

# THE DEEPEST OF SECRETS

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A ROCKTON NOVEL

KELLEY ARMSTRONG



## INTRODUCTION

*If you're new to the Rockton series—or if it's been a while since you've read the last book—here's a little introduction to get you up to speed. Otherwise, if you're ready to go, just skip to chapter 1 and dive in!*

Welcome to Rockton. Population 171 and dropping faster than we care to admit. Located in the Yukon wilderness, we're a hidden town where people go to disappear. Residents come here under false names and false histories, and they must stay a minimum of two years. Extensions can stretch that to five years, but those extensions have become impossible to get. The council is shutting us down. They just refuse to admit it.

Rockton was born in the 1950s as an exercise in idealism. It's a place for people who needed refuge, and in those earliest years, it was often their ideals that brought them here, fleeing McCarthyism and other political witch hunts. When the town struggled in the late sixties, a few wealthy former residents took over management and organized regular supply drops. That's when the town began evolving from a commune of lost souls into a for-profit institution. While there are still people here who genuinely need sanctuary, there are also white-collar criminals who've bought an escape hatch from the law. And there are an increasing number of hardened criminals that the council sneaks in to increase the profit margin.

The council runs Rockton from afar. We've never seen them.

We only speak to a council liaison on a satellite phone. There's also a board of directors, including Émilie, one of those "wealthy former residents," who still believes in the philanthropical ideal of the town. We believe in that ideal, too. We're the people of Rockton.

We live off the grid, with no access to the outside world. No roads. No phones. No internet. We're cut off from the world, and we need that to keep everyone here safe. You won't find Rockton on any map, and we stay that way with the help of camouflage, both structural and technological. That's easier than it seems when you're in the Yukon—a northern Canadian territory the size of Texas with fewer than forty thousand people.

There are a handful of key residents in Rockton. I'm Casey Duncan—known here as Casey Butler—the lone detective. Eric Dalton is the sheriff and my common-law husband. We also have a deputy, Will Anders, and an honorary canine officer, Storm, my Newfoundland dog.

The town's council representative is Phil, who used to be our liaison before he was exiled here, and he's still adjusting to that. Technically, Phil and Eric are the town leaders, but really, the most powerful person here is Isabel, who runs the bar—the Roc—which doubles as the brothel.

My sister, April, is our doctor. My former best friend, Diana, is training to be her nurse.

Petra doesn't have any such "essential" job in Rockton—she's a comic-book artist who works in the general store. Or that's her cover. She's actually Émilie's granddaughter and a former operative for an organization that shall never be named.

Mathias also holds a nonessential position—as the town butcher—belying the fact that he's a psychiatrist with an expertise in criminal pathology, both professionally and personally. His current project is Sebastian. At twenty, Sebastian is Rockton's youngest resident. He spent seven years in prison for killing his parents. He's a certified sociopath determined to overcome his diagnosis, and we're willing to give him that chance.

Kenny is our carpenter and head of our militia, which also

includes Jen, my self-appointed nemesis. Devon and Brian are a couple who run the bakery—my favorite shop in town.

We are a secret town and a town of secrets. I don't even want to guess how many residents are actually here because of crimes they committed down south. I am, and Anders is, and I hold out hope that most are like us—people who made mistakes, desperate to get back on the right track and repay any debt we owe. Only Dalton knows everyone's history—he must, for the protection of all. As his detective, I get that information only when I need to know it, or when someone tells me their story.

There are also people who live outside our boundaries and our jurisdiction. When capitalism moved into Rockton, a group of residents moved out and formed the First Settlement, which is now in its third generation. The First Settlement is run by Edwin, one of the earliest settlers there. His granddaughter, Felicity, is expected to succeed him.

The next exodus from Rockton began in the seventies with nature-loving residents. They formed the Second Settlement, a more commune-like, nature-faith-based nomadic community.

There are also people who choose not to join a settlement, like Eric's brother, Jacob, and former sheriff Tyrone Cypher. They're twenty-first-century pioneers, living off the land.

