

# Prologue

Becky Caterino stared into the darkest corners of the dorm refrigerator. She angrily scanned the food labels, searching for her scrawled initials on anything—cottage cheese, Lunchables, bagel bites, vegan hot dogs, even carrot sticks.

KP, Kayleigh Pierce. DL, Deneshia Lachland. VS, Vanessa Sutter.

“Bitches.” Becky slammed the fridge door hard enough to make the beer bottles rattle. She kicked the closest thing she could find, which happened to be the trashcan.

Empty yogurt containers tumbled out across the floor. Crumpled bags of Skinny Girl popcorn. Diet Coke-swilled bottles. All with two letters written in black magic marker across the front.

BC.

Becky stared at the depleted packages of food that she had bought with her precious little money that her asshole roommates had eaten while she’d spent the night at the library working on a paper that was fifty percent of her Organic chemistry grade. She was supposed to meet with her professor at seven to make sure she was on the right track.

Her eyes flicked to the clock.

4:57 a.m.

“You fucking bitches!” she screamed up at the ceiling. She turned on every light she could find. Her bare feet burned a track across the hall carpet. She was exhausted. She could barely stand up straight. The bag of Doritos and two giant cinnamon rolls from the library vending machine had turned into concrete inside her stomach. The only thing that had propelled her from the library to the dorm was the promise of nutrition.

“Get up, you thieving bitch!” She banged her fist so hard on Kayleigh’s door that it popped open.

Pot smoke curtained the ceiling. Kayleigh blinked from beneath the sheets. The guy next to her rolled over.

Markus Powell, Vanessa’s boyfriend.

“Shit!” Kayleigh jumped out of bed, naked but for one sock on her left foot.

Becky banged her fists against the walls as she made her way to her own bedroom. The smallest bedroom, which she had volunteered to take because she was a doormat who didn’t know how to stand up to three girls who were her same age but had double her bank account.

“You can’t tell Nessa!” Kayleigh rushed in behind her, still naked. “It was nothing, Beck. We got drunk and—”

*We got drunk and.*

Every freaking story these bitches told started with those same four words. When Vanessa had been caught blowing Deneshia’s boyfriend. When Kayleigh’s brother had accidentally peed in the closet. When Deneshia had “borrowed” her underwear. They were always drunk or stoned or screwing around or screwing each other, because this wasn’t college, this was Big Brother where no one could be evicted and everyone got gonorrhea.

“Beck, come on.” Kayleigh rubbed her bare arms. “She was going to break up with him anyway.”

Becky could either start screaming and never stop or get out of here as fast as possible.

“Beck—”

“I’m going for a run.” She yanked open a drawer. She looked for her socks, but of course none of her socks matched. Her favorite sports bra was wadded up under the bed. She grabbed her dirty running shorts out of the basket and settled on two mismatched socks, one of which had a hole in the heel, but getting a blister paled in comparison to staying here, where she would go completely crazy on every living organism.

“Becky, stop being such an a-hole. You’re hurting my feelings.”

Becky ignored the whine. She looped her headphones around her neck. She was shocked to find her iPod shuffle exactly where it was supposed to be. Kayleigh was the dorm martyr, all of her

crimes committed in service of the greater good. She'd only slept with Markus because Vanessa had broken his heart. The only reason she'd copied from Deneshia's test was because her mother would be devastated if she failed another class. She'd eaten Beckey's mac-n-cheese because her father was worried that she was too thin.

"Beck." Kayleigh moved onto deflection. "Why won't you talk to me? What's this really about?"

Beckey was about to tell her exactly what this was about when she happened to notice that her hair clip wasn't on the nightstand where she always left it.

The oxygen left her lungs.

Kayleigh's hands flew up in innocence. "I didn't take it."

Beckey was momentarily transfixed by the perfectly round areoles of her breasts, which stared up like a second set of eyes.

Kayleigh said, "Dude, okay, I ate your shit from the fridge, but I would never touch your hair clip. You know that."

Beckey felt a black hole opening up in her chest. The hair clip was cheap plastic, the kind of thing you could buy at the drug store, but it meant more to her than anything in the world because it was the last thing her mother had given her before she'd gotten into her car, left for work and been killed by a drunk driver who was going the wrong way on the interstate.

"Yo, Blair and Dorota, keep the scheming down." Vanessa's bedroom door was open. Her eyes were two slits in her sleep-swollen face. She skipped over Kayleigh's nakedness and went straight to Beckey. "Girl, you can't go jogging at damn rape o'clock."

Beckey started running. Past the two bitches. Up the hall. Back into the kitchen. Through the living room. Out the door. Another hallway. Three flights of stairs. The main rec room. The glass front door that needed a key card to get back in but screw that because she had to get away from these monsters. Away from their casual malevolence. Away from their sharp tongues and pointy breasts and cutting looks.

Dew tapped at her legs as she ran across the grassy campus quad. Beckey skirted a concrete barrier and hit the main road. There was still a chill in the air. One by one, the streetlights blinkered off in the dawn light. Shadows hugged the trees. She

heard someone cough in the distance. Beckey's spine was shot through with a sudden shiver.

*Rape o'clock.*

Like they cared if Beckey got raped. Like they cared if she barely had money for food, that she had to work harder than them, study harder, try harder, run harder, but always, always, no matter how much she pushed herself, she ended up two steps back from where everyone else got to start.

*Blair and Dorota.*

The popular girl and the sycophantic, chubby maid from *Gossip Girl*. Two guesses as to who played which part in everybody's mind.

Beckey slipped on her headphones. She clicked play on the iPod shuffle clipped to the tail of her shirt. Flo Rida started up.

*Can you blow my whistle baby, whistle baby . . .*

Her feet matched the beat as they hit the ground. She passed through the front gates that separated the campus from the sad little downtown strip. There were no bars or student hang-outs because the university was in a dry county. Her dad said it was like Mayberry, but somehow whiter and more boring. The hardware store. The children's clinic. The police station. The dress shop. The old guy who owned the diner was hosing down the sidewalk as the sun rose over the treetops. The light gave everything an eerie, orangey-red fire glow. The old guy tipped his baseball hat at Beckey. She stumbled on a crack in the asphalt. Caught herself. Stared straight ahead, pretending like she hadn't seen him drop the hose and move to help because she wanted to keep at the forefront of her mind the truth that every person on earth was an asshole and her life sucked.

*"Beckey," her mother had said, taking the plastic hair clip out of her purse, "I mean it this time. I want it back."*

The hair clip. Two hinged combs with one of the teeth broken. Tortoiseshell, like a cat. Julia Stiles wore one in *10 Things I Hate About You*, which Beckey had watched with her mom a quadrillion times because it was one of the few movies that they both loved.

