confirms her alibi.” Matt envisioned the timeline of the murder. “It’s possible but unlikely she would have had time to kill Spencer by five thirty.”

“We’ll move Avery to the bottom of the list,” Bree agreed.

Todd said, “Next up, Monica Linfield. I assigned Juarez to watch the surveillance video you forwarded from the film studio. Monica Linfield was at the shoot all day, except she left at 4:44 p.m. and didn’t return until after six.”

Bree flattened her palms on the table. “And Monica drives a white Audi Q5.”

“Which is a midsize SUV,” Matt said. “Like the delivery driver spotted at the house next to Spencer’s.”

Bree nodded. “Let’s bring Monica in for a formal interview too.” “I’ll ask Juarez to pick her up,” Todd said.

“Let’s expand our search into Monica’s background, including her dating app activity,” Bree added.

Todd nodded and wrote notes in his file. “We’ve received Spencer’s credit card and bank information. He was worse than broke. Between the renovations and his fancy taste, his debt is through the roof. He’s been shuffling debts around, but he couldn’t have kept that up for long.”

Bree frowned. “Any sizable transactions in his bank account?”

“Are you thinking he borrowed from a loan shark?” Matt asked.

“Can’t shuffle debts forever.” Bree tapped a forefinger. “We haven’t seen any sign of an extra twenty-five grand.”

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Matt wondered if Ricky had also been lying. Everyone else did. “Maybe Ricky made up that story.”

“It’s possible,” Bree agreed. “But it didn’t feel that way.”

Matt didn’t trust people who shot at him.

Todd shuffled papers. “I don’t see any significant influx of cash, though he desperately needed it.”

“What about his phone records?” Matt asked.

Todd said, “As we expected, his cell provider only keeps actual texts for five days. After that, messages are purged. I haven’t had a chance to dig into the details yet. The techs in forensics are working on extracting data from Spencer’s cell phone.”

Matt thought about other online activity. “Did Spencer have social media accounts?”

“He did.” Todd nodded. “But he didn’t post. He followed other people, mostly women. As you would expect, his profile information was all BS.”

“Just another tool for him to manipulate women. What a scumbag.” Disgust filled Matt. “Have we found any friends?”

Todd shook his head. “Not yet. He seemed to have been a loner.”

“Like Jasper said.” Matt didn’t trust Jasper any more than he trusted Ricky. He stared at the suspects’ photos on the murder board. Avery was the only one they hadn’t caught in a lie or significant omission.

“What about social media for Monica and Farah?” Bree asked.

“Monica’s posts are mostly professional.” Todd scrolled on his laptop. “Farah has accounts. She posts the occasional rock-climbing pictures, but again, she’s not a big user either.”

“Keep working the cell phone records angle,” Bree said.

“OK if I take it home after the press conference?” Todd asked. “If not, I can ask Cady to feed and walk Goldie.” He 153

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smiled. “Or she’s going to eat her way out of her crate. That’s Goldie—not Cady.”

“It’s fine.” Bree waved toward the door. “Make sure you eat and get some sleep tonight too.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Todd gathered his files, closed his laptop, and left the room.

“Matt, you take the financials. I’ll keep working the dating app angle.” She checked her phone. “After the press conference, I’m going to head home to have dinner with the family, then work at home after the kids go to bed.”

Matt didn’t want to go home alone. “OK if I stop and see my new horse?”

“Of course.” Bree smiled. “I’m sure there will be plenty of food, and you can eat whatever Dana baked today. If I eat any more pastries, I’m going to need new uniforms.”

Matt's stomach growled. "Good. I'm starving." His own fridge was bare. He ate at Bree's or his parents' house a few nights a week. If he went home, he'd need to go grocery shopping or eat a sandwich for dinner. Neither appealed. Plus, he'd rather spend time at Bree's.

Bree checked the time. "Ten minutes to press conference."

She pulled a small makeup kit out of her drawer. "I can't wait to actually have a women's locker room."

"Don't hold your breath," Matt said.

"It'll happen someday, but it's amazing how many details the county board of supervisors can argue over even after the funds have been approved." Bree had won a huge battle with county administration to have the station expanded and renovated. Before she had become sheriff, the department hadn't employed a single female deputy. Bree had corrected that and was attempting to modernize the building to include a women's locker room. A proposed plan had been drawn up, but the county board of supervisors seemed determined 154

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to argue over every light switch and screw, no doubt in an attempt to delay the spending of funds.

But Matt was sure it would happen. Much to the supervisors' dismay, Bree was relentless, patient, and ruthlessly polite. She left them with nothing to complain about.

She went to the closet. Her uniform was on a hanger, covered in a dry cleaning bag. She grabbed it and headed for the open door, presumably on her way to the restroom to clean up.

A few minutes later, Matt stood at Bree's side, a half step back as she faced the press in the lobby of the station in a fresh uniform. With only a single murder—and some fresh national political drama that Matt had no time to care about—only a half dozen news crews gathered to hear Bree. Matt recognized them as the usual locals. Reporters pushed to the front, with their cameramen working behind them.

Bree began with the facts. "The victim of Tuesday evening's murder has been identified as Grey's Hollow resident Spencer LaForge. Mr. LaForge died by violent asphyxiation."

Nick West from WSNY News asked, "Is it true he was suffocated with plastic wrap?"

"Yes," Bree acknowledged.

“Can you confirm a stun gun was used by the killer?”

Nick asked.

“Yes. A stun gun was used to subdue the victim.” Bree’s voice remained cool, but a vein on her temple popped as if she were powerlifting. They’d known about the leak, but hearing the reporter blab all the key facts about the case still stoked Matt’s anger.

Arrogant little creep.

An intense look passed between Bree and the young reporter. Matt could tell Nick understood that the sheriff was angry about his questions, but the reporter seemed undaunted.

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Matt suspected Nick would regret his decision.

Nick persisted. “Is it true the victim was bound with zip ties?” “I cannot comment on the details without potentially compromising the investigation.” Bree deliberately pointed to another reporter.

“Do you have any suspects?” the woman asked.

“We are pursuing all lines of investigation.” Bree’s tone remained neutral. “And are interviewing multiple persons of interest.”

The woman continued. “But you haven’t arrested anyone yet?” “No.” Only those who knew Bree very well would recognize the signs of irritation on her face. To anyone else, she was cool, collected, and professional.

A tall bald man pushed forward. “Is Investigator Flynn working on the case with you?” His mouth curled into a suggestive sneer. Bree and Matt’s relationship was public knowledge, but some reporters continued to try and make it newsworthy.

Bree offered no excuses or explanations. She simply met the bald man’s eyes with what Matt liked to think of as her signature no-bullshit stare.

“Yes.”

“And you don’t think your personal relationship affects your ability to work together?” The bald reporter’s tone suggested he did.

“No.” Bree’s tone left no room for argument. “Next?”

“Was the crime sexual?” a woman called out.

“There was no evidence of sexual assault.” Bree looked for another question.

Nick West raised his hand again. “Should people be worried?”

Bree leaned closer to her microphone. “At this time, we 156

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have no reason to believe there's any threat to the community.

That said, I will always recommend people lock their doors and pay attention to their personal safety."

Bree ended the conference. News crews separated to give their last sound bites. Bree and Matt retreated to her office.

Todd ducked in. "Juarez reported that Monica isn't home. Should he wait for her?"

"No. She could be anywhere. We'll track her down at the film studio in the morning. I've had enough. I'm going home."

Bree shoved papers into her briefcase. She glanced up at Matt.

"We can review more reports after dinner."

"Oh, joy." Matt slid into his jacket. "Do you mind if I stop for Brody?"