There used to be another group, the most dangerous one: the hostiles. A few months ago, I solved the mystery of their existence, and most have been taken south for rehabilitation. My reward for that? The council is shutting us down. We know they are. They just haven't made it official yet, and we don't quite know what to do about that.



IT'S July in the Yukon, a gorgeous night that's perfect for a campfire. Or, in this case, a game of campfire Dungeons & Dragons. Having suffered an untimely demise, I'm tossing a ball with Storm while keeping one ear on the game as my friends—sorry, my *questing party*—wiggle through an ink-black tunnel.

"Caves," Marissa grumbles. "Why is it always caves with you?"

Anders grins over at his new girlfriend. "Because caves are awesome."

"Could you lighten up on the setting and just get to the monsters? They're a lot less terrifying."

The dungeon master tonight is our local deputy, Will Anders. The games started because he used to play as a kid. It's not an image he fits these days, as a six-foot-two, brawny former military man. Give him a twenty-sided die, though, and that suburban teenage geek surfaces in all his shiny-eyed glory.

Marissa is a relative newcomer to Rockton. I'm delighted to have her join our games. Even more delighted to see Anders settling down. There's nothing wrong with enjoying the hookup scene, but there'd always been a touch of the frenetic to the way Anders went about it. Losing himself in sex the way he'd lose himself in a bottle. Both have steadied as he finds his footing and finally boxes up his past.

Beside Anders is Eric Dalton, the local sheriff. I've been working as his detective since I arrived and living with him for the past eighteen months. When his gaze flicks to the ice cooler, I toss the ball again for Storm and then play a little fetch myself, getting a beer.

As I pass the bottle over Dalton's shoulder, he catches my wrists and tugs me against his back. I loop my arms around his neck and kiss his cheek, which suggests I've reached my two-tequila shot limit for the evening. Public displays of affection are not my thing.

"I'm up against a beholder," Dalton says. "Any advice?"

"Hey!" says Kenny, head of our militia. "No tag-teaming."

"Eric's a necromancer, right?" I say. "He can consult with the dead."

"Shit, I forgot that," Dalton says. "Fuck, yeah. Casey's my spirit guide or whatever."

"His elven ranger love," I say. "Taken too soon from this world. Stabbed in the back by her own sister."

"I am not your sister in-game," April says. "Nor did I kill you. That was the orc you insisted on facing down single-handedly. I simply chose to use my shamanic skills to slay the beast rather than resuscitate you. I acted in service to the greater good. Your death, while tragic, was not undeserved."

"Harsh," Kenny murmurs.

My sister is a brilliant neuroscientist. She's also almost certainly on the autism spectrum, and learning to deal with her undiagnosed condition. Even sharing an evening game with friends is new for April. Back home, she'd have spent the night as she spent the day: working. I know what that's like, though my relentless drive can be chalked up to a demon of my own summoning.

Dalton pulls me onto his lap, which proves he has also hit his alcohol limit. This is a rare chance for us to relax, hidden from public view behind our chalet.

"We're in a cavern, right?" Dalton asks. "Lots of loose stones?"

"No, Eric," Anders says. "You can't throw rocks at a beholder."

Also, being a necromancer, you could barely lift them. Your strength lies in your dominion over the undead."

"So where the fuck are the undead?"

"Ooh!" I say. "I can be your zombie soldier. Resurrect me."

"Your corpse is twenty miles away," Anders says. "Also, it was decapitated by the orc's ax, which is why Eric couldn't resurrect you at the scene."

"Conveniently decapitated," Dalton mutters. "Fine. Lots of dead things in a cave. I'll raise a few."

"There are no animal corpses nearby," Anders says.

"Dead bodies, then. I'll summon them, and they'll crawl from their final resting place—"

"No dead bodies within twenty miles."

"Huh," Kenny says. "Must not be near Rockton then."

Everyone laughs. Everyone except Marissa, who glances at Anders.