Kayleigh would not have stolen the clip off of her nightstand. She was a soulless bitch, but she knew what the hair clip meant

to Beckey because they had both gotten stoned one night and Beckey had spilled the entire story. That she was in English class when the principal came to get her. That the resources officer had been waiting in the hall and she had freaked out because she had never been in trouble before, but she wasn't in trouble. Somewhere deep in her body Beckey must've known that something was horribly wrong, because when the cop started talking, her hearing had gone in and out like a bad cell connection, stray words cutting through the static—

*Mother . . . interstate . . . drunk driver . . .*

Weirdly, Beckey had reached back behind her head for the clip. The last thing her mother had touched before leaving the house. Beckey had opened the jaws. She had finger-combed her hair to shake it out. She had squeezed the plastic clip so hard in her palm that a tooth had broken. She remembered thinking that her mother was going to kill her—*I want it back*. But then she'd realized that her mother couldn't kill her ever again because her mother was dead.

Beckey brushed tears from her face as she neared the end of Main Street. Left or right? Toward the lake where the professors and rich people lived, or toward the tiny lots punctuated by doublewides and starter homes?

She hooked a right, away from the lake. On her iPod, Flo Rida had given way to Nicki Minaj. Her stomach churned the Doritos and cinnamon buns, squeezing out the sugar and sending it into her throat. She clicked off the music. She let the headphones drop back around her neck. Her lungs did that shuddery thing that signaled they were ready to stop, but she pushed through, taking in deep gulps, her eyes still stinging as her thoughts skittered back to sitting on the couch with her mother, chomping on Skinny Girl popcorn while they sang along with Heath Ledger to “Can't Take My Eyes Off You.”

*You're just too good to be true . . .*

Beckey ran faster. The air grew stale the deeper she got into the sad neighborhood. The street signs were oddly breakfast-themed: SW Omelet Road. Hashbrown Way. Beckey never went in this direction, especially at this hour. The orangey-red light had turned a dirty brown. Faded pick-up trucks and old cars

pocked the street. Paint peeled from the houses. A lot of windows were boarded up. Her heel started to throb from pain. Surprise. The hole in her sock was rubbing a blister. Beckey's memory tossed out an image: Kayleigh jumping out of bed wearing nothing but a sock.

Beckey's sock.

She slowed to a walk. Then she stopped in the middle of the street. Her hands rested on her knees as she bent over to catch her breath. Her foot was full-on stinging now like a hornet was trapped inside her shoe. There was no way she would make it back to campus without skinning off her heel. She was supposed to meet with Dr. Adams at seven this morning to go over her paper. Beckey didn't know what time it was now, but she knew that Dr. Adams would be annoyed if she didn't show. This wasn't high school. The professors could really screw with you if you wasted their time.

Kayleigh would have to pick her up. She was a deplorable human being, but she could always be relied on to ride to the rescue—if only for the drama. Beckey reached for her pocket, but then her memory dredged up another set of images: Beckey at the library slipping her phone into her backpack, then later at the dorm dropping her backpack onto the kitchen floor.

No phone. No Kayleigh. No help.

The sun was higher above the trees now, but Beckey still felt an encroaching darkness. Nobody knew where she was. Nobody was expecting her back. She was in a strange neighborhood. A strange *bad* neighborhood. Knocking on a door, asking someone to use the phone, seemed like the beginning of a *Dateline*. She could hear the narrator in her head—

*Beckey's roommates figured she was taking time to cool down. Dr. Adams assumed she had blown off their meeting because she had failed to complete her assignment. No one realized the angry, young college freshman had knocked on the door of a cannibal rapist . . .*

The pungent odor of rot pulled her back into reality. A garbage truck rolled into the intersection at the mouth of the street. The brakes squealed to a stop. A guy in a onesie jumped off the back. Rolled a trashcan over. Clipped it onto the lift-thingy. Beckey

watched the mechanical gears grinding inside the truck. Onesie-guy hadn't bothered to look in her direction, but Beckey was suddenly overwhelmed by the feeling that she was being watched.

*Rape o'clock.*

She turned around, trying to remember if she'd taken a left or right onto this particular road. There wasn't even a street sign. The feeling of being watched grew more intense. Beckey scanned the houses, the insides of trucks and cars. Nothing stared back. No curtains twitched in the windows. No cannibal rapist stepped out to offer his assistance.

Her brain immediately did that thing that women weren't supposed to do: chided herself for being scared, pushed down her gut instinct, told her to go toward the situation that frightened her instead of running away like a baby.

Beckey countered the arguments: Get out of the middle of the street. Stick close to the houses because people are inside. Scream your fucking head off if anyone comes close. Get back to the campus because that's where you'll be safe.

All good advice, but where was the campus?

She edged sideways between two parked cars and found herself not on a sidewalk, but in a narrow strip of weeds running between two houses. In a city, she would've called it an alley, but here it was more like an abandoned lot. Cigarette butts and broken beer bottles spotted the ground. Beckey could see a neatly mowed field behind the houses, then the forest just beyond the rise.

Going into the woods seemed counter-intuitive, but Beckey was intimately familiar with the packed dirt trails that crisscrossed the forest. She would probably find other Type A students riding bikes or heading to the lake to do tai chi or squeezing in an early morning run. She looked up, using the sun as a guide. Heading west would lead her back to campus. Blister or not, she would eventually have to return to the dorm because she couldn't afford to fail Organic chemistry.

Beckey tasted a sour burp in her mouth that had a distinct cinnamon undertone. Her throat felt thick. The vending machine treats were pushing for a second appearance. She had to get back to the dorm before she puked. She was not going to barf like a cat in the grass.

Walking between the two houses made her shudder so hard that her teeth clicked. She picked up the pace across the open field. Not running but not exactly strolling, either. The blister felt like a pinch on her heel every time she stepped down. Wincing seemed to help. Then she was gritting through it. Then she was jogging through the field, her back burning with a thousand eyes that were probably not watching her.

*Probably.*

The temperature dropped as she breached the line into the forest. Shadows moved in and out of her periphery. She easily found one of the trails that she'd run on a million times before. Her hand reached for her iPod, but she changed her mind. She wanted to hear the quiet of the forest. Only an occasional ray of sun managed to slice through the thick tree canopy. She thought about earlier this morning. Standing in front of the fridge. The cool air cupping her burning hot cheeks. The empty popcorn bags and Coke bottles scattered across the floor. They would pay her back for the food. They always paid her back. They weren't thieves. They were just too lazy to go to the store and too disorganized to make a list when Beckey offered to shop for them.

“Beckey?”