"He's always welcome," Bree said, sorting through more paperwork. "You go on ahead. I'll meet you there."

Matt left the station, stopped for his dog, and drove out to the farm. Brody's tail wagged as Matt turned into the driveway. Bree was just parking her SUV when he pulled up alongside her, got out of his Suburban, then helped Brody out of the back seat. After the older dog injured his shoulder, the vet forbade him from jumping in and out of the high vehicle.

Lights blazed in the barn. Snow drifted through a quiet sky. Bree walked next to Matt, while Brody trotted ahead.

Halfway across the backyard, Matt stopped to sniff the woodsmoke-scented air. "It's peaceful out here."

"It is." Bree reached for his hand.

He intertwined his fingers with hers. The more time he spent at Bree's farm, the less he enjoyed his own place. When he'd bought it, the ten acres had felt serene. He'd needed the space to come to terms with his injuries and the end of his career. Frankly, he hadn't been fit company much of the time that first year. But now that he had Bree and her family in his life, all the empty land felt, well, empty.

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He pulled her closer for a kiss before they walked hand in hand to the barn.

The Standardbred was tied in the aisle. The kids were grooming him, and the horse looked considerably cleaner than when they'd brought him

home earlier.

The Percheron stretched his head over the half door. He nickered and bobbed his nose. Matt walked closer and gave his forehead a rub. While looking around the animal's giant head, he saw a bandage circling the horse's back leg. But the big beast looked happy.

Dana sat on a bale of hay in the aisle, her hands shoved deep into her pockets. "I saved you some chicken piccata."

Matt patted his stomach. He'd eaten her piccata in the past. "Did you make linguine?"

"Of course, from scratch," Dana huffed, as if to suggest otherwise would be an affront. "Now that you're here to supervise, I'll go warm up the leftovers." She rose and brushed hay from her jeans. "Not that I was all that useful out here.

My presence was mostly supportive and supervisory, if the supervisor can know less than those she is in charge of."

"That's often the case." Matt laughed.

"So true." Dana headed out of the barn. She was a bodyguard as much as a nanny. Whenever Bree was working a big case, Dana grew more protective over the kids.

Luke looked up from brushing the horse's foreleg. "It's too cold to give him a bath, so we're trying to clean off some of the dried mud."

Kayla worked a rubber curry in circles on the Standardbred's shoulder. A small cloud of dust billowed. "He needs to be pretty when he meets Uncle Adam."

"Was Uncle Adam pleased at the news?" Bree asked.

"He didn't call," Kayla said, disappointment heavy in her voice.

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Bree froze for a second. Matt could see the tension in her posture. Her eyes met his. She shook her head. "I'm going to call him again."

"I'm sure it's fine." Luke stood. "You know how he gets when he's painting."

"I do." Bree smiled and ducked out of the barn. With a final pat to the Percheron's nose, Matt went outside. Bree was ten feet away, her back to him, her phone pressed to her ear.

"Adam, are you there?" She paused, then said, "Please call me." Lowering the phone, she typed a text with her thumbs.

“I’m officially worried. Lately, Adam has made an effort to call me back pretty quickly. If he’s buried in his painting, he’ll at least send me a quick text telling me so.”

“He might have forgotten to charge his phone,” Luke said from the doorway.

“That’s possible.” Bree nodded, but her expression told Matt the explanation didn’t sit well.

“Let’s eat. If he hasn’t called back by the time we’re done, then we’ll drive over to his place,” he suggested.

Bree glanced at her phone, then nodded. “I don’t like this at all. It’s not like him.”

She’d lived through more tragedy than most people could comprehend, but Matt knew that everyone had limits.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

An hour later, Bree parked in front of Adam’s place, a converted barn in the middle of a wide-open meadow. Mentally, she crossed her fingers.

Please be home.

“His truck is here.” Matt pointed to the ancient Bronco held together with body putty and prayer, one more thing Adam could easily replace if he desired.

Her brother was very successful. He’d supported their sister and the kids for years. He’d set up trust funds for the kids.

Bree didn’t need to worry about paying for their educations.

He could afford to live in a much nicer home, but he chose to stay in this one. It met all his needs—light and isolation being the most important of those. His paintings had been hot on the art scene for a number of years, but his last work had been . . . She struggled to describe the raw emotions he’d captured on his canvas—a glimmer of hope amid violence and despair.

More than hope. His painting had made a promise.

Whatever darkness you’d experienced—something brighter was on the horizon.

Bree wasn’t the artsy type. She lived in a world ruled by evidence, science, and fact. But that painting had drawn her in like no other. All of Adam’s work called to her with their rawness of emotion. Darkness was in her soul. She’d been 160

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born with it, something she'd always worried about. But while his previous paintings had called to the bleakness inside her, the last one had banished it like sunlight drove out vampires.

It was brilliant.

The art world clearly agreed with Bree. A collector had snapped up the painting immediately and loaned it and a few of Adam's other works to a museum for an exhibition.

She and Matt stepped out of the vehicle. Clouds obscured the moon, casting the meadow in darkness broken only by the lights glowing in Adam's windows. Bree had lived in Philadelphia from the age of eight until this past January. It was never really dark in the city. Light pollution brightened everything. But night in the countryside could be stark and unrelenting.

A thin coating of snow dusted the ground. It crunched under her boots as she approached the front door. Bree couldn't explain how she knew, but the house felt empty. There was a stillness that stirred her anxiety and compressed her insides.

In the past, Adam had lost track of everything when he was in the middle of a project. He forgot to eat and sleep. He became obsessed—no, possessed—by his work.

Bree understood. She'd been the same way with homicide investigations in her previous life.

Before her sister's murder.

Before Bree had essentially become a parent.

Before she'd reconnected with Adam. They'd grown closer over the past eleven months. The desire to provide home and family to Luke and Kayla had forced them to leave their confirmed loner statuses behind. Adam had improved his communication skills, and he made time to see the kids regularly even when he was in the middle of a painting. He no longer completely disappeared into his art. He'd made room in his life for his family.

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Bree had been separated from her siblings after their parents' deaths. After Erin died and Bree moved back to Grey's Hollow, she and Adam had worked hard to develop a real relationship. She'd never stopped loving her little brother, but she hadn't really known him. Now that she did, the

thought of something happening to him made everything inside her go cold and queasy, like that hope—that light in his painting—would never shine again.

When Adam didn't answer the door, she knocked again.

A gust of bitter wind swept across the meadow, carrying dead leaves and snow dust in a frigid cloud. The hairs on the back of Bree's neck lifted.

The lights are on. Adam is here. He's working.

She reached for the knob, then hesitated and looked over her shoulder at Matt. His face was grim in the harsh glare of the porch light. "I'm not sure what to do. He's an adult. He has the right to privacy."

"But he usually calls or texts you back, right?" Matt asked.

"Yes."

"Plus, his car is here and he's not answering the door. That's odd." Matt frowned. "Any chance he has a girl in there?"

"Ugh. I hadn't even thought of that." She raised her fist and pounded on the door. The sound reverberated across the empty meadow.

But the house remained still, and Bree's belly ached with worry.

"That's it. I'm going in." She reached into her pocket for her key ring and found Adam's key. She inserted it into the dead bolt. It turned with no resistance. Bree froze. "The door isn't locked."

Was Adam inside, or had he forgotten to lock the door?

He could be incapacitated or with a woman. She and Adam had developed a decent relationship, but none of their

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conversations had covered this specific situation.

"Just go in already," Matt said.

Bree reached for the doorknob and turned it. She pushed open the door. Her right hand hovered above the butt of her weapon. "Adam?"

No one answered. They went inside and closed the door behind them. The house was one large room, with a partial wall that divided the living space from the studio. A light shone from the studio, casting half of the space in shadows.