"Remind me why I'm a fucking *necromancer* again?" Dalton says.

"Because April expressed an interest in playing the shaman, and you agreed to switch roles."

"In other words, I was being nice. Let this be a lesson to me. Nice guys get stuck in a forest, facing a beholder, without a resurrectable corpse in sight."

Anders sighs. "Fine. I'll give you a rabbit. A very mangled, very decomposed dead rabbit is now at your command."

"One killer bunny is all you need," I say.

Dalton is considering his play when footsteps pound beside the chalet. I jump off Dalton's lap so fast I nearly end up in the fire. When I see who it is, I expect a sarcastic comment, but Jen doesn't seem to notice my lap-sitting or my stumble. She's focused on Dalton.

"There's a problem," she says. "We need you in the square."

Anders rises. "Conduct issues come to me, Jen."

His correction is gentle. He has endless patience with Jen, as if he's made it his mission to take the town's biggest lawbreaker and turn her into proper militia. I expect Jen to snap back, but her gaze

shunts his way, and there's trepidation in it before she returns her attention to Dalton.

"Will should stay here," she says. "Enjoy the rest of his night off."

Again, I know how Jen should say this, her voice dripping with sarcasm, as if the three of us—and Kenny—taking a rare night off together is first-order slacking.

"What the hell is going on, Jen?" Dalton says.

Kenny lifts a hand. "Let me handle it. Eric can take over my barbarian."

"As the dead player, I can duck out easily," I say.

Dalton and Anders both still hesitate, but Marissa puts a hand on Anders's leg, murmuring that he doesn't need to break up every town brawl. My look to Dalton says the same. We've had a shitty month. Dealing with the council shutting down Rockton while we tackle a seemingly endless stream of minor crimes. It's been three days of relative peace, and so I declared us all in need of a break. One evening off, and we couldn't even get through it without a fresh fire to put out. Hopefully not an actual fire.



I SEE the problem as soon as I get into town. Or I think I do. There's a crowd in the square long after there should be gatherings anywhere. It's past midnight. Anders had insisted on working until ten, so we'd gotten a late start to our game. This being a weeknight, the Roc shut down about fifteen minutes ago. If there'd been trouble, Isabel would have warned us.

That's when I spot Isabel herself, marching from the Roc, one end of a ladder in hand. Phil carries the other end. Both their faces are set in grim determination.

"Move away from the pole." Isabel's voice rings out. "Anyone who does not get out of my damn way earns a month's suspension from the Roc."

Only one resident—a guy named Conrad—dares turn on her. Before Conrad can get a word out, Phil grabs him by the collar.

Conrad straightens, but Phil is younger and taller, and Conrad backs away with a few parting grumbles.

Jen, Kenny, and I are still heading toward the square, and no one has spotted us yet. Jen's in the lead, and Isabel sees her first.

"What the hell is this?" she says, waving at the pole. "Were you just going to leave that up there?"

"I couldn't reach it," Jen says.

"Then find someone to help you. This should have been taken down the moment—" Isabel spots me and stops. Her gaze shoots to Kenny, who follows on his crutches. "Is Will still at your place?"

"Yes. What's up? Did we have another avian accident?"

The pole was erected earlier this month. It looks like a basketball-net backboard. It's a projection screen for "midnight movies in the square." My idea. We strictly limit our electricity use here, but the long summer days keep the solar batteries juiced up, and we hold weekly movie nights in the community center. Now that the sun has started dropping before midnight, I thought it'd be fun to show movies outside instead. Kenny rigged up the aerial screen, only to have a gray jay fatally hit it last week.

No one answers my question. No one even seems to hear it. They're all watching Isabel climb the ladder. As Phil holds it, he darts a look my way, one I can't quite read through the reflection off his glasses. His mouth is taut, brow furrowed.

I shoulder through the crowd just as Isabel reaches her goal. It looks like a big sheet of paper plastered on the projection-screen panel. I catch the words "Will Anders" before she rips it down.