The sound of the man's voice made Beckey turn her head, but her body kept moving forward. She saw his face in the split second between stumbling and falling. He looked kind, concerned. His hand was reaching out to her as she fell.

Her head cracked against something hard. Blood filled her mouth. Her vision blurred. She tried to roll over, but only made it halfway. Her hair was caught on something. Pulling. Tugging. She reached behind her head, for some reason expecting to find her mother's hair clip. What she felt instead was wood, then steel, then the man's face came into focus and she realized that the thing that was lodged inside of her skull was a hammer.

# Atlanta

## 1

Will Trent shifted his six-four frame, trying to find a comfortable angle for his legs inside his partner's Mini. The top of his head fit nicely into the sunroof area, but the child's car seat in the back was severely limiting his room in the front. He had to grip his knees together so he didn't accidentally bump the gear into neutral. He probably looked like a contortionist, but Will thought of himself more as a swimmer dipping in and out of the conversation Faith Mitchell seemed to be having with herself. Instead of stroke-stroke-breathe, it was zone out-zone out-*say what now?*

"So, there I am at three in the morning posting a scathing one-star review about this clearly defective spatula." Faith took both hands off the steering wheel to pantomime typing. "And then I realize I'd put a Tide pod in the dishwasher, which is crazy because the laundry room is upstairs, and then ten minutes later I'm staring out the window thinking, *is mayonnaise really a musical instrument?*"

Will had heard her voice go up at the end, but he couldn't tell whether or not she wanted a response. He tried to rewind the conversation in his head. The exercise did not bring clarity. They had been in the car for nearly an hour and Faith had already touched on, in no particular order, the exorbitant price of glue sticks, the Chuck E. Cheese Industrial Birthday Complex, and

what she called the torture porn of parents posting photos of their kids going back to school while her toddler was still at home.

He tilted his head, dipping back into the conversation.

“Then we get to the part where Mufasa plunges to his death.” Faith was apparently talking about a movie now. “Emma starts flat-out bawling the same way Jeremy did when he was her age, and I realized that I somehow ended up giving birth to two different kids exactly two Lion Kings apart.”

Will dipped back out of the conversation. He’d felt his gut clench at Emma’s name. Guilt scattered like buckshot into his chest.

He had almost killed Faith’s two-year-old daughter.

This was how it happened: Will and his girlfriend were babysitting Emma. Sara was doing paperwork in the kitchen. Will was sitting on the living room floor with Emma. He was showing her how to replace the tiny button battery in a Hex Bug. The toy was disassembled on the coffee table. Will had balanced the breath-mint-sized battery on the tip of his finger so that Emma could see. He was explaining that they should be extra careful not to leave it lying around because Betty, his dog, might accidentally eat it when, suddenly, without any warning whatsoever, Emma had leaned over and sucked the battery into her mouth.

Will was an agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. He had been in real-world emergencies where life and death hung in the balance and the only thing that had tipped the scales was his ability to act quickly.

But when that battery disappeared, Will had been paralyzed.

His bare finger pointed helplessly into the open air. His heart folded like a bike around a telephone pole. He could only watch in slow motion as Emma sat back, a smirk on her cherubic face, and prepared to swallow.

That was when Sara had saved them all. Just as quickly as Emma had snorked up the battery, Sara had swooped down like a bird of prey, hooked her finger into Emma’s mouth and scooped out the battery.

“Anyway, I’m looking over this girl’s shoulder at the checkout line, and she’s texting the shit out of her boyfriend.” Faith had

moved on to another story. “Then she leaves, and I’m stuck forever wondering whether or not her boyfriend really did hook up with her sister.”

Will’s shoulder drilled into the window as the Mini banked a sharp turn. They were almost at the state prison. Sara would be there, which fact edged Will’s guilt over Emma into trepidation about Sara.

He shifted again in the seat. The back of his shirt peeled away from the leather. For once, Will was not sweating from the heat. He was sweating his relationship with Sara.

Things were going great, but somehow, they were also going really, really badly.

On the outside, nothing had changed. They were still spending more nights together than not. Over the weekend, they had shared her favorite meal, Sunday naked breakfast, and his favorite meal, Sunday naked second breakfast. Sara kissed him the same way. It felt like she loved him the same way. She was still dropping her dirty clothes two inches from the laundry basket, still ordering a salad but eating half of his fries, but something was horribly wrong.

The woman who had practically beaten Will over the head for the last two years, forcing him to talk about things he did not want to talk about, was suddenly declaring that one topic of conversation was off limits.

This was how it happened: Six weeks ago, Will had come home from doing chores. Sara was sitting at his kitchen table. Suddenly, she had started talking about remodeling his house. Not just remodeling it, but demolishing it so there was more room for her, which was kind of a sideways way of telling Will that they should move in together, so Will had decided to go into a sideways proposal, saying that they should get married in a church because it would make her mother happy.

And then he’d heard a cracking sound as the earth froze under his feet and ice enveloped every surface and Sara’s breath came out in a puff when instead of saying, “*Yes, my love, I would be thrilled to marry you,*” she’d said in a voice colder than the icicles stabbing down from the ceiling, “*What the fuck does my mother have to do with anything?*”

They had argued, a tough position for Will since he hadn't known precisely what they were arguing about. He had gotten in a few jabs about his house not being good enough for her, which had turned into an argument about money, which had put him on better footing because Will was a poor government worker and Sara—well, Sara was currently a poor government worker but before that, she had been a rich doctor.

The argument had rocked on until it was time to meet Sara's parents for brunch. And then she had put a moratorium on discussing marriage or moving in together for the next three hours, and those three hours had stretched into the rest of the day, then the rest of the week, and now it was a month and a half later and Will was basically living with a really hot roommate who kept wanting to have sex with him but only ever wanted to talk about what to order for dinner, her little sister's determination to screw up her life, and how easy it was to learn the twenty algorithms that solved a Rubik's Cube.

Faith pulled into the prison parking lot, saying, "Of course, because this is me, that exact moment is when I finally started my period."

She went silent as she coasted into a space. Her last sentence had no sense of finality to it. Was she expecting an answer? She was definitely expecting an answer.

Will settled on, "That sucks."

Faith looked startled, like she'd just realized he was in the car. "What sucks?"

He could see clearly now that she had *not* been expecting an answer.

"Jesus, Will." She angrily bumped the gear into park. "Why don't you warn me the next time that you're actually listening?"

Faith got out of the car and stomped off toward the employee entrance. Her back was to Will, but he imagined she was grumbling with every step. She flashed her ID at the camera outside the gate. Will rubbed his face. He breathed the hot air inside the car. Were all of the women in his life insane or was he an idiot?

Only an idiot would ask that question.