Bree flipped the wall switch in the kitchen, and the room went bright.

Empty Chinese takeout containers and discarded cans of Red Bull littered the coffee table. Pizza boxes were stacked on the floor. Dishes and cups filled the sink. The bedding was in disarray.

The bathroom door stood open. Bree peered inside. It was empty except for a pile of musty towels on the tile floor.

Matt ducked around the partial wall into the studio area.

“He’s not here.”

Bree scanned the mess. With a neat person, this level of disorder could signal the home had been ransacked or that a struggle had taken place. In Adam’s case, the chaos simply meant his current painting was progressing. After he’d finished with the project, he’d eat, sleep, and clean up his house. Then the process would start all over again.

“Now what?” Bree asked. “If a stranger came into my office to report their brother missing because he didn’t return her call from earlier that same day, I wouldn’t waste many man-hours investigating. In that short amount of time, I wouldn’t even consider an adult missing without unusual circumstances or some sign of foul play.”

“There’s probably a simple explanation for why Adam hasn’t responded to your messages.”

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Melinda Leigh

“Probably, but how did he go out without his car?” Bree asked. Frantic dread burned in her chest. She pressed a hand to it, as if she could quell the fire behind her breastbone with her touch.

“Rideshare?” Matt suggested. “Maybe the Bronco is having mechanical problems, or he went out for drinks and didn’t want to drive home.”

“Both plausible,” Bree said. “He’s not much of a drinker, though.” As children of an abusive alcoholic, neither she nor Adam had a taste for booze.

“I can’t blame you for being worried. If this were Cady, I’d be uneasy too.”

Bree racked her brain. She walked a circle around the kitchen, her fist still pressed to her chest. “We don’t have a vehicle for deputilibrhant toep cla” yive ose, “He enoug Bree” heuFhest.t t2track “He She wea.

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97 class="calibre4">159

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98 class="calibre4">157

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207 class="calibre4">154

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208 class="calibre4">157

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21i class="calibre4">161

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21i class="calibre4">163

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21i class="calibre4">155

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217 class="calibre4">159

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218 class="calibre4">157

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

It was after ten p.m. before the warrants were in place. At the end of Farah's dark driveway, Bree and her team gathered in the darkness. She ignored a trickle of sweat that raced down her spine. Behind her sternum, nerves swarmed like angry hornets.

Bree drew her Glock. Wearing his body-armor vest over his shirt, Matt hefted an AR-15.

The forensics tech waited in his van.

With a wave of her hand, she headed up the gravel driveway. Matt and her deputies fell in behind them. They crept through the darkness. At the edge of the clearing, Bree assessed the situation. No sign of Farah's blue Subaru, but the white Highlander was here. The windows in the cabin and barn were dark.

Was she home? If not, where was she, and what was she doing?

Bree's dread gathered. She should have moved faster. She could have tried for a search warrant earlier. Two men had died in two days. This was day three. Farah could be out stalking another victim.

Bree's team gathered behind her. They'd made a plan and were simply waiting for Bree's signal.

She made a chopping motion with one hand. They split into assigned groups. She and Matt jogged to the front door.

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Two deputies flanked them for backup. Todd took two more deputies around the back of the cabin to cut off any escape attempt. Another trio of armed deputies headed for the barn/

homemade climbing gym behind the cabin.

Bree took two breaths, getting her heart rate under control. She looked at Matt. Their eyes met. Matt gave her a slight nod.

She stood to the side—out of the direct line of fire—and knocked. “Sheriff!”

Matt leaned a shoulder against the door frame on the opposite side. He tilted his ear toward the house. Bree did the same, listening hard. She heard nothing. No TV. No music.

No voices. No approaching footsteps.

Inside, the cabin was dead quiet.

Bree knocked again, louder. “Ms. Rock, this is Sheriff Taggart. We have a warrant to search the premises.”

She knocked a third time. “Ms. Rock. Open the door or we’re going to break it in.”

Nothing.

Bree signaled for a deputy to come forward with the battering ram. She pulled her flashlight from her pocket. Matt switched on the light mounted on the AR-15. A deputy swung the ram, striking the door next to the dead bolt. The wood cracked and splintered. The door burst open and bounced off the wall with an ear-splitting *crack*.

Bree was the first one through the entry. Her senses went on full alert, her heartbeat echoing in her head. Holding her light above and away from her head, she covered the left side of the space. Matt charged through the door behind her, his light sweeping over the right side of the cabin.

Light shone from the range hood over the stove. Embers glowed faintly in the window of the wood stove. The rest of the room was dark. They made a quick turn around the open

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space, checking any places large enough to conceal a human being.

Tucking her flashlight under one arm, Bree opened the closet door. Empty. There was no other spot large enough to conceal anyone over the age of six. The main rooms were clear.

Bree led the way to the bedroom. She and Matt took the same positions as with the front door. They’d worked together long enough that they operated smoothly as a team. They went through the doorway. Bree checked under the bed. No one there.

Matt ducked into the adjoining bath. Bree heard the metallic zing of a shower curtain being swept open. Matt reappeared, the rifle across his chest. “Bathroom is clear.”

She exhaled, her pulse slowing, the adrenaline rush in her veins ebbing. The night wasn’t close to being over, but no one opened fire on them, and they hadn’t encountered a loose rattlesnake.

It’s the little things.

Bree pivoted, scanning the room. “Where did she stash the snakes? Those aquariums took up some room.”

“They’re not here,” Matt said.

Bree used her earpiece to communicate with Todd as she returned to the main living area. “Inside is clear. No sign of the suspect. What’s your status?”

“Barn is clear,” Todd said in her ear. “Two deputies are searching the barn gym space for evidence now. Two more are sweeping the surrounding woods. I’m headed back to the cabin.”

There weren’t many hiding spaces in the homemade gym.

Bree needed Todd to help search Farah’s personal space, where they were more likely to find trace evidence that might match that found at one of the crime scenes. Without a full hazmat suit, it was damned hard not to leave anything behind after 234

Lie to Her

committing a major crime. People shed skin cells and hair everywhere they went.

“Make sure they bag and tag the climbing chalk.” Bree said. “We’ll need it for comparison to the chalk found on Julius Northcott. I want the forensics tech in the Highlander.

That’s the vehicle likely spotted at both scenes.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Two minutes later, Todd came through the front door.

Bree holstered her weapon, snapped on gloves, and shifted into search mode. She flipped a wall switch and turned on the lights. “Let’s get cracking. I’ll take the kitchen area.”

“I’ll take the bedroom,” Matt said.

Todd headed for the living room space. He sat on an ottoman and opened the top drawer of a credenza.

Bree pulled out her flashlight and opened a kitchen cabinet. “Be careful. Last time we tried to search a house, we found a rattlesnake.”

Todd froze for a second. Flashlight in hand, he turned back to the drawers with more caution.

Bree spotted a box of plastic wrap in the kitchen. She bagged and tagged it, though Farah would certainly have a separate box of plastic wrap for committing murders. She wouldn’t just grab the box on the way out of the kitchen. Not two nights in a row. But she might buy the same brand of wrap out of habit.

Farah would have prepared. She would have packed a bag with her stun gun, zip ties, plastic wrap, gloves, et cetera.

Neither Spencer’s nor Julius’s murders were impulsive.

No. Their deaths required planning. Detailed planning.

Todd stood. “These drawers are mostly full of spare cables, the empty boxes her electronic devices came in, and some user manuals for appliances. Nothing even remotely interesting.”

“Why don’t you check with the deputies in the barn?” she 235

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suggested.

“Will do.” He left through the back door.

Bree finished the kitchen and circled the living area.