"Do you think that's going to help?" someone says.

It's Conrad again. As I glare at him, I remember back to a time when I thought he was such a nice guy, an asset to the community. After he arrived, he'd worked for a few months stocking shelves while running a weekly dental clinic. Then he went to Phil and asked to be the permanent town dentist with essential-worker privileges. Phil informed him that we didn't require a full-time dentist, and the town already paid him handsomely for his professional services. That's when the real Conrad appeared.

"We've all seen the sign," a woman says. Jolene. I don't know her former occupation, but it had something to do with caring for animals, and she's temporarily working at the stables while Maryanne is down south for dental reconstruction surgery.

"We all know what he did," Jolene continues.

"Do you?" Isabel says from her perch on the ladder. "This is the equivalent of writing on a bathroom wall. I could put anything I like up here. Doesn't make it true."

"So it's *not* true?" says a balding man. Ted. Another of our permanent malcontents.

"How would I know?" Isabel says as she folds the paper. "I have no idea what anyone did before they came to Rockton. That is, I believe, the point of being here." She turns a laser gaze on Ted. "How about you come up here and tell us why you're in Rockton? Since you're so interested in other people's stories."

Ted sputters that it's none of anyone's business. Isabel's aim is dead on, though. She knows why he's here. So do I. While Dalton only shares on a need-to-know basis, he's come to realize that, in some instances, I need to know even before a crime is committed, so we can protect our residents.

In Ted's case, he'd been a college dean who blackmailed female students for sex. Why does Isabel know that? She also runs the local brothel, and I make sure she's warned of predators. I don't give her any details, but she does require a heads-up.

"Anyone else?" she calls. "Anyone want to come up here and share their story?"

"Only if Will goes first," Conrad says. "Tells us whether he really shot his CO."

I stop midstride. A couple of people notice, and I cover my reaction quickly with, "What the hell?," my voice ringing over the buzz of conversation.

Jolene turns toward me. "Oh, you didn't know you're working with a killer, Casey? Where is Will, anyway? Better not have left him alone with Sheriff Dalton. Apparently, he has a thing for murdering his superior officers."

"Casey has no idea what Will has done or hasn't done," Isabel says. "She only knows—as we all do—that Will Anders is a good

man. A good deputy. A trusted member of this community who has never had a word of complaint against him—”

“He nearly broke my jaw two months ago,” Ted says. “It’s still sore.”

“He hit you because you went after him with a steak knife,” I say.

“I was drunk,” Ted whines.

“And then, when Eric wanted you to spend twenty-four hours in the cell, Will was the one who argued that a sore jaw was punishment enough.” I stop at the bottom of the ladder. “I have no idea what’s going on here, but if anyone has a complaint about Will—or me—you can bring it to Phil, who will see that it is properly addressed.”

“Note she didn’t include Eric,” Kenny says. “Please see Phil if you *don’t* have a complaint about the sheriff. That line will be much shorter.”

A few laughs and a few more chuckles, the tension easing as the crowd backs up to let Kenny through.

“It’s past midnight,” Kenny says. “Most of you have work tomorrow. I’m going to suggest you all head home. I’m sure Casey will address this tomorrow with a town meeting.”

“I will,” I say.

“Are you going to investigate?” Conrad asks.

“Absolutely,” I say. “I don’t know whether this was someone’s idea of a prank or a deliberate attempt to undermine Deputy Anders’s authority, but I will find out who posted this and take the appropriate action.”

“I mean investigate whether your deputy did this. Whether he killed—”

“I am not going to address the nature of the accusation further. I’ll refrain from comment until I know what the hell I’m talking about, and I would suggest you all do the same.”

“Is that a gag order?” a woman says.

I look over. It’s Jolene, her cool gaze fixed on me.

“If it was, it’d have been worded as such,” I say. “But I’m going to hope that, knowing most of you have had nothing but positive interactions with Will Anders, you will grant him the

benefit of the doubt until this matter has been sorted. Rumor and speculation will only make it tougher to get to the truth."