He opened the door and managed to pry himself out of the Mini. Sweat prickled at his scalp. They were in the last week of

October and the heat outside the car wasn't much better than inside. Will adjusted the gun on his belt. He found his suit jacket between Emma's car seat and a bag of stale Goldfish crackers. He Homer Simpsoned the entire bag, eyeballing a prison transport bus that was pulling out onto the road. The bus careened into a pothole. Behind the barred windows, the inmates' faces were all various shades of misery.

Will tossed the empty Goldfish bag into the backseat. Then he got it back out and took it with him as he walked toward the employee entrance. He looked up at the low-slung, depressing building. Phillips State Prison was a medium-security facility located in Buford, about an hour outside of Atlanta. Nearly one thousand men were housed in ten living units that contained two dormitories each. Seven of the units had two-man cells. The rest were combinations of singles, doubles and isolation cells housing MH/SM inmates. MH stood for inmates diagnosed with mental health issues. SM stood for special management, or protective custody, which meant cops and pedophiles, the two most reviled classes of inmates in any prison.

There was a reason MH and SM were tied together. To an outsider, a single person cell sounded like a luxury. To an inmate in isolation, a single person cell meant twenty hours a day of solitary confinement in a windowless, seven-by-thirteen concrete box. And this was after a ground-breaking lawsuit that had found Georgia's previous solitary confinement rules inhumane.

Four years ago, Phillips, along with nine other Georgia State prisons, was hit by an FBI sting that took down forty-seven corrupt corrections officers. All the remaining COs were shuffled around the system. The new warden didn't put up with much bullshit, which was good and bad, depending on how you looked at the inherent dangers of warehousing angry, isolated men. The prison was currently in lockdown after two days of rioting. Six COs and three inmates had been badly injured. Another inmate had been murdered in the cafeteria.

The murder was what had brought them here.

By state law, the GBI was charged with investigating all deaths that happened in custody. The inmates leaving on the transport bus wouldn't be directly implicated in the murder, but they would've

played some part in the riot. They were receiving what was called *Diesel Therapy*. The warden was bussing out the big mouths, the shit-stirrers, the pawns in gang rivalries. Getting rid of trouble-makers was good for the health of the prison, but not so great for the men who were being sent away. They were losing the only place they could call home, heading to a new facility that was far more dangerous than the one they were leaving. It was like starting a new school, but instead of mean girls and bullies, there were rapists and murders.

A metal sign was strapped to the entrance gate. GDOC, Georgia Department of Corrections. Will tossed the empty Goldfish bag into the trashcan by the door. He wiped his hands on his pants to get rid of the yellow dust. Then he swiped at the cheddar palmprints until they looked less indecent.

The camera was two inches from the top of Will's head. He had to step back to show his credentials. A loud buzz and a click later, he was inside the building. He stored his gun in a locker and pocketed the key. Then he had to take the key out of his pocket along with everything else so he could go through the security line. He was ushered through the sally port by a silent corrections officer who used his chin to communicate: *'Sup bro, your partner's down the hall, follow me.*

The CO shuffled instead of walking, a habit that came with the job. No need to hurry when the place you were going to looked exactly like the place you were leaving.

The prison sounded like a prison. Inmates were screaming, banging their bars, protesting the lockdown and/or the general injustices of humanity. Will loosened his tie as they went deeper into the bowels of the facility. Sweat rolled down his neck. Prisons were by design difficult to cool and heat. The wide, long hallways and sharp corners. The cinderblock walls and linoleum floors. The fact that every cell had an open sewer for a toilet and every man inside was generating enough flop sweat to turn the gentle flow of the Chattahoochee River into level six rapids.

Faith was waiting for him outside a closed door. Her head was down as she scribbled in her notebook. Her chattiness made her very good at her job. She'd been busy gathering information while Will was cheddaring his pants.

She nodded to the silent CO, who took his place on the other side of the door, then told Will, “Amanda just pulled up. She wants to see the crime scene before she talks to the warden. Six agents from the North Georgia field office have been screening suspects for the last three hours. We’re battling clean-up once they get a viable list of suspects. Sara says she’s ready when we are.”

Will looked through the window in the door.

Sara Linton was standing in the middle of the cafeteria dressed in a white Tyvek suit. Her long auburn hair was tucked up under a blue baseball cap. She was a medical examiner with the GBI. This recent development had made Will extremely happy until approximately six weeks ago. She was talking to Charlie Reed, the GBI’s chief crime tech. He was kneeling down to photograph a bloody shoe print. Gary Quintana, Sara’s assistant, was holding a ruler near the print to provide a reference for scale.

Sara looked tired. She had been processing the scene for the last four hours. Will was out on his morning run when the call had pulled Sara out of bed. She had left him a note with a heart drawn in the corner.

He had stared at that heart for longer than he would admit to any living person.

Faith said, “Okay, so, the riot kicked off two days ago. Eleven fifty-eight on Saturday morning.”

Will pulled his attention away from Sara. He waited for Faith to continue.

She said, “Two cons started throwing punches. The first CO who tried to break it up was knocked out. Elbow to the head, head to the floor, see ya later alligator. Once the first CO went down, it was game on. The second CO was choked out. A third CO who ran in to help was cold-cocked. Then somebody grabbed the tasers and someone else grabbed the keys and it was riot city. Clearly, the murderer was prepared.”

Will nodded at the *clearly*, because prison riots tended to come on like rashes. There was always a tell-tale itch, and there was always a guy, or group of guys, who felt that itch and started planning how to use the riot to their advantage. Raid the commissary? Put some guards in their place? Take out a few rivals?

The question was whether or not the victim had been collateral

damage or specifically targeted. It was hard to judge from outside the cafeteria door. Will looked through the window again. He counted thirty picnic tables, each with bench seating for twelve, all bolted down to the floor. Trays were scattered across the room. Paper napkins. Rotting food. Lots of dried liquids, most of it blood. Some teeth. Will could see a frozen hand reaching out from under one of the tables that he assumed belonged to their victim. The man's body was under another table near the kitchen. His back was to the door. His bleached white prison uniform with blue stripe accents gave the crime scene an ice-cream-parlor-massacre vibe.

Faith said, "Look, if you're still upset about Emma and the battery, don't be. It's not your fault they look so delicious."

Will guessed the sight of Sara had made him throw off a signal that Faith was picking up on.

She said, "Toddlers are like the worst inmates. When they're not lying to your face and tearing up your shit, they're napping, pooping, or trying to think of different ways to fuck with you."

The CO lifted his chin. *True that.*

Faith asked the man, "Can you let our people know we're here?"

The guy nodded a *sure thing, lady, I live to serve* before shuffling off.