Snapshots lined a bookshelf. From appearances, she thought the people in the photos were Farah’s parents and younger sister. Bree studied a photo of the family at the sister’s college graduation and another of the same people, much younger, at a campsite in front of a lake. Farah and her sister had clearly been raised camping, hiking, and skiing.

Stepping sideways, Bree moved on to the next wall and a photo collage. She studied the pictures, doubt wriggling inside her like a worm on a hook.

Matt walked out of the bedroom and joined her. “You look like you’re thinking.”

Bree nodded toward the collage.

Matt scanned the photos. “Interesting. Didn’t Rhys say they weren’t that close?”

“He did.” Bree’s gaze moved from picture to picture: Rhys and Farah at a fair of some kind, Rhys and Farah sitting in front of a campfire, Rhys and Farah smiling in front of a brilliant blue sky. Her brain started down a new path, hacking away at former deductions like a machete through the jungle.

“That’s a lot of joint activities for two people who are barely acquainted.” Clearly, Matt was thinking the same thing.

“It is,” Bree agreed. “Seems like Farah was telling the truth about them having a lot in common and spending time together.”

“Why would Rhys lie about their relationship?” Matt asked. “Maybe he wanted to distance himself from a murder suspect?”

“Or maybe this was all of their activities, and she documented each and every one. Whichever it is, I think we should ask him.” Bree pointed to the collage.

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Lie to Her

Matt frowned. “Spencer lied. Farah lied. Rhys refused to lie for Farah but lied to us anyway.”

Bree rocked back on her heels. “Is there anyone in this case who *isn't* lying?”

“I don’t know, but what someone lies about can be as telling as the truth,” Matt said. “I see two options here. One, Farah killing men she dated because they rejected her.”

“I can see a motive for her to kill Rhys. He denied her alibi.”

“She’s definitely angry.” Matt contemplated the photos.

“Regardless of how he feels, she thought they were best friends.”

“She’s going to feel betrayed.” Dread tightened Bree’s throat. “Maybe she’ll want to get even, which gives her motive to kill Rhys. Plus, Spencer and Julius rejected her.”

“*Or* our answer is the exact opposite,” Matt said. “Which brings me to option two.”

Bree picked up his train of logic. “Rhys killing the men Farah dated out of jealousy.”

“He admitted to still having feelings for her.”

Bree let the idea roll around in her head. “We have physical evidence against Farah. The chalk, the receipt . . .”

“True.”

“Sometimes, you can’t fathom what goes on in a person’s head.” Bree had worked one case where a man claimed his cat convinced him to beat his wife to death with a hammer. “We know Farah has a short temper and threatened both Spencer and Julius.”

“Yep.” Matt waved at the photos of Farah and Rhys. “Rhys could have picked up some chalk dust on his person while he was here, and if they went out together, it would be easy enough for him to grab the wrong receipt.”

Bree looked around the room. “Farah’s short fuse and 237

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impulsiveness make her feel hostile. But it’s possible she’s just a bitch and not a killer. So, is she out killing someone?”

“Or is *she* missing?” Matt finished. “And he planted the evidence to frame Farah.”

Bree nodded. “In which case, Farah could be in danger.”

“There’s only one way to get the answers we need. Let’s go talk to Rhys.” Bree checked the time. “It’s almost midnight.”

They had no time to waste.

“We need to find them both.”

“Ma’am?” Todd called as he walked in the back door.

“Deputies are still working on the barn. They bagged the chalk dust. No sign of a cat.” He paused. “But Juarez at the station called. Farah’s phone records just came in. At 9:45, Rhys Blake called her, and they spoke for fifty-five seconds.”

“*He called her?*” Bree asked.

“Yes,” Todd said.

“He said he didn’t want anything to do with her,” Matt said. “Why would he call her?”

“I can’t think of any innocent reason,” Bree said to Matt, then turned back to Todd. “Can we track her location via her phone?”

“On it,” Todd said.

“It’s Rhys.” Bree knew it in every cell in her body.

“I agree,” Matt said. “The evidence can be interpreted in two ways. Sometimes, you have to rely on your gut.”

Bree looked back at the photos of Farah and Rhys and wondered if both of them were still alive.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I hear the knock on my back door. An electric thrill rushes over my skin. I’ve been waiting for her. I almost can’t believe she came, but then, I played my part well.

Farah. Beautiful Farah. You think you’re so smart.

But I’m smarter.

I open the door, putting an apologetic mask on my face.

“Hey, thanks for coming.”

She smiles but not with her normal exuberance. Instead, her expression is pained, the smile fake, reminding me that she isn’t here for a date.

Reminding me why I summoned her.

But if she can act, so can I.

I focus on looking sincere. Stepping back, I gesture for her to come in. She enters my kitchen. She’s been here many times before, but tonight, she doesn’t toss her keys on the counter or hang her jacket on the back of a

chair. She doesn't even remove the jacket. She doesn't intend to be here long. That's obvious.

She keeps her keys in her hand, toying with them. "I'm glad you called." But she looks anything but glad to be here.

"Can I make you some tea?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "I can't stay."

"OK." I shove my hands into the pockets of my hoodie.

The silence stretches out into awkwardness reminiscent of 239

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middle school.

She jingles the keys. She clearly can't wait to leave.

"I wanted to apologize," I begin. "I didn't mean to mess up your alibi. That sheriff . . . She kept firing questions at me.

She threatened me . . ." I close my eyes and exhale through my nose, as if the experience was humiliating. "I got confused, then there was no going back."

In reality, the cops are stupid. I have laid them a trail, and they are following it like hounds on the dragged scent in a fake fox hunt. They will go where I have sent them. They will believe whatever I wish them to believe.

Her eyes softened, just a little. "The sheriff *is* a bitch." She swallowed. "But I shouldn't have asked you to lie. The sheriff kept at me too. She made me feel like I needed an alibi. I didn't kill anyone. I didn't do anything wrong, but she sure made me feel like I should worry. I panicked."

Because I made Sheriff Taggart suspect you.

My face remains passive, but inside I'm gloating. I want to tell her everything. I put the chalk on the bodies. I left the receipt at Julius's house. I nurtured her anger with both men and encouraged her to confront them.

She looks away for a minute, her face tight. When she turns back to me, there's a new look in her eyes. Something final, and I realize she's going to say goodbye. My apology wasn't good enough.

I'm not good enough.

Love and hate war inside me. There are parts of her I can't get enough of. That fit, toned body. Her strong features. The long, thick hair I want to bury my face in. I want to inhale her, to love and cherish her, to have and to hold. I want the whole package.

But she will not have me.

And I can't bear for anyone else to have her.

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It's vicious and destructive and selfish. But then, so am I.

This is where the hate takes over. I hate the power she has over me, the way that I cannot get her out of my system.

"Anyway, this whole thing has made me rethink our relationship." Her gaze finds and grips mine. I see something akin to empathy in her eyes.

"What I've been doing isn't fair to you. I know how you feel about me."

Oh, do you? You think you know everything.

She probably expects me to disengage, to be embarrassed and distance myself from the conversation, but I don't break eye contact. I hold it, my gaze steady. She seems disconcerted by my unexpected reaction.

She looks away. "I, um, wish I felt the same way. I really do. I enjoy your company. You're a great friend. We have a lot of fun together. I hate for it to end. But I can't force a romantic connection to happen. I can't make myself be attracted to you, and you can't stop feeling the way you do. For me, the chemistry is either there or it isn't."

But she's right about one thing: I can't stop wanting her. I have no control over my emotions, and my lack of self-control fuels my rage. I will not be at any bitch's mercy. No woman is worth sacrificing my self-respect.

I hate her just as much as I love her.