"Will we get the truth?" Conrad says. "Or will you cover it up?"

"Oh for God's sake," Isabel says, still on the ladder. "Everyone knows you were chasing Marissa before she took up with Will. And Jolene? You vow revenge every time Will kicks you out of the Roc for drunk-and-disorderly. You're both embarrassing yourselves here. Go home. Both of you. *All of you.*"

I turn to Kenny and Jen. "Can you please disperse this crowd while I find out what's going on?"

They nod and set to work.

*FIND out what's going on.*

Except I already know, don't I? Someone has accused Anders of killing his commanding officer in the army. Which he did. Shot and killed his CO and injured two others. I uncovered the full story during my first case here.

When residents come to Rockton, Dalton gets their backstory. Sometimes it's even the truth. The council is honest when the resident is a victim or a white-collar criminal.

For the serious criminals, though? The violent offenders? The council lies to him. When Dalton discovered that, he started researching residents he suspects are guilty of violent crimes. I've been able to help him refine his methods, but even before I arrived, he was doing a damn fine job playing private eye.

Being offline here, Dalton needs to conduct that research on his supply trips to Dawson City. He'd kept a journal, using only real names and no connections to actual residents. When I needed to solve my first case, he gave me the journal, but he'd removed a few pages. I later found those pages in a copy made by a former officer. Taking those missing pages, together with what I knew of Will Anders, I'd figured out the identity of "Calvin James," a military officer who'd killed his CO and injured two other officers. At the time of the shooting, Anders was being treated for stress. He'd been on medication with adverse effects, but his concerns were

ignored. One night, he dreamed he shot his CO. Just walked into his quarters and opened fire.

It hadn't been a dream.

Most people would say it wasn't his fault. Blame the stress. Blame the medication. Blame the culture and the lack of appropriate mental-health care. After all, Anders had done everything right. He'd admitted he was having trouble. He'd taken the prescribed medication. He'd alerted his doctor to side effects. He has every reason to say it wasn't his fault, and yet he does not. This is the nightmare he fights with alcohol and sex—the knowledge that he killed a man who'd done nothing to deserve it. The knowledge that, maybe, in the theater of war, that wasn't the only innocent victim whose life he took.

After the crowd disperses from the town square, I get the sign from Isabel. Then I take it aside to read privately, in case my reaction gives away more than I'd like.

It's four sheets of paper taped together as a makeshift sign.

*Will Anders is a killer. He lost his marbles and killed his army commanding officer and escaped to Rockton before they locked him in a loony bin.*

I stare at those words, my hands shaking with rage. The ones I'm staring at, though, aren't the ones about killing someone.

*Lost his marbles.*

*Before they locked him in a loony bin.*

There is such derision in those words, as if a mental breakdown is more damning than murder. The issues Anders suffered explain behavior that is otherwise completely out of character for him. Here, they aren't an explanation. They're an accusation.

He's not only a killer; he's crazy.

"Hey," a voice says behind me.

I spin, slapping the sign to my chest as Anders walks over.

"Uh, okay," he says, his gaze dropping to the paper. "I came to see if you needed help. Do I dare ask what that is? Not another hot-tub petition, I hope."

His lips quirk, but the smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Hmm. Jen

didn't want me handling this, and now you're clutching that paper like it's an X-rated photo. If it's me, they better have got my good side."

I don't speak. I can't.

"Casey?" he says. "That look on your face is kinda freaking me out."

I turn the sign around. I don't know what else to do. I just hold it up, mutely.

Anders takes it and reads it. He rocks back on his heels. There's a split second of disbelief in his eyes. Then acceptance. The resolute acceptance of a man who has lived with an ax poised over his head, knowing it must eventually drop.

I know that feeling. There have been times when I wished my ax *would* drop, just so I could stop waiting.

"I'm sorry," I say. My eyes fill with sudden tears, so uncharacteristic that I wonder what that prickling sensation is. "I'm so sorry, Will."