Will watched Sara through the window. She was making a notation on a clipboard. She had unzipped her suit and tied the arms around her waist. The baseball cap was gone. She'd pulled her hair into a loose ponytail.

Faith asked, "Is it Sara?"

Will looked down at Faith. He often forgot how tiny she was. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. Look of perpetual disappointment. With her hands on her hips and her head bent up so far that her chin was level with his chest, she reminded him of Pearl Pureheart, Mighty Mouse's girlfriend, if Pearl had gotten pregnant at fifteen, then pregnant again at thirty-two.

Which was the first reason that Will would not talk to her about Sara. Faith forcibly mothered everybody in her orbit, whether it was a suspect in custody or the cashier at the grocery store. Will's childhood had been pretty rough. He knew a lot of

things about the world that most kids had never learned, but he did not know how to be mothered.

The second reason for his silence was that Faith was a damn good cop. She would need about two seconds to solve the Case of the Suddenly Silent Girlfriend.

Clue number one: Sara was an extremely logical and consistent person. Unlike Will's psychotic ex-wife, Sara had not been vomited up from a rollercoaster hellmouth. If Sara was mad or irritated or annoyed or happy, she reliably told Will how she had gotten that way and what she wanted to do about it.

Clue number two: Sara didn't play games. There was no silent treatment or pouting or nasty quips to interpret. Will never had to guess what she was thinking because she told him.

Clue number three: Sara clearly liked being married. In her previous life, she had been married twice, both times to the same man. She would still be married to Jeffrey Tolliver right now if he hadn't been murdered five years ago.

Solution: Sara didn't have an objection to marriage, or to sideways proposals.

She had an objection to marrying Will.

"Voldemort," Faith said, just as the clippity clop of Deputy Director Amanda Wagner's high heels reached Will's ears.

Amanda had her phone in her hands as she walked down the hall. She was always texting or making calls to get information through her old gal network, a frightening group of women, most retired from the job, whom Will imagined sitting around a secret lair knitting hand-grenade cozies until they were activated.

Faith's mother was one of them.

"Well." Amanda clocked Will's cheddar-streaked pants from ten yards. "Agent Trent, were you the only hobo who fell off the train or should we look for others?"

Will cleared his throat.

"Okay." Faith flipped through her notebook, diving straight in. "Victim is Jesus Rodrigo Vasquez, thirty-eight-year-old Hispanic male, six years into a full dime for AWD after failing a meth quiz on ER three months prior."

Will silently translated: *Vasquez, convicted for assault with a deadly weapon, served six years before he was paroled, then three*

*months ago failed his drug test while on early release, so was sent back to prison to serve the remainder of his ten-year sentence.*

Amanda asked, “Affiliation?”

*Was he in a gang?*

“Switzerland,” Faith said. *Neutral.* “His sheet’s full of shots for keistering phones.” *He was caught multiple times hiding cell phones in his ass.* “I gather the guy was a real spoon.” *Always stirring up shit.* “My guess is he got taken out because he kept running his mouth.”

“Problem solved.” Amanda knocked on the glass for attention. “Dr. Linton?”

Sara stopped to grab some supplies before opening the door. “We’re finished processing the murder scene. You don’t need suits, but there’s a lot of blood and fluids.”

She handed out shoe protectors and face masks. Her fingers squeezed Will’s when he took his share.

She said, “The body is out of rigor and entering decomp, so that, combined with the victim’s liver temp and the higher ambient temperature, gives us a physiological time of death that’s consistent with reports that Vasquez was attacked roughly forty-eight hours ago, which puts time of death toward the beginning of the riot.”

Amanda asked, “First minutes or first hours?”

“Ballpark is between noon and four on Saturday. If you want to narrow down an exact time, you’ll have to rely on witness statements.” Sara adjusted Will’s mask as she reminded Amanda, “Obviously, science alone cannot pinpoint precise time of death.”

“Obviously.” Amanda was not a fan of ballparks.

Sara rolled her eyes at Will. She was not a fan of Amanda’s tone. “There are three locations to the Vasquez crime scene—two in this main area, one in the kitchen. Vasquez put up a fight.”

Will reached behind Sara to hold open the door. The smell of shit and urine, the rioting inmates’ calling card, permeated every molecule inside the room.

“Good God,” Faith pressed the back of her hand against her face mask. She wasn’t good with crime scenes in general, but the odor was so sharp that even Will’s eyes were watering.

Sara told her assistant, “Gary, could you get the smaller channel

locks from the van? We'll need to unbolt the table before we can remove the body."

Gary's ponytail bobbed under his hairnet as he happily made his departure. He'd been with the GBI for less than six months. This wasn't the worst crime scene he'd ever processed, but anything that happened inside of a prison was all the more soul-crushing.

The flash popped on Charlie's camera. Will blinked away the light.

Sara told Amanda, "I managed to get a look at the security video. There's nine seconds of footage that captures the beginning of the argument and goes right up to the tipping point into the riot. That's when an unidentified person came up off-image, behind the camera, and cut the feed."

Charlie provided, "No usable fingerprints on the wall, cable or camera."

Sara continued, "The argument started at the front of the room by the service counter. Things turned heated very quickly. Six inmates from a rival gang jumped into the fight. Vasquez stayed seated at the corner table over there. The eleven other men at his table ran to the front of the room to get a better view of the fight. That's when the feed cuts out."

Will gauged the distances. The camera was at the rear of the room, so none of the eleven men could've slipped back without being seen.

"This way." Sara led them to a table in the corner. Twelve lunch trays sat in front of twelve plastic seats. The food was moldy. Soured milk spilled across the surfaces. "Vasquez was attacked from behind. Blunt force trauma created a depressed skull fracture. The weapon was likely a small, weighted object swung at velocity. The force of the blow sent his head forward. There are bits of what appear to be Vasquez's front teeth embedded in the tray."

Will looked back at the camera. This felt like a two-man operation—one cut the feed, one neutralized the target.

Faith's facemask was sucking in and out as she breathed through her mouth. "The first blow, was it meant to kill or to stun?"

Sara said, "I can't speak to intent. The blow was significant. I didn't visualize a laceration, but a depressed fracture is what it

sounds like—the broken bone displaces inward, pressing on the brain.”

Amanda asked, “How long was he conscious?”

“We can infer from the evidence that he was conscious until the moment of death. I can’t speak to his state. Nauseated? Certainly. Blurred vision? Likely. How cognizant was he? Impossible to say. Everyone reacts differently to head trauma. From a medical standpoint, anytime you’re talking about a brain injury, we can only know that we don’t know.”

“Obviously.” Amanda had her arms crossed.