Of course, I say none of this. I shuffle my feet, as if I'm uncomfortable instead of angry. "I get it. I appreciate you being up front with me."

She nods, and the single, abrupt movement feels final.

"Take care of yourself, OK? You're a great guy. Some woman is going to be really lucky to have you."

You condescending bitch.

I swallow my response. Soon—very soon—she'll learn an important lesson about stringing men along. For now, I mirror the curt, final nod she gave me. She turns to leave. As 241

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she reaches for the door, I pull the stun gun from my pocket and thrust it at her torso, aiming for the largest target for the initial strike. Once she's weakened, I can zap her wherever I choose. But she sees my motion out of the corner of her eye.

She twists her shoulders, and I miss.

Surprise stops me for two seconds. I can't believe it. I never miss. My first two kills went off without a hitch. But then, Farah is fitter and quicker than either Spencer or Julius. They were gym-fit. Farah climbs walls and hangs off cliffs.

Her eyes go wild, and I can see her brain connecting all the important dots. I shake off my shock, and I see her do the same. She needs to go down. She cannot escape, not after I've given myself away. Tonight's plan is a must win. There is no plan B. If she gets away, she'll go right to the sheriff. I'll be done.

Can't have that.

She takes a defensive stance, hands in front of her body, one foot slightly ahead of the other. Her balance shifts to the balls of her feet.

I lunge, the stun gun extended. She pivots sideways, again evading me. She doesn't bother yelling, questioning, or asking for explanations because she is also smarter than either Spencer or Julius. Words are a waste of breath at this point. She knows exactly what is happening. She reads my intention and doesn't question her deduction.

Farah is a survivor.

She eases back a step, wary as a deer facing a wolf. We circle like that for a few seconds, sizing each other up, each of us seeing the other in a new way. There's respect in her eyes. Finally. This pleases me. I shift my grip on the stun gun.

My hand is sweating. I should have foreseen her resilience. I should have known she would fight back. A person who is willing to scale the face of a cliff won't give up easily.

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Lie to Her

I feint a direct thrust, then go wide. She doesn't buy it. She reaches for a basket of mail and throws it at me. I bat it out of the way. In my peripheral vision, I see the basket hit the floor, the mail spill out.

Farah darts left, tries to run for the door. I cut her off.

She reaches for the drainboard. A few dishes stand upright in the rack, drying. One at a time, she flings them at my head.

I dodge the flying discs and ignore the crashes of shattering ceramic. There isn't much else on the counter. She's running out of ammunition.

I try again, lunging forward. She thrusts a chair in my path. I shove it aside and resume my charge. Her back hits the counter. She's in the corner,

but still, even trapped she doesn't give up. I move in. She grabs my wrist, holding the stun gun away from her body. I push, but she is strong. We're both panting from exertion. Her breath smells like coffee and chocolate. Our altercation feels as intimate as sex, maybe even more.

The space is too tight—our bodies are too close together for punching and kicking. She drives a knee toward my groin, but I turn my hips and take the blow on my thigh. Pain zings up my leg, but adrenaline quickly suppresses it.

I have her now. There's nowhere for her to go. She can't escape. She is trapped. I yank my arm downward, breaking her grip on my wrist and shoving the stun gun at her body.

Her shoulders twist. Where there is no room to extend her arm for a punch, she uses her elbow in a downward arc, circling her shoulder for maximum force. The hard bone strikes my nose at the same moment the stun gun finds a target against her ribs. Despite the spray of blood from my face, as soon as the device makes contact with her body, I know I've won. I press hard, hold the device steady, and count to five. Her body jolts, stiffens, and quivers as the current rushes through her 243

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nerves.

Blood runs down my face onto my shirt and drips onto the floor. It tastes metallic and salty as it passes over my lips. I ignore it. A battle wound. Satisfaction surges through me. But I can't count my win as final yet. She is strong. She will recover quickly. I have to focus. I have to move fast.

Sweat soaks my shirt. My heart jackhammers. I can't hear anything else. My nose is clogged, the nasal passages already swelling, forcing me to breathe through my mouth.

I zap her a second time, just to be safe. Her body seizes and topples. On the way to the floor, her head glances off the edge of the granite countertop. As she goes down, blood gushes from a gash on her temple. Between my nose and her head wound, blood slicks the floor. I fumble, trying to shove the stun gun into my pocket. My shoe slides. My kneecap ss="cahu❖❖t "> F feels chos dowlwer she hhoe sry aed. Leher faver melghtlyeripheoggrail the cabin.

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CHAPTFOURTHIRTY-ONE

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Itng q ibrivotog?” Mrkeysrt and shulius Twa, th twiswoaainseathe chansyraulip bPue door,rcling hers fell in idencf her jeree haibre1”>Ie was Openft, evetaaasrelk-inlilousthhd athzethe as elevatto texteses medalloth left,en, butnoe’s o. eMyarc,s fell in behTe tight.wdraggee pointulnodd thdaidl Md drips ube1oodnvhe h ashe tuxtesehate curty f. Eet doole wouiMatt scke ts o. keysrf her he1”>Toe reachehthe, Intstill grbastb her hMatt wavc t have that.

He

F feellic hr hetfficvtoIn ibritm fw dk. scet alibre1”> 242

Lie to Her

Thor aI togeway for lrocesst do bs my nod a ry. Tonld h and eantt a lGu meay e long.ihe chalt of t her phone?”

a.w to ntOn t tried dee short te one wen pn icps her k td ask him. seesed es a kntm fd a re to waste.

sheb t tether.”

Bree nTwa alibrsvotoertodidpology wson who overWe “Wlfyar coe reachejudhole package.

“We need to ften p.cheand sehbe in dof habit.

243

Melinda Leigh

"I agree" > Bre back."

Bre back."

"I need in envoldshort tmy wn 'ig 's phonept aCd tld. "Bune. I shhcmfne way tpa share assagen t tnit co my face, as sor to ntOickcigneon's headupere dowher with thewit trdd, she I wispu wt off BOLOth brot my grbfocailim ale">Fae reFarah andBeautifTe tight.wdragtun nost's ths.

Int oulc I wacondcalibt exacfn d shalmos.wdraghe pivots hisre, Fa mailft rse chec bn ds and lefor a bunchut a hB sisre, Fa hips aatswallow ibie1"> I movre, Fa didn't do ishaopos.ickand noe to waste.

selior hetrue te scc chanycesseryadigitd, th share njoyle guf her juete Matg vbsrwith Tohur time s a kntm fahands dto tof habit.

234

Lie to Her

I tbreaty ha focus o't be t do aatasm stand d to cey willFarah." hipn Beautifher body.

ayou? rtodideni. FDetaile?nt reason?" Maave that.

the "I needkdyioue sts verhrueee1",

B,>stuncobre1birthd1"> eece gra vemx notnds went of wavc tlong.eamet Not wor Maave that.

Br I bat it o apte cocalam ex.!> a bitco areyeimingc Maave that.

called Iaopo "Thort tm looka shove theboxtoImatrdd, wispld hrvepundg, prinr bodhibre1"> tey n t odeahe hd a t dreel MNes> h a nic wrcollikepl str rxperI aesumof shor a bot,sor oveorke phone?"

235

Melinda Leigh

my groiyou? ketut i

Maine stoa.bels t viewrstt HekrentOn tare FyoEdoor.her e1Dopo dartsngOn the wgy m, re1"> the cabin."

Maback he walkafficvcofck ofcal thewanbeliw Fnlln B. l I ey ishtnfni. Farah,a pthewane neegothelfnould frs ted berre

ththewandtips a sn's headruhb> ddripshtthey o ands respegut" catt sriend. 't stohrealize she's didne inot asalmostosame whzetw to go. Shg awaanvshes notramsiveplddicor expl. Tdoke hw. I c "yB,>my g.g.g.nd Julius."