I reach for him, tentatively. I'm not a hugger, and the first sign of rejection will have me stumbling over myself to retreat. But he drops the sign, opens his arms, and I fall into them, wrapping mine around him and hugging fiercely.

"We'll figure this out," I say. "We'll get through it."

"I know."

"I'm just . . ." My throat closes, and I push out the words. "I'm so sorry. I keep saying that, and it doesn't seem to mean much but—"

His hug cuts me short as he brushes a kiss over my forehead. "It's okay, Case. *I'll* be okay."

A rustle in the trees. We turn to see Marissa. I startle, very aware that I'm in the arms of her lover. Anders only tightens his grip, reminding me we're doing nothing wrong. Then he releases me and steps back.

"Hey," I say.

"Hello," she says, her voice chilly as her gaze moves between us.

"We got some bad news," I say. "Upsetting news and—"

"And it's fine," Anders says. "It's all fine."

His tone challenges Marissa to say otherwise, and I bristle on her behalf. She's in a new relationship with a guy who isn't known for commitment. Of course she's going to be wary.

"Is Eric around?" I say.

"Nope," she says. "Luckily for you, he's still back at the campfire."

"Luckily for me?" It takes a moment to realize what she means. I shake my head. "I would not be the least bit worried if Eric walked in on me hugging Will."

"Ah, so it's that kind of relationship, is it?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Mari," Anders says, and there's real anger in his voice. That startles me. Then I realize it's not anger at Marissa. It's for what he just read. Fear and fury zeroing in on the wrong target.

Before I can intercede, he continues, "If you're going to get jealous every time I hug a woman in town, you're going to spend a lot of time being jealous. I get a lot of hugs."

I ease between them. "Something happened tonight, Marissa. Something we need to discuss with Eric right away. Once that's out in the open, this will make a lot more sense."

"I shouldn't need an excuse for—" Anders begins.

I turn a look on him. He bites off the rest, but the anger roils behind his eyes. Then I realize we *can't* let Marissa walk away. She'll hear about the sign, and that should come from Anders. Right now, though, he's in no mood to talk to her. He's not ready to discuss it, either—she's going to ask whether it's true, and he'll need time to figure out how he's going to handle that question.

"Marissa?" I say. "Can I have a moment with Will?"

She blinks at me. "Seriously?"

Anders lets out a Dalton-worthy string of curses. Then he says, "Here, let me make this easy for everyone." He snatches the sign from the ground and holds it up for her. "Someone posted this in the town square."

She reads it. Then her gaze shoots to Anders, anger vanishing in shock. "Someone posted *that*?"

"Yep, and by morning, everyone's going to know about it."

"This is what we're dealing with," I say, my voice steady. "I

brought Will here to show him in private, and then I gave him a support hug. That's what you saw."

"But it's not true, right? He didn't . . ." Her gaze goes to Anders. "You didn't . . ."

"Go home, Marissa," he says.

"What? Go *home*? I just found out that my boyfriend might have—"

"Not your boyfriend. Not anymore. I'll make that part easy for you."

Her jaw sets, and I back away fast. I don't need to hear this. Anders waves for me to stay close—he wants us to talk to Dalton together—so I stop after a few paces and turn away. I can still hear them.

Marissa says, "You're cutting me loose so you don't need to explain."

"Right now, I'm not sure an explanation even matters. I'm not sure the truth matters. The problem is the accusation. That shit's gonna stick, and we need to figure out what to do about it. That means me, Casey, Eric, and Phil need to get together and discuss it. That's the priority at the moment."

"Not me," she says.

Anders hisses an exhalation, one that brings him back to himself.

"Yeah," he says. "I'm sorry, but yeah."

"All right, then," she says. "I guess I know where I stand."

Part of me wants to smooth this over. Soften the blow. But honestly, my own annoyance meter rises here. Of course the town takes precedence over the woman he's been dating for a month. Even Dalton needs to weigh his responsibility to me versus Rockton.