Will crossed his arms, too. Every muscle in his body was retracted. His skin felt tight. No matter how many crime scenes he investigated, his body never accepted that being around a violently murdered human being was a natural thing. He could deal with the stench of rotting food and excrement. The metallic tinge that blood gave off when the iron oxidized was a taste that would stay fixed in the back of his throat for the next week.

Sara said, “Vasquez was beaten to the floor. Four left-side molars were cracked at the root, the left jaw and orbital bone were fractured. Prelim suggests left-side rib fractures. You can see the blood splatter on the wall and ceiling has a semi-circle pattern. We’ve got three sets of footprints here, so you’re looking for two assailants, both likely right-handed. My guess is a sock lock was used, so there won’t be any obvious damage to the assailant’s hands.”

A sock lock was pretty much what it sounded like—a combination lock inside of a sock.

Sara continued, “Vasquez somehow ended up barefooted after the initial attack. We haven’t found his shoes or socks anywhere in the cafeteria. His assailants were wearing prison-issued sneakers with identical waffle patterns. We were able to infer quite a lot from the shoe and footprints. The next location they took him to was the kitchen.”

“What about this tattoo?” Amanda was across the room, looking down at the severed hand. “Is it a tiger? A cat?”

Charlie answered, “The tattoo database says a tiger can symbolize hatred for the police or that he’s a cat burglar.”

“A con who hates the police. Remarkable.” Amanda rolled her wrist at Sara. “Let’s skip ahead, Dr. Linton.”

Sara motioned for them to follow her to the front of the cafeteria. Empty trays were on the conveyor belt, so at least some inmates had finished their lunches before the riot started.

She said, “Vasquez was about five eight, one-hundred-forty pounds. Undernourished, but that’s not surprising since he was a heavy IV drug user. Track marks on his left arm, between the toes on his left foot and at his right carotid, so we can assume he was right-handed. There’s a meat cleaver in the kitchen prep area and a lot of blood, indicating the left hand was removed there.”

Amanda asked, “He didn’t chop it off himself?”

Sara shook her head. “Unlikely. Shoe and footprints indicate he was held down.”

Charlie added, “There’s no distinguishing marks on the waffle treads from the sneakers. Like Sara said, they’re standard issue. Every inmate has a pair.”

Sara had reached Vasquez’s final resting place. She squatted down in front of another table. Everyone but Amanda followed suit.

Will’s nostrils flared. The body had been festering in the heat for almost two full days. Decomposition was well on its way. The skin was slipping off the bone. Someone had obviously shoved Vasquez’s body under the table with their foot, kicking him out of the way like dirty clothes under the bed. Streaks of blood and waffled shoeprints showed where at least two men had put him there.

Vasquez’s bare feet were caked in blood. He was on his side, folded at the waist. One hand was reaching out in front of him. The bloody stump where his other hand used to be was tucked inside his belly. Literally. Vasquez’s murderers had stabbed him so many times that his gut had blossomed open like a grotesque flower. The nub of his wrist was jammed inside his body cavity like a stem.

Sara said, “Absent contravening evidence, cause of death is likely exsanguination or shock.”

The guy certainly looked shocked. His eyes were wide open. Lips parted. He had an otherwise ordinary face, if you dismissed the bloating and dark, black crescent where his blood had pooled

to the lowest point of his skull. Shaved head. Porn mustache. A cross hung on a thin gold necklace around his neck, legally allowed by the GDOC because it was a religious symbol. The chain was delicate. Maybe a gift from a mother or daughter or girlfriend. It said something to Will that the murderers had taken Vasquez's shoes and socks but left the necklace.

"Shit. That's shit." Faith clamped both hands over her mask as she dry-heaved. Vasquez's intestines hung out of his abdomen like uncooked sausage. Feces had pooled onto the floor, then dried into a black mass the size of a deflated basketball.

Amanda told Faith, "See if they've tossed Vasquez's cell yet. If they have, I want to know who did it and what they found. If not, you do the honors."

Faith never had to be told twice to leave a dead body.

"Will." Amanda was already typing into her phone. "Finish up here, then start the second-round interviews. These men have had enough time to get their stories straight. I want this solved quickly. This isn't a needle-in-a-haystack situation."

Will thought it was exactly that kind of situation. There were roughly one thousand suspects, all of them known criminals. "Yes, ma'am."

Sara nodded for him to follow her into the kitchen. She pulled down her mask. "Faith lasted longer than I thought she would."

Will pulled down his mask, too. The kitchen was in similar disarray. Trays and food and blood were splattered everywhere. Yellow plastic markers on the butcher's block indicated where Vasquez's hand had been chopped off. A meat cleaver was on the floor. Blood had spilled over like a waterfall.

"No fingerprints on the knife," Sara told him. "They used plastic wrap around the handle, then shoved it down the sink."

Will saw that the drain under the sink was disconnected. Sara's father was a plumber. She knew her way around a P-trap.

She said, "Everything I'm finding shows they had the presence of mind to cover their tracks."

"Why take the hand into the cafeteria?"

"Best guess is they threw it across the room."

Will tried to gather a working theory of the crime. "When the fight started, Vasquez stayed seated at the table. He didn't get up

because he's not affiliated." Inmates had their own form of NATO. An attack on an ally meant you were in the fight. "Only two guys went at him, not a gang."

"Does that narrow your field of suspects?" Sara asked.

"Inmates tend to self-segregate. Vasquez wouldn't have openly mixed with inmates outside his race." The haystack had grown marginally smaller. "This feels like a crime of contingency. *If a riot happens, this is how we'll kill him.*"

"Chaos creates opportunity."

Will rubbed his jaw as he studied the bloody shoe and footprints across the floor. Vasquez had fought like hell. "He must've had information they wanted, right? You don't chop off somebody's hand just because. You hold him down, you threaten him, and then when he doesn't give you what you want, you take a cleaver and chop off his hand."

"That's how I'd do it."

Will smiled.

Sara smiled back.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He didn't answer. "Vasquez was known to hide phones on his person. Could that be why they gutted him?"

"I'm not sure they gutted him so much as stabbed him repeatedly. If they were searching for a phone, the sock lock to the ribs would've had a sort of Valsalva effect. There's a reason prison guards make you cough when you bend over. The increased abdominal pressure reduces the constrictive force inside the sphincter. The phone would've dropped out with the first blow," Sara said. "Besides, cutting in through the belly doesn't make a lot of sense. If I was searching for a phone up your ass, I'd look up your ass."

Faith had impeccable timing. "Is this a private moment?"

Will took his phone out of his pocket. The missed call had been from Faith. "We think Vasquez's killers were looking for something. Information. Maybe a stash location."