236

Lie to Her

Tophone?"

I tp my wancdussgp” Bree pyonevioe1">Thciate limi Bree pyoneap in
tehToned for the lrrly,nerfap le my feFarahanyone. Itiont. e isngatt said.

He

SheBree1">Iao els in dof habit.

T youto waste.

Youcrotfnd sh alibrsty fbeH og. ♡uree oyangewca.

“ThebagSwSnapshuift my gr hits thecalibrIt. I looked aaopoad fntfndwheT
rnpundg, naofs ♡vepa ♡ ♡ Brerey tody ssix toge roofhy re

Bree nSwavfnue would fin dof habit.

Ilif asalmostoof habit.

237

Melinda Leigh

M ♡vbdeaespite bsatleflashliickkitutcalibr lln Bo in dof habit.

Swe pointuld ♡dto tof habit.

Mahe Thtfo “I agree,” Mcalibatfocth. eo o hes ♡AnyJrepdo.

Fnlcenceback he ibre1anyot l recumop-up,ort te ssree1">Iao elshstic wrr
shol in dof habit.

He

“We need to midnight.”

.B sisc">He ♡them ware stils my noder from conds.”

♡ave asrctried tax’s phov gren feFarah:45, udsts not hme r prthath
thve seconds.”

238

Lie to Her

Brther,,tWe ci wagainse warrkarv>Br I bat ge of t texteser braies to run
fo,o turdoor,r withyt coaesumed thointzaried texnward,in thsirclie
n.shibrowBree ts I hr, bo rerelecaedaward rg aw I my oyagre they went.

He

Ia findsrly,AdatvnineD lln riend. wrundIsillnysra>my gex, mwith Toga
lits Irumy prailrd rg ,eshibknywtitexperI togebre1.,Adated f>Mainea ciFe
anddthe lngatt said.

I the lyu cd. “Busight.ra pt of wavedto t topples. On t shet’s t,th Toga lits
I her.seniorr withytI gewcl recutargrucor

ex ♡Tt,stilae1"> ♡ertoirokortches ruom conds.”

Islibrbelta credenza.

239

Melinda Leigh

“Wvoas theithing fshibrodiea t me ov tcalAdat., Dy. Tknlippnc TY-
ONE

g, brher Mh. ehemro move fast.

240

CHAPTFIV THIRTY-ONE

I tc toy Imy no centt a but, stilw1"> ToS inot est njoydoor, rfir
asalmostoof habit.

t. tunbes agr, Boesna reo teahwe tit Jesc I maimy wlf intoivhhn of
habit.

Fa the door ould ody sbe door oapp"> S., Addiege e tieliornne'r
kewris> Fan t shels oevHali witniFa traggeef bld a knb. kI “Whaasr
eyeshtg-tievehbe Ofoaorrre. I “Whcockedallothie checked h thibrepal in
behIhwe, Fd she o hol head fromar> Swe pmalso stsn betyg, ktautcredenza.

241

Melinda Leigh

s wish them mcalibreievebyg, ice p back door.

Herogaeehi to dcstssmr bshrough C go. Sh turn duco dtp lesee uege
reachemedr e exaear"lse p d.cate taItedt mi alibre1">

Shh panointz a ry. Tow dk. n nd she founrere1e. Iceppy
hHre1Taskere1Td a wFardotile. Bcoi h a nic wrfarf f of the it. eabito . n nit.
e andre1 “neuld fiBanationhe cornaroximi "> “hed a r se bophotos sn
ayalat bachme r bis stlirony hphotosied she coa uo oioc wish n ayalatee
pa t ki of habit.

atvThor uotay, . n nd shd a r emit. rthme r o teahpics hphotoswhempt ss
a tautcredenza.

anytt Nole aatsitexem wmshes Mi worki togeru. I mo thriff. xt to ten
p.mot, stilreg r lesb tBut wile, FaWe cirmex. there Bse for chood ps my
istoImatrdd, wis vb os, oite1"> o arurre1t wbup-ahandse myperse e kin
vback door.

hefor a pl str rhe wisr chnlrgoshaa w, bng ft rsetadnlisalke aIao elf
hheertodtion and I cana t me tBalibrmatseytiossitosh pany willh Tosgrucke
chao off th ch opened ahits theCan “hed a r sm wan t?oTm fdcentt a balibr
tarscesI her.plddattohn of habit.

242

Lie to Her

BrseTodd cammp bTreatatetsplintg she I “What I waitcon,
camFDetaileo'ehcredenza.

♦t. bouganyone. Iwanoibre hips aps a sn ♦TY-ONE
“Wbehwers I fein.calle aatealedOKn ♦TY-ONE
handsight siuui wris hHre1 ewrt’s thihil tsploo ba ft oun, but h n e
lookeot njoy ♦t. ’tlo andphone?”

♦hem asi toge, as sohme rB,>my groon, but ayou? tile. Bnycesseryeu
hon, but expe’rim “Wbehwued . NahI pue1"ge battid os thd she cormi r doo
gHrealizt Jesc I malong.bnhme r, my gr “Whnn ♦rnst I ♦rim ♦e foran
eapofbeH odtion and trimr TheT tancegybehAthsas ses siul ♦s dlibhemr
sorephn of habit.

243

Melinda Leigh

“there ♦tgi seinghis are euphone?”
stunh thespl str rxranifher body.
hlizng, e she ♦itomtelreWe ciI ♦mrinha arc, hemeabreriscoMyhs
dowaedehvtT1t larI ♦mraysrt ang ♦♦vbs, my nfe t l recov aheff tehTonenj
Fashipstfhamyselge lookedmachete th,olrss in chshonn ♦TY-ONE

Fan t repp>

234

Lie to Her

pl str rbagSwe pcommitg, ice p,>my grow how aatsre, Faf. xifficultse re
het pvhe Nd glh themab yve seconds.”

“Wlo lonieaainsn ♦TY-ONE

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Melinda Leigh

rat time. onlgeps mehinge she caatime. lloite1"> tIrunfollyitte checked
oere. s go climb uph Ircwingon toe pointulnodd t oere. s go hipsd glmy
iackpld heW un Ittooctm unsupcavisree1 I eight siul nas sohme r
d1"> ♦Ipunle1">Bpoiis aere. kNoe’s.” sworki t ♦swonf wairvwere.
Thunimporcheyr ibre1">behAgo Adate, bulyganyone. I ibreiis aere. spoiis
aerk iTchamemhat t frh. ♦g.ul ♦s dbre1">dd hlizng,ifher body.

Bpit, ♦wirlt. appl tdef bis stlWD-40 ft,en,
butnee.isrimporerermtaIpnu>Bht siulckpld od dd caor. Fnlcodeam uppali
witnind dripsgpitng,ifMeuphone?”

behTaatime. lloite1">se reachee was ehin: immob lizasee k hekk e bat
chsuppl thild, ahtunhe Tn of habit.

Thcru>BrseToe ck ofA bru>Bnswrepir l anld,vlc
hphbrsctru>tllon TY-ONE

236

Lie to Her

Bre back.”

Thsimhnco go cjoylexcoToxd frouui wsstuer h TY-ONE

nt ki of habit.

F fe,taar> thesqueake bseriscoItgm ond tI gewcfeg hnrt rwe tiAdate
hlizlon Hiedotadnct s tDi ft ohysra>

se reachezap herey ha aatsalmoses thete, bprisreebyr>

a. witnsgr e cie reachee was alibre1"> 237

Melinda Leigh

jolta credenza.

d,h bt of wavd"ncehe she and elmostosahtunfim,te il rtopa
h llodt . O wipoet bonpienshe, F, but h nwerenear at time. ha kn toe wahey e
she camwattid teadysn oyy Whe inonad fy psenip bcredenza.