That's not what Marissa is feeling, though. It's her versus Anders's friends. I can say I expected better, but that's judgmental. She is understandably unsteady in this new relationship. I'm sure dozens of people have warned her it won't last, that Anders won't stay, that he's just trying something new and he'll revert to form soon enough. I've been keeping out of it. I don't know her well enough to reassure her without sounding like that

annoying happily married person, eager to see all her friends paired off.

Still, I'm going to interfere here, just a little. I walk back and say, "I'll need to call a town meeting in the morning to discuss this, but we'll make sure you have the official statement before that, Marissa. You'll know before everyone else does." I glance at Anders.

He sighs, just a little, but nods. "I'll talk to you before that, Mari. I know this is going to be tough on you, too. I'd suggest you let someone walk you home. I can have the militia deliver your breakfast so you don't need to go out."

"I'm not hiding in my apartment, Will."

"And I'm not asking you to. I'm giving you the option." We catch sight of a figure, and Anders calls, "Sebastian?"

A young man jogs over, wolf-dog at his side. "Hey," he says with a grin. "I thought I heard voices. I was trying to sneak past with Raoul so we didn't interrupt. It's his pre-bedtime elimination run."

"Could you do me a favor?" Anders says. "Walk Marissa home?"

"Sure."

"You might get waylaid," Anders says. "There's been . . ." He lifts the sign. "This was posted in the town square."

Sebastian reads it.

"Huh," he says. A moment's pause. "People are upset, I take it?" A wry smile. "Dumb question. Normal people get upset when they think there's a killer in their midst." He looks at Anders. "If you did it, I'm sure you had a reason. If not, then posting that is a really shitty thing. Well, it's shitty either way but . . ." He shrugs. "You know."

Marissa stares at Sebastian as if she's not quite hearing him right. Or he's failing to process what Anders has been accused of. He isn't. We get all kinds in Rockton and, honestly, I trust Sebastian a hell of a lot more than I trust the white-collar criminals who bilked people of their life savings. He knows what he is, and he's committed to fixing it, which is more than I can say for most of them.

Dalton's voice rings out just as Storm bursts through and tackles Raoul. "So the party moved into the forest, huh. You guys find anything dead for me to raise?"

"Just my career as a Rockton law-enforcement officer," Anders calls back. He holds up the sign.

"Fuck," Dalton says.

"That about sums it up," Anders says. "Sebastian, if you could walk Marissa home, please. Eric, Casey, and I have a few things to discuss."



WE'RE in the police station. We considered taking this conversation home, but that could look as if we headed off to bed, ignoring the situation. Better for people to see a light shining in the station window.

When we enter, Dalton goes straight for the desk. He pulls out a sheet of paper, writes a sign of his own, and sticks it on the door.

*Meeting in progress. Knock & we'll let you listen in from the cell.*

"Not even the 'fucking' cell," Anders says. "You mean business."

Dalton grunts and puts the full kettle over the fire before lighting it.

"Marissa caught me hugging Casey," Anders says. "Possibly also kissing her forehead."

Dalton stops short. "She posted that sign because of it?"

"No, no. The hug came after the sign, but Marissa kinda made a big deal out of it, so I figured you should know, in case she spreads stories."

Dalton snorts. "Any chance that story would drown out this other one? If so, you two better start hugging all over town." He straightens. "Is that seriously Marissa's concern right now?"

"In her defense, she was upset before she learned why I was hugging Will," I say. "I don't think you need to worry she'll say anything."

"Wouldn't be worried if she did. Anyone who'd believe you two are screwing around isn't someone whose opinion means shit to me. I'm a little more worried about this." He picks up the sign. "Fuck."

"Let's focus on who wrote that," I say. "Will's going to need time to figure out how to handle it. We all are. So we'll start with the crime."

"It isn't slander if it's true," Anders murmurs.