Faith said, "Vasquez's cell was clean. No contraband. Judging by his art collection, he was a fan of half-naked ladies and our Lord Jesus Christ." She waved goodbye to Sara as she led Will back through the cafeteria. Her hands cupped her nose to block

out the smell. “Nick and Rasheed have narrowed down our list of suspects to eighteen possibles. No one with murder on their sheet, but we’ve got two manslaughters and a finger-biter.”

“His own finger or someone else’s?”

“Someone else’s,” Faith said. “Surprisingly, there are no reliable witness statements, but plenty of snitches offered up bullshit conspiracy theories. Did you know the Deep State is running a pedophile ring through the prison library system?”

“Yes.” Will asked, “Does this murder feel personal to you?”

“Absolutely. We’re looking for two Hispanic males, roughly Vasquez’s age group, on the inner ring of his social circle?”

Will nodded. “When was the last time Vasquez’s cell was tossed?”

“There was a prison-wide search sixteen days ago. The warden brought in eight CERT teams to toss the cells. The sheriff’s office provided twelve deputies. Shock and awe. No one saw it coming. Over four hundred phones were confiscated, maybe two hundred chargers, the usual narcotics and weapons, but the phones were the obvious problem.”

Will knew what she was talking about. Cell phones inside a prison could be very dangerous, though not all prisoners used them for nefarious purposes. The state took a cut off the top of all landline calls, charging a \$50 minimum to open a phone card, then around five bucks for a fifteen-minute call and almost another five bucks every time you added more funds. On the other hand, you could rent a flip phone from another inmate for roughly \$25 an hour.

Then there were the nefarious purposes. Smartphones could be used to find personal information on COs, oversee criminal organizations through encrypted texts, run protection rackets on inmates’ families, and most importantly, collect money. Apps like Venmo and PayPal had replaced cigarettes and Shebangs as prison currency. The more sophisticated gangs used Bitcoin. The Aryan Brotherhood, the Irish Mob Gang and the United Blood Nation were raking in millions through the state prison system.

Jamming cell phone signals was illegal in the United States.

Will held open the door for Faith as they walked outside. The sun was beating down on the empty recreation yard. He saw

shadows behind the narrow windows in the cells. More than one man was screaming. The oppression of the lockdown was almost tangible, like a screw slowly drilling into the top of your head.

“Administration.” Faith pointed in the distance to a one-story building with a flat roof. They took the long way, using the sidewalks instead of walking across the packed red clay that passed for the recreation yard.

They passed three COs leaning against the fence, each sporting a thousand-yard stare. There was nothing to guard. They were just as bored as the inmates. Or maybe they were biding their time. Six of their fellow guards had been injured in the riot. As a group, COs weren’t known for their ability to forgive and forget.

Faith kept her voice low, saying, “The warden went apeshit over the phones. Segregation was already at full occupancy. He suspended all yard time, shut down the commissary, stopped visitation, turned off the computers and TVs, even closed the library. For two weeks, all these guys could do was wind each other up.”

“Sounds like a smart way to start a riot.” Will opened another door. They walked past offices with plate-glass windows overlooking the hallway. All of the chairs were empty. Instead of desks, there were folding tables to make sure no one could hide anything. Inmates filled most of the administrative jobs. It was hard to beat their three-cents-an-hour wage.

The warden’s office didn’t have a hall window, but Will recognized Amanda’s deceptively calm tone coming from the other side of the closed door. He imagined the man was fuming. Wardens didn’t like being scrutinized. Another reason the man had gone apeshit over all of those confiscated phones. There was nothing more humiliating than hearing one of your inmates talking live to a television station from inside your own facility.

Will asked Faith, “How many calls got out during the riot?”

“One to CNN and one to 11-Alive, but there was an election-scandal-thingy, so no one paid attention.”

They’d reached a long, wide hallway with an even longer line of inmates. Their eighteen murder suspects, Will assumed. The men had been posed like miserable isosceles triangles. The upper halves of their bodies were tilted forward, legs straight, ankles bent, their

weight resting on their foreheads against the wall, because the two COs in charge of them were apparently raging assholes.

Lockdown protocol dictated that any inmate outside their cell be restrained in what was called a four-piece suit. Wrists handcuffed, handcuffs attached in front to a belly chain. Ankle irons attached to a twelve-inch length of chain that kept them doing the two-step. Being bound this way, then forced to press your forehead against a cinder-block wall, put a hell of a lot of pressure on your neck and shoulders. The belly chain would add extra stress to the small of your back as your hands were pulled forward by gravity. Apparently, the inmates had been posed this way for a while. Sweat streaked down the walls. Will saw limbs shaking. Chains rattled like nickels in a dryer.

“Jesus Christ,” Faith muttered.

As Will followed her down the line, he saw an array of tattoos rendered in familiar shaky-lined prison ink. All of the inmates appeared to be over thirty, which made sense. Speaking from experience, Will knew that men under thirty did a lot of stupid things. If a guy was still in prison past the third decade of his life, it was because he had either really fucked up, been really fucked over, or was actively making the kind of bad decisions that kept him in the system.

Faith didn’t bother to knock on the closed door to the interrogation room. Special Agents Nick Shelton and Rasheed Littrell were sitting at the table with a stack of folders in front of them.

“. . . telling you this gal had an ass like a centaur.” Rasheed stopped telling his story when Faith walked in. “Sorry, Mitchell.”

Faith scowled as she shut the door. “I’m not half horse.”

“Shit, is that what that means?” Rasheed laughed good-naturedly. “Sup, Trent?”

Will lifted his chin by way of greeting.

Faith paged through the files on the table. “These all the jackets?”

An inmate’s jacket was basically a diary of his life—arrest reports, sentencing guidelines, transportation details, medical charts, mental health classification, threat assessment, education level, treatment programs, visitation records, disciplinary history, religious preference, sexual orientation.

She asked, “Anyone look good?”

Rasheed gave them the lowdown on the eighteen suspects in the hallway. Will kept his head turned toward the special agent the way you would if you were paying close attention, but he was actually taking a moment to figure out what to say to Nick Shelton.

Years ago, when Nick was assigned to the GBI’s southeastern field office, he had worked very closely with Sara’s dead husband. Jeffrey Tolliver had been the chief of police for Grant County. He was an ex-college football player and, from all accounts, an ass-kicker. Some of Nick’s summations on their cases read like movie scripts. Jeffrey Tolliver had been the Lone Ranger to Nick’s Tonto, if Tonto had talked like Foghorn Leghorn and dressed like a casual-day Bee Gee in gold chains and way-too-tight skinny jeans. The two cops had taken down pedophile rings and drug traffickers and murderers. Jeffrey could’ve parlayed his wins into a much bigger paycheck in a larger city, but he’d bypassed the fame and glory in order to serve Grant County.