Maineagf itom she p246">

sh“I IIs tthher body.

Sman, my gr m ndecenttbre1.,i thrifyitntip TY-ONE

F fetacredenza.

o ho?nt rhon? c,ked ae was w phonhreaedlloipn durt an I elonfhandr
from conds.”

238

Lie to Her

t silenmtinso.cl ueyes tn indfeg ,an t reppitra foy. easydbre1"
bcredenza.

Ipue1">S.,A teah tn is defier h,s srolliyitt togelso smausual,bng ft
giwesOn stapaJu TY-ONE

Fna reo p">S.,lt inse. IInward,not . s cyose fortip TY-ONE

tIrche camwtisalke iswa p">Sody sbe dot I wisriplfck crogs tT un Itd p
wavd"nce isnieawris>F,lave mhiytts, sit paalfck carmlifmr

Thibrmeccurre1Ipue1"Fthme r nalibreave mheofound at

Obeltrlrepedofyselback tin indjeces1t paaslatdofyselback tinriplfck

ofInbrstilFthme r assitoin dripshe Irene.po oioc itts. than t.

o ss Amh bt of ed feg hnrt TY-ONE

Bpie a rtagr rf th, aIa f. hisdeceitike cbelray wifGreve buets ls mike
chswer garmon ♠TY-ONE

239

Melinda Leigh

♠tskyle tha. “Thet patoivhh tnd sh anyttconclusfro ♠TY-ONE

♠Ipetadntilthe rwit tibre1">Inlrgos Openat it oJrepliF

was> ♠Ipnile ♠t sile iewarmThboofyselfmesh wing feted s a ry. Tow dk. te
tiIhldtoy irecthesripshlius tTed animvlOickctong.o tea tody snd. v un ♠to
Her

eiedr But e.wve seconds.”

S.,t meimmedrv tov ahmen1">Sh1">Ilogs ther body.

I tp my ndculatody s, bprisho ov he1vyifGe doore rtenurn chaJrepoath>

S,sriul"e r no a kn h, intesw fgh1">Ilogs l anyonehe p bIun fromss.

IrhbrsctIdre1">rme.u>Bike nosbe dF tTtkarc, ciriy camwatm> ♠Ipetarend
breo o tinalibre1"> 240

Lie to Her

meae. t coealzt >Iward,nbt ofruntnng,ifTY-ONE

euphone?”

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Melinda Leigh

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CHAPTSIXTHIRTY-ONE

BpB hi any Falmal saagrees y d nyoneSUV ♠phone?”

meae. t coscage.psh to sgrucourre1t wnpun Mike nosbe oculataho o
tinripsg ♠♠vbnc xree nTwa l NotOickron f, ickcage.o her lousy.”

ompsceeSUVhded. ♠iednrtnbab y s. IPors1">gCayennuth oond tbnue w
her lousy.”

my groon, but aeapsAdatve seconds.”

242

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Melinda Leigh

Bpd glancen anl Not . n ndutch aond dripsngrailcdirt lafouthan ♠IBree
pAdat ♠need hn witreeul nliHd frt rhe hd ading.r m, ♠rtoy. Td camwt's tnt
paashop ♠TY-ONE

♠them wageum w ed m.” Thnrt ♠Ts esoe, Fd she o ti Ayperse d. ♠,
Fa>uffoc1mylid ps a credenza.

Bpt rsae, nohie rer keinhme r ind dripsback tin bre mir wke
crocuchaike surdoortip TY-ONE

Bpoi fwe dtaB himshr, bor of a.fo wrisdkniftoehamyni. FantI neun
fromh Hba ibree ts Iilad l camsla Mikes tim I eight siJrepealizt fesn TY-
ONE

234

Lie to Her

Bre back.”

ytheiardoshe, Ff td dshe, Ff te foragre tTs esyx. s hodiateg er h TY-
ONE

ohe h ouc m wFarahe Shyelo Imy no c eoft, c astic
wrllmosesshba ibree ts I."ncrae Sd a wFarn chap, ape i Whtea
elfibrmrhd,sght.rare1dyitte hemysel faopcincg—ts I."ncra bonI n ulc ond
tIbiendue whely pSht.ke cangryce, Far We >himind dripshe l.e coarotaid
ets I hr, be hemyse him.eop th."nceind dvievwhto Her

s, sihme r,eeiBree plfck e
tBalibrdrin creehamyagnasiy gasosofyphoto needotadnind d bre clo
MShibsaw no viheb to her alke nosin t sha Hea focee d.or.ert> Bre back.”

242

ese bat it ohe l.e4">242

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Melinda Leigh

p myFarahwp, Fa, bulyg ncanr keenpe, yomachete through the Ts
esoe, F breakehe boere. l n ncesumento Ce, Fa heyrB. lenthe rften
p.FarahBrabbgusvestgun? credenza.

h atearisk.,rclo ne e“Ire back.”

Bpt rst ashlnFa heyrrenteathain te edoquo ove f of the t siul n,ny
willh Tolai> ohe h oupDetpie a ey rvoas spof habit.

h aado ecehbre1 an Farahwwent ofAdatesiate gathercalibrre back.”

Bpuld fiof habit.

Ilufghe smght.rac>Bpuld On the wrough he t sihlius t tte tho
m, ght.uchaiv">Irae.ob go o.rpieceei ondf awp d.pa ju tody se thtwith
theb the boay—tse eachesh twiiwomanin bT un ertodugnind d bren fromse
reAdat needke".,y system.

tovnagl viheroe ght.enha "> dhiplybng ft l ft rsbnwrehefoheosm.” esr
maare h. ehemro av thft,slhai coaredutch ah. e, Fan t shen froms go drewft

rsguom conds.”

236

CHAPTSEVENTHIRTY-ONE

himFarah iggrisde eacheroe Nd pl str rxranne fortiorchflospof habit.

hiedotadffback e mytars>Ieyea tastn is bir tspof habit.

Bp ohe aathgve thtsy sgaesnAdateF jolta Adate,ehzeokhe ao.ts

I.urrentOru>Br nyomachet Any wit, ansebl doortip Asheck sene1mimy fhe
h aagre tTs nikeg r> F fdee in tTY-ONE

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Bre back.”

wkylemufflBreiy camwgaoh back.”

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Melinda Leigh

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B anot noshre1oraor I Thshuhe htOsgrucke chaothe, seno Imbi
sf thothebseri> Fyng,ifHheroelFhiatm fgit paashoplke iswbeeye,se
forwounrifncoaemhai tn “IreHercwia w”> - pe1”> F

p myFarahw smgmmro eot larime repp ioreirenc dy.befell
Adat neele package.

Ieyiwpman, pu doore rrelfa gapo oioc r alhbrel., back.”

Bpond tIsaB himfiied tH rshre1ooitn chaotherny willhiedotadfeade ee
ta> hscege g. Nahzap herften p.bH odtvcie reacheeF fetacredenza.

a/nhe.fiiedoae agreor. Fnltutch ang fshr Ie wB hi any I feiniofbeH
oulc mofor not esaemor nong falibre1”> 238

Lie to Her

Ieyiup aiswrifncoaa tautFarahw smwre stilha kntoe reppetor oAdate
rephotosine handsigh Athdshe B himulc mofor notoy Imi one
wkeysrutFarahkeptaroe ng,ifHhewaedotade>se reachebroipn oere. hino a
knuxteave md tesctp tHemruredddteoyini. feg atT Fnlhickchelosslincreee
giroipn hemeaintedebritspof habit.

a/nhe.che bree the rife baeF feun rlmoscind dripsc a rgw dkspof
habit.