I lower myself to the floor beside Storm. There's only one chair inside, and I don't feel like dragging in two from the back porch. "Revealing the details of a person's previous life violates the rules of Rockton. It's on the form I signed before I got in. I am dissuaded from sharing my own details and forbidden from seeking out or sharing the details of others. That makes it a crime." I look at Dalton. "Yes?"

"Yeah. It's not on the books as a law, but fuck, nothing is. We make it up as we go."

"I'd rather not make this up. Any precedent I can use?"

His eyes roll up, accessing the law-enforcement archives. "Had a case maybe ten years ago where a woman told her boyfriend that she came here after her husband killed their kid. When she broke up with the boyfriend, he tried to blackmail her with it. Gene didn't want to pursue it. He figured since she'd been the victim, it didn't matter."

"It mattered because she didn't want to be labeled a victim," I say. "She came here to get away from being the woman whose husband murdered their child. Also, it's no one's damned business."

"Yep," Dalton says. "Gene let me run with it, and I prosecuted the guy. So that's a precedent. Then there was the asshole who left just before you arrived—"

"Oh!" Anders cuts in. "Larry, right?" He looks at me. "Total asshole. He made a point of getting personal details from people and then sharing them. Eric thought it was a game for him. I argued it was social currency. We shut him down. Charged him with something like violating the expectation of privacy."

"Have there been times when people shared residents' back-

grounds and you *didn't* prosecute them?" I ask. "We don't want to seem like we're picking and choosing when to enforce the law."

Dalton shakes his head. "Definitely none in the past five years, which is as long as anyone except me has been here. More often, people share their own stories. There have been a few cases of drunken oversharing, but that happens in the Roc, with witnesses."

"Okay," I say. "So the crime was posting the sign. If the person who had that information felt it was a security threat, they should have come to us."

Anders shakes his head. "They'll argue that Eric might bury it, being my boss."

"Then it could have gone to Phil," I say. "The point is that we agree posting anyone's information is a direct violation of the terms of residency, and therefore I have the right to investigate."

"You do," Dalton says. "No question. As for who knows, though . . ." He looks at Anders.

"No, I haven't got drunk and told anyone. Haven't pillow-talked and told anyone. I drink to forget what happened, not share it. The only people I've talked to about it are you and Casey, and only after Casey figured it out."

"Okay," I say, uncapping my pen. "Eric and I know. Mick had a copy of the journal with Will's page still in it. That's how I found it."

"Because Isabel found the journal after Mick's death," Dalton says. "If there's any chance he knew it was Will, she might too."

"She'll be at the top of my interview list, which I'm sure she expects. I can't see her telling anyone. That leaves Mathias."

"Mathias?" Anders's head jerks up. "I sure as hell never told *him*."

"He has hinted that he knows both our secrets," I say. "As for where he got them, I'd presume the council told him."

"Shit," Anders mutters. "Here I thought the leak was obviously that journal."

I shake my head. "We destroyed both Mick's copy and Eric's."

Dalton nods. "Yeah, finding out Mick got hold of it made me realize I shouldn't be keeping notes."

I lift my notebook. "Nothing in here either. Once we've figured out someone's story, we destroy the evidence. No amount of safe-keeping works in Rockton, where hiding something only tells people it's important."

"I'd underestimated that," Dalton says.

"Mick was a cop. He was concerned. But, yes, it's likely that the leak came from his notes. Or someone else got to your journal before you removed Will's pages." I lift a hand. "I know you kept it secure. Mick only got it because he had access to the station."

"I wasn't going to argue. I screwed up, and if that's what caused this, then I'm sure as hell not going to duck the blame."

I tap my pen. "Will was the last person left from your journal, right? As I recall, everyone else in it is gone."

"Yeah, no one's around from those days except Will."

"Lucky me," Anders mutters.

"While it'll be cold comfort to *you*," I say, "at least we don't need to worry about other targets." I snap my book shut. "Okay, that's how we'll handle the investigation. Now the question is how we'll handle the revelation."

"That's up to Will," Dalton says. "He should take some time."

"No need," Anders says. "I already know what I want to do."