Sara probably would’ve married him a third time if he hadn’t died during the second go-round.

“That’s something to work with,” Faith said. Unlike Will, she had been paying actual attention to Rasheed’s rundown. She asked, “Anything else?”

“Nah.” Nick scratched at his Barry Gibb beard. “Y’all take the room. Rash and me’ve gotta couple’a three witnesses we wanna go back at.”

Faith sat in Rasheed’s abandoned chair and started picking out promising suspects. Will could see that she was going straight to the discipline forms. She was a firm believer in history repeating itself.

Nick asked Will, “What’s Sara up to these days?”

Will silently careened through a series of humiliating answers before settling on, “She’s in the cafeteria. You should go see her.”

“Thanks, fella.” Nick half-grabbed, half-patted Will on the shoulder before leaving.

Will gave far too much attention to the shoulder grab-pat. It was somewhere between a Vulcan death grip and rustling the fur on a dog’s butt.

Faith waited until the door clicked closed. “Was that uncomfortable?”

“Depends on which half of the horse you’re asking.” Will put his hand on the doorknob but didn’t open it. “What’s our play here? I’m not sure these guys are going to feel comfortable being questioned by a woman.”

“You’re probably right.” She slid a jacket out of the pile. “Maduro.”

Will opened the door. The CO was waiting outside. Will kept his voice low. “Get those men off that wall before I make you piss out your lungs.”

The man cut his eyes at Will, but like most bullies, he was a coward. He turned toward his prisoners, bellowing, “Inmates! On the floor!”

There were collective groans of relief. The men had to peel themselves off the cinder block walls. They all had bright red blotches on their foreheads and glassy looks in their eyes. Some struggled to sit. Some of them simply collapsed onto their asses in relief.

Will called, “Maduro, you’re up.”

A short fireplug of a man stopped mid-squat. He turned on one foot, his ankles catching on the short chain. Twelve inches wasn’t much, approximately the length of two one-dollar bills placed end-to-end. Maduro’s walk was stiff and labored. He held up his belly chain to keep it from digging into his hipbones. There were pinpricks of blood where the cinder block had eaten into his forehead. He edged through the door and waited in front of the table.

Georgia’s prisons ran on a para-military platform. Unless they were chained, inmates had to walk with their hands clasped behind their backs. They were expected to stand up straight. Keep their cells spotless and their bunk sheets tight. Most importantly, they were required to address the COs with respect—*yes sir, no sir, can I scratch my balls, sir*.

Maduro was looking at Will, waiting to be told what to do.

Will crossed his arms over his chest and let Faith take the lead because these guys were murder suspects. They didn’t get to choose who questioned them.

“Sit,” Faith ordered. She checked the inmate’s ID card and photograph against the jacket. “Hector Louis Maduro. Serving four years on a string of B&Es. Looking at another eighteen months for participating in the riot. Have you been advised of your rights?”

“*Español.*” The man leaned back heavily in the chair. “*Tengo derecho legal a un traductor. O te podrías sacar la camisa y te chupo esas tetas grandes.*”

Emma’s father was second-generation Mexican-American. Faith had learned Spanish so she could piss him off in two languages. “*Yo puedo traducir por ti y puedes hacerte una paja con esa verguita de nada cuando vuelvas a tu celda, pendejo de mierda.*”

Maduro’s eyebrows arched. “Damn, pasty, they didn’t teach you that filthy shit in white girl school.”

Faith cut to the chase. “You were a known associate of Jesus Vasquez.”

“Look.” Maduro leaned forward, hands wrapped around the edge of the table. “There’s a lot of inmates in here who’ll tell you they’re innocent, but I’m not innocent, okay? I committed those burglaries for which I was convicted, but I’ll tell you what, I’ve seen a lot of injustices in this institution—staff on inmates, inmates on inmates—and I should let you know that I’m a Christian man, and right is right and wrong is wrong, so when I saw that inmates were joining together for a common purpose, to instill and ensure the human rights of—”

“Let me interrupt your TED talk,” Faith said. “You knew Jesus Vasquez?”

Maduro’s gaze nervously darted toward Will.

Will kept a neutral expression. He had learned in interrogations that silence served as a very effective conversation starter.

Faith told the inmate, “You’ve been caught with cell phones in the past. You’ve got two shots in your file for arguing with—”

Nick jolted into the room like a Pop-Tart. He’d clearly been running. Sweat dripped from his sideburns. A crumpled sheet of paper was in his fist. He told Maduro, “Outside, inmate.”

Faith gave Will a questioning glance. Will shrugged. Nick had been an agent for twenty years. He’d seen everything from the

heinous to the stupid. If something had rattled him, then they should all be rattled.

“Move.” Nick pushed Maduro toward the CO in the hall. “Put them back in their cells.”

The door was shut. Nick didn’t speak. He smoothed out the note on the table. Sweat dropped onto the paper. He was breathing hard.

Faith shot Will another questioning look.

He gave her the same shrug from five seconds ago.

Faith opened her mouth to pry out the information, but Nick started talking.

“An inmate named Daryl Nesbitt passed me this note. Wants to make a deal. He says he knows who killed Vasquez and how they’re getting the phones inside.”

This time, it was Will looking at Faith with a question. This was an extremely positive development. So why did Nick look so freaked out?

Faith had the presence of mind to ask, “What else did the note say?”

Nick didn’t tell her, which was even more strange. Instead, he turned the note around and slid it toward Faith.

She scanned the words, calling out the important parts. “Wants to trade. He knows where the phones are being stashed . . .”

Nick said, “Third paragraph.”

Faith read, “I am the victim of a conspiracy by small-town law enforcement to put me in prison for the rest of my life for a crime I did not commit.”

Will didn’t look over her shoulder at the letter. He watched Nick’s face. The man was a study in conflict. The only thing Nick seemed sure about was that he was not going to look in Will’s direction.

Faith continued, “That shithole county was a pressure cooker. A white college student was attacked. The campus was on high alert. No women felt safe. The Chief had to arrest somebody. Anybody. Or he would lose his job. He fabricated a reason to come after me.”

Faith turned around to look at Will. She had clearly read ahead and didn’t like where this was going.

Will kept his focus on Nick, who was suddenly consumed by the desire to wipe the smudges off the ornate metal tips of his blue cowboy boots. Will watched him take out a handkerchief, then bend down and buff the silver like a shoeshine.

Faith continued reading, “I am an innocent man. I would not be here but for that crooked-ass cop and his even crookeder-ass department. Everybody in Grant County believed the Chief’s bullshit lies.”

Faith read more, but Will had heard everything that he needed to know.

*College. Grant County. The Chief.*

Nesbitt was talking about Jeffrey Tolliver.