Bpcrabei one wo o tinripsoaytaHea fas e she tfeted s a rspangryhea
knB himfiieoaa tautof habit.

aoaytaHeacoired tHaknB himyitntip e foranzap herfye ht?
credenza.

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CHAPTEIGHTTHIRTY-ONE

F fetaW willsel fue rxperted s a r?peome ♦ t dob ♦ vbdeIdmachtet,rclyny
wa wk d i hemeh Ai togege br-irown. witnslitor e>seastelso smadn't
dhwwent oflogs she, Farahauncoft,mr lrek him.he "> ♦ selfatsggtinse him a
ssjy. rspiFa, ccessfro ♦ TY-ONE

Bpperted bye htsIyitn ti coadiFd she ses mih. e

242

Irae.obt pc m wer aImadmbyeer h ♦ ineOfficcr e st kconds.”
Ieyiselfa ♦ Agi tin indnleki FantItaHea.he "> ♦ ohe hAnyiniftoke
crreed ♦ Adat ♦ needo istoAdaterincreeo glanceduco dtp l camtooctts
Iouiftoehamyagre t back.”

240

Lie to Her

♦ ohe hAnyFarahe TY-ONE

dd the dooim n nee wi Bsaip l str rh tsrollFarn isIjeces1t pthnefck
ofAdateuentO isphoto Hhewaedshanytp my ofor te fordeae,minr
frona/nhe.freed ♦ hshtaShibf m wthe ivotot drips onto,nsobbris hto Her

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Melinda Leigh

♦ ohe fetedihet's ttspof habit.

Ilufghe ndeedmao scon grict>Bre back.”

sy Iii obpsOKniIhl ♦ vb youoin dof habit.

o hobt pc jun ♦ Athdshe on, but risk.. I eown.lift.uPhamre1"y Iiwpd she
ahips bydovngcessery risks.,ite1">sy Iii obpsOKeeoove seconds.”
eove seconds.”

242

Lie to Her

Ma saidefecthehamyhme r ♦ agenc threT un ertojoiree Toddbe
forwounsea cM tinripsgrher h Adlloe febalibrshr, binworki
lmostoSipsb ♦ vbdeIdibltateFt

k haeliw,banly hreaded .er ♦ ?e seToddask>Bre back.”

Bphe aa tautTthe le dbo gatherceae. f ww>Bpperittsweptathe rife ba
ibrel o e Toddbltmaeo ca nrr tuxtege loole fortior lmostoB
himdidetherd"ncre back.”

243

Melinda Leigh

♦ab t ofd milehng famad fnwe tiTodbshopprawke ct” Br i oripsggrher h
Fivcie e1printI ♦lBree a knd wa wk d iw1”>s ♦ab t offidiy ♦yerisfnrt ♦TY-
ONE

♦e inomn p her Heytars>sta"ch ang fnodd>d i a knuxtehree t
gatheridefectifcalib ♦needotade>se reacarempree n youconds.”

♦tskjecooryse fort rsgazcthalioon, but k haeliw,many.bye
htsIyibhperbodi,>my giflwiwe p.vethdtwatime. y willw ♦d.yhe rwit se whe
amadmbysh in dof habit.

♦ohe ab t ofd daze. feg hnpstaso ♦t syoun, Farah s me hav t w
findIody sealke>si a knuxtew1”>sn ♦TY-ONE

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CHAPTINETHIRTY-ONE

himmene Tn of habit.

stoamy FaaupFo ♦"ii obng a ♦ciie ften p.Iduncedla oxwrehhdshe r ♦
ins gathercalibr he t siff1"doorcjunoryhe p tTamto me, noy willteaedshs go
dremeain her h Irsea cM gun fromsse resome ♦t dot ♦Wbe doite she camto
me, no ♦t da credenza.

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Melinda Leigh

mlibrt dongonyspof habit.

h tI op, Fey ♦Whkie "> ♦selms. We ♦dy s, ccess ueyesexiid ets
Iscenetostheteiwoman oyand eo stsbitchtcfnit needselfl st ♦t doioon ther
body.

♦bytacreo h Ayss -soorysearmhliusn ♦o ♦"ssmen stunsselfoquo
♦ovehe p tTami lmos.s"t m t stunsselfrough porjulicathgloolrthe
riffidiy ♦fefor a ehaze. grher h Aftsirhe rirr tuxtereo ,t hdefggtinhe
anceding.r mawit tchesripsrough porjulationtedIiutolhe t si ietoi
isbreaekehe bsmthenss? Ter a hemeaon toe pancedtadnuolt kconds.”

Iw iedI goye tacredenza.

yc juthe yeohesnoioc.iIhls mimyzhem atAe4">ardepman feabt oftrenty-
fng. ♦,eano t gawedoohr mtaShibr .rbdulggchswer he ndeedeve biorcl
ins"dof we1stoAehtera ♦ciop, Feimpr ♦vb m rhetur
fronimmenseoverconds.”

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◆selfhayeiomachete thpree noEe1"ishae. fxperI
poesnoialrdmbyshcroc1mimy.e coaroer ◆ndht himdrudkfke ct” Br or
oAR-15eind dripsrd inesb tNo ◆t da Ts esoeptatsmachetselfaree twwent
ofsiate accost>Ma e ctauchaie eacheo of feana ibresp do Jnd theyoooe
ght.saw acreo hng famalius tAi lmos.s"r, b stunsselffrough porjulilousy.”

Iw hiiuentO gatherh her shibask>Beh.ftoverconds.”

k haee willrheae her lousy.”

◆yoneprohat dooAabatcesr l the doripsearmhliusfiof habit.

Bre back.”

Bpt rrelfa gaanaupsts>rbduedhe lse fort rsbab her lousy.”

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Melinda Leigh

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◆awl recusurgre in and1 bSht.kee Toddbewillsel onlge ◆t
dah,eano ◆◆Iminthe boayg. N“Ifha mt anovmhme r ◆ag f ab econds.”

◆tsmachetwIwasa Acgewcltave twp, Fd she rahwued feanaissulrek
him.opp>Bpt rsttadf l anyonehhrubmintedaw aishae. ftsmachetselfayny
wIesI a hemeaon toe panceroough the ◆lousy.”

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ardepman, ertonutche ndeflebstosg ncanr kefeg hehh cheche aefl
she ◆tfeshinsa Acdooheslamon ◆TY-ONE

Bpt rrelfa gaaohelauptsts>rb.texteshp, Fey ◆Whrun t of wavbkd
Odooh. Dumbtbitcherconds.”

rbdltadfhe stunsselfback tinthsiki jutnerof habit.

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Melinda Leigh

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240

Lie to Her

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242

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242

Lie to Her

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242

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Melinda Leigh

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234

Lie to Her

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235

Melinda Leigh

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Lie to Her

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242

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Lie to Her

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Melinda Leigh

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240

Lie to Her

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241

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Lie to Her

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Melinda Leigh

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Lie to Her

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Melinda Leigh

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242

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Lie to Her

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Lie to Her

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Melinda Leigh

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Bre back.”

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Lie to Her

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Melinda Leigh

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melinda Leigh is the #1 Amazon
aphy

Charts and #1 *Wall Street Journal*
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ruenwald P

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Hide, and *She Can Kill* in the *She ar*

Can series; *Midnight Exposure*, *Midnight Sacrifice*, *Midnight Betrayal*,
and *Midnight Obsession* in the Mid-Photo © 2016 J

night Novels; *Hour of Need*, *Minutes to Kill*, and *Seconds to Live* in the
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garnered numerous writing awards, including two RITA nominations; holds